

**The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 11-Year A - The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 7.23.23
Proper 11A: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

Jesus's parables are sometimes seemingly simple stories that are appealing and inviting: the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. Even if the world of the parable isn't completely familiar, we are drawn towards the world, wanting to know more about it, and it unfurls as we move in. [Pause] And then there are parables that are *not* simple stories, but paradoxical puzzles—mazes, really—where finding an entryway into the parable, to even begin to wander through its world, is tough. The images and language of these parables are typically more off-putting. Twists and turns in the story might have the effect of holding us back from the parable. It's not a world that appeals, not a place you want to hang out in.

I think of these parables as being like a nut with a very hard shell. Not only is the shell really hard to crack, but you might wonder if the nut inside is worth the effort. Is it tasty enough to do the work to get to the meat? I put today's parable in the tough nut to crack category. In thinking about how to crack this one open, I was reminded of Julian of Norwich's First Revelation of Divine Love. Back in the 14th century, she wrote: "[Christ] showed a little thing the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand...and it was as round as any ball. I looked therein with the eye of my understanding, and thought: "What may this be?" And it was answered generally thus: "It is all that is made."

Gazing at the parable, as Julian gazed at the hazelnut, and wondering how it might contain all that is made, I want to acknowledge the hard-shell exterior of this parable. Jesus starts out by saying, "The kingdom of heaven might be compared to someone who sowed good seed, but where weeds sowed by an enemy took root, right alongside." That creates a big, "Huh?" Isn't the kingdom of heaven supposed to be the place where God's justice, kindness, compassion and mercy are fully practiced, where God's dream is fully visible, where all relationships are finally healed and restored? There are a lot of weeds in this world (not so much here at St. A.'s, of course, due to the diligence of the Alder Guild). They are the bane of every gardener. So to hear Jesus describing the kingdom of heaven as a place with plenty of weeds is daunting. If anyone is tempted to ignore all weeds in the parable, the disciples call this the *Parable of the Weeds*.

The weeds and references to *the slave and master, the enemy, evil one and devil*—are difficult to take in, but important because in Matthew's world, which is part of the full world contained in the nut of the parable, Matthew was challenging a nascent Christian community to understand that the kingdom of heaven stretched across familial and friendship ties, way beyond anything they could imagine or had ever practiced in terms of inclusion. Much as the urge might have been for Matthew's community to self-identify as good seeds surrounded and challenged by weeds that must be pulled, Jesus says, "No. Identifying who is seed and who is weed is not your call." The parable seems to contain its fair share of judgment, but as we gaze at the shell surrounding the nut of the parable, it is worth considering that the parable says that we are all growing in the same soil, that nothing that is growing in that soil is worthless, and, even beyond that, the weeds and the grain need one another to thrive. As Julian wrote about the hazelnut, "I marveled how it might last, for it seemed to me it might suddenly have fallen into nought for its

littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: “It lasteth and ever shall, because God loveth it. And so hath all things being by the love of God.”

So that is one way of looking at this tough nut of a parable that may or may not begin to crack it open. Turn the nut—and if it helps to envision it resting in your palm this morning, just as it rested in Julian’s palm in her vision - go ahead and do so—turn the nut a different way, for a completely different perspective. [Pause] Looking at the nut from a different perspective, we might notice that the parable does not shy away from acknowledging that evil—all that goes against and attempts to suppress God’s ways—is alive and well in the description of the kingdom of heaven. While this brings up another big, “Huh?”

The world of Matthew’s gospel and the world of the parable, importantly, do not ask us to ignore the presence of real struggle of real people in our world. The parable does not ask us to become naive or indifferent. The invitation of the parable might be to hold that tension between God’s dream of a healed and whole world, where justice thrives, and the suffering of God’s people and God’s earth (very front and center as we head into the last week of the hottest July on record for most of the world). Esther de Waal, in her brilliant little book *Living with Contradiction* says that the closer we come to saying something worthwhile, the more likely it is that paradox will be the only way to express it. (Esther de Waal, *Living with Contradiction*, p. 23-24) Thus, we proclaim a God who became human, and are told that in losing our lives we are saved. There are so many contradictions or paradoxes in today’s readings alone. God says to Jacob—the younger twin who tricked his brother out of his birthright blessing (if we wanted to identify human weeds in scripture, Jacob might be a candidate!)—“I will not leave you.” A sleeping place with a stone pillow—a place of discomfort, at best—being proclaimed as an awesome place where God is present. All that decays is being made new. And this parable, full of paradoxes and contradictions.

Contradiction is not the same as fragmentation. Contradiction is the tension between the now and the not yet. There are systems of oppression that persist all around us, and emerge or re-emerge, even when we think the root has been completely pulled out. Gary Commins, in his new book, *Evil and the Problem of Jesus*, goes so far as to say that “our faith cannot ripen” without asking questions about evil. Father Fadi Diab and his family talked, on Friday night, about daily struggles for Palestinians (Christians and Muslims) in the West Bank: the lack of freedoms to move through their hometowns and have daily access to water. What came up was that this world that we live in, which is reflected in the world of the parable, is full of paradoxes and when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, we are in the now and the not yet. Holding that tension within ourselves and within community is not easy and yet is the stuff of hope, as Paul might say.

Make one final turn of the nut of the parable this morning to look at the parable from one more perspective. This perspective is inspired by Dr. Kate Bowler, an Associate Professor of American Religious History at Duke, who was a very successful young scholar, going places. married, with a child, when, at the age of 35, was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer. She began to speak and write about her illness and how she was struggling to make meaning. And she began to write blessings because, she says, “We need blessings for [who we are] and the lives we *actually* have. The ones that are tired, burdened, grief-filled, average, lovely, and garbage.” The

times in our lives when we might say our life is overwhelmed with weeds. As she describes the shift she has gone through since her diagnosis, she says, "I came to understand more about the beauty of a God who accompanies you to the very edge...My prayers changed from relatively elaborate confessions of faith...into simple, raw hopes: God, save me, save me, save me. And, God, if you don't, love me through." (*The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days.*) So, this final perspective on the parable that may or may not crack this parable open for you is really just an acknowledgement that the kingdom of heaven is like being in the soil, not knowing or surmising what's ahead, and simply praying, "Save me. And if you don't, Love me through." Jesus ends this parable by saying, "Let anyone with ears listen!" In other words, What do *you* hear if or when that shell of the parable cracks open?