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“Seed, Soil, and Sower”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

July 13, 2014

Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119: 105-112; Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

The power of stories, the power of the Word of God’s Kingdom, and the mysterious ways the Kingdom of God is alive mysteriously in our midst.

The Power of Story. Elie Wiesel sketched a magnificent story about the power of the story. It goes like this: Rabbi Israel used to go to a certain place in the forest to meditate. Whenever there was misfortune threatening the Jews, he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished, and the disaster would be averted.

His disciple some generations later, Rabbi Friedman, would go into the same place in the forest, but he did not know how to light the fire. He did know the special prayer. He said that prayer in that particular place, and the miracle was accomplished and the disaster averted.

Years later, Rabbi Marilyn was going into the forest to that certain place. When she went to pray to avert misfortune for her people, she didn’t know the prayer, much less know how to light the fire. But she was “in the right place,” and she hoped that was sufficient. And it was. The miracle was accomplished.

And finally, Rabbi Kathy at her organ bench, her head in her hands, looked up to the Living God and said, “Lord, I don’t even know the place in the forest, much less know the special prayer or how to light the fire. All I can do is to tell the story,

and that must be sufficient.” And it was. Wiesel goes on to say that God made us because God loves stories.

We turn our pain into narrative so we can bear it. We turn our joy and ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. God made us because God loves stories. We are God’s Story.

Jesus was a great storyteller. He was a master storyteller, very effective in the way in which he wove together stories and parables and images from the everyday life of his people. This was his primary technique to communicate the meaning of the word of the kingdom. He wasn’t into propositions and definitions. He wanted to communicate in and through the everyday experience of his people, from whatever social strata they came from, the meaning of the mission he was entrusted with from his Father to bear the good news of the kingdom. We are going to hear, and will hear over the next two weeks, sections of the discourse on parables from Matthew’s Gospel, and I encourage you to read in continuity the whole 13th chapter so that you can see how Matthew weaves together parables, interpretations of parables, in so many ways taken from the everyday life of an agrarian culture—seeds and sower, weeds and wheat—all of this as a means to communicate the power of God’s holy kingdom. All very thought provoking, for sure.

The Power of the Word of the Kingdom. Sometimes it’s hard to realize that these images taken from the 1st century are images that resonate with us in the 21st century. I would like to remind you that God’s word is multigenerational. One of the great images to capture that truth is taken from one of my mentors in theology who died recently, the liturgist David Power. He had this to say about the Word of God that I think is relevant to our understanding the images that Jesus gives us. To understand what the Proclamation of the Word means to later generations, he uses the image of an echo.

An echo is heard when a word uttered into the vastness of an open space reverberates and returns. Recognized as conforming to the original sound of the voice that uttered it, the echo traveled across space and the sound upon its return is new, marked by the places encountered on its journey. The Word of God is also like that. It is a

word launched into the world, and continues to be launched into different settings, bringing its living message to each of them. As it echoes off its new surroundings, it returns with a new sound for us to hear.

I think this helps us realize that these images and these parables that come out of an agricultural culture may not be as strong as ones that we might use from an urban setting, yet they do capture a Word that is important for us to hear.

The Sower and the Seed. What is it about the message of the kingdom that Jesus teaches us in the story of the sower and the seed? A little background will help. Jesus was speaking to the crowd and to his disciples after experiencing quite a bit of opposition. We forget that Jesus wasn't all success, and he obviously experienced even in his preaching a great deal of resistance. He received resistance from the religious authorities who clearly saw him as blasphemous in his forgiveness of sin and working miracles on the Sabbath. He was experiencing discontent from his own disciples who saw him as a Messiah who was going to overturn the existing authorities so the Jewish community would have freedom from its oppressors. Even among his own relatives, they saw him as sometimes too full of himself, too big for his britches. And, of course then, there is the crowd. They are fickle. One day, they love him, appreciate him, and on another day, he is not meeting their expectations as a wonder worker. He ends up disappointing.

The meaning behind the story that Jesus tells behind the sower and the seed is simply the truth that God's word as the seed of the kingdom falls on all kinds of soil, the kind of soil that is receptive at times and non-receptive at others. Hungry birds come and eat up the seed, the seed lands on rocky ground, there is no depth of soil, the sun scorches, there are thorns, and he is trying to communicate that the way in which the kingdom lives and breathes is mysterious. He is not always able to be perceived as one who solves all problems, that evil is going to be overcome immediately, and that all problems and concerns are erased.

I am not experiencing that, He says, in his mission of service to us. Why should you? I think that's the truth for all of us in which we conduct and live our lives, knowing and believing that the kingdom in some real way is mysteriously coming

alive. All of us can be all types of this soil at one time or another. All of us have experienced the challenges of loss, sickness, our jobs, cancer, worrying about our children or elderly parents and our own broken humanity.

This summer, when we were in Italy, Sheila and I picked up a piece in the *New York Times International* by David Brooks that is very touching. You may have read it. He says, quoting Immanuel Kant: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.” Crooked timber we are. He goes on to say: “People with crooked timber try to find comedy in a mixture of high and low. People with crooked timber try to adopt an attitude of amused affection. People with crooked timber are anti-perfectionist.” I think all of us can identify with this notion of being broken timber.

And yet, in the midst of all this, we know about the good soil of our lives. We know about the joy of impending marriages; we know about the joy of the newly born; we know about the joys of forgiveness and compassion that we exercise, one for the other. Clearly life is full of highs and lows, and I believe despite the interpretation that is given later by Jesus that specifies clearly in the allegory for us about each segment of soil—those with thorns, those that are good soil, those that are taken up by the birds—that the allegory does not capture the full meaning of the parable that he originally speaks. That is the way it is with the Kingdom.

So I encourage you to be receptive and fruitful good soil by being open and receptive to God’s word as it echoes in your life. To be expectant for a hundred-fold yield of God’s grace despite the challenges and obstacles we face as we walk together in the various soils of our journey of faith, knowing and believing that God’s plan and God’s purpose is being brought about in always mysterious ways.

That section from Romans 8 captures the same meaning of the parable that Jesus told. Paul says we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit *groan inwardly* while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Resistance, the challenge and the struggle of our groaning, are all a part of our walk as men and women of faith as we experience the breaking of God’s kingdom in our hearts, in our community, and in our lives. I encourage you to be expectant,

to make room for that word in your lives, make it a priority, especially with the scriptural word as well as your presence at Sunday worship so that we together can hear that word and allow it to be for us an effective source of support.

There is a great line from Thornton Wilder that captures the sense of who we are as wounded warriors, broken humanity and broken timber. While we fail sometimes and we succeed sometimes in the journey of life, in whatever soil the seed of the word of the kingdom comes to us, he says, “In love’s service, only the wounded soldier serves.” A full yield and harvest is possible!

References:

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- David N. Power, *The Word of the Lord: Liturgy’s Use of Scripture*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.
- John Shea, *Stories of God*, Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2007.