

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
October 15, 2017

This morning I'd like to share with you a quote from the introduction to a book about Dr. Howard Thurman—a spiritual biography—titled, “Visions of a Better World.”

We need a moral prophetic minority of all colors
who muster the courage to question the powers that be,
the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people,
and the courage to fight for social justice.
Such courage rests on a deep ... vision of a better world
that lures us and a blood-drenched hope that sustains us.

Cornel West

Over the past several weeks, 5 or 6 weeks, the appointed gospel readings have all been parables. We began this season of parables with a mesmerizing Godly Play introduction by Katy Daily. “I wonder what this might be,” she began as she held up boxes within boxes, stories within stories. Even the youngest of her students shouted, “It’s a parable!” (It happened to be her daughter!) For the past weeks we’ve heard the parable of the mustard seed. Weeds among good plants. The valuable pearl. The unmerciful servant. The good Samaritan. Wicked tenants. And today a parable about an invitation to a great banquet. There are 46 parables in all.

As a refresher, a parable is a short story that illustrates a universal truth; it is a simple narrative. It sketches a setting, describes an action, and shows the results. A parable often involves a character who faces a moral dilemma or one who makes a bad decision and then suffers the unintended consequences. Although the meaning of a parable is often not explicitly stated, it is not intended to be hidden or secret but to be quite straightforward and obvious. The defining characteristic of the parable is the presence of a subtext which suggests how a person should behave or what he should believe. It is a teaching. Aside from providing guidance and suggestions for proper conduct in one's life, parables frequently use metaphorical language which allows people to discuss more easily difficult or complex ideas. In short, parables express abstract arguments by means of using a concrete stories which are easily understood. The genius of the parable is that it defuses difficult issues by involving the hearer with a case in which he/she has no apparently direct concern— and can therefore make a disinterested judgment which enables the hearer to come to a decision—to conclude “on their own,” so-to-speak, the moral lesson at hand. Parables are teaching tools, but even more than this, they move people to make moral judgments—and open the door to actions, often courageous actions. But Jesus, the gifted teacher, would never say all of this! He taught, more than this, he shaped the lives of his followers by involving them in these teaching stories, and watched them come to their own conclusions.

In the Gospels, the stories about the life of Jesus come from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—they are written for the early church communities—are not told by Jesus. He didn't write anything. No angels at his birth. No shepherds or songs or wise men from afar. No stories of the crucifixion. No scenes in the Garden of Resurrection. What we have in the gospels that “belong to Jesus” are the parables. And, these parables are *all* about one thing. Does this sound new? It's as if we've learned the rules of the game, as in tennis or pickleball, where to stand, when to hit

the ball, how to keep score, but, what it's all about—well, maybe we still haven't seen the big picture. Maybe we've missed the whole point. The parables of Jesus are about only one thing. One thing only. No dogmas. No doctrines. The parables of Jesus are about the Kingdom of God. It's the only topic he ever preached. "The Kingdom of God is very near," he said.

"The kingdom of God is like this. The kingdom of God is like that." The Kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus' public proclamation. It is the pearl hidden in the field. The most valuable treasure in the world. The large plant grown from the smallest of seeds that offers a safe place for birds of all kinds to roost and raise their young. It's the reversal of suffering and oppression in the promises of the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. It is God at work, even when we can't see it. It is about deliverance and vindication. It is about forgiveness and it's about a new era. It is "in our midst." It is within our reach! It is the very stuff of hope. Not an escape from this trouble or that worry, but the fulfillment of all promises.

The Gospels, the parts written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are full of glimpses! This is why they are called "Good News." The good news of God's presence and power right here with us. The miracle stories in particular are evidences of God breaking in. The presence of Jesus means equals the Kingdom's presence. How can I say it when Jesus didn't even try to explain it! He told stories. And in his life, he showed it. I'd say we've been handed some confusing messages about the Kingdom. Is it in the past? Is it in the future? Or is it in the present? More than a few generations have been taught to look to the future. Heaven, it's called. "Do well on earth, be good, and your reward will come later." Or not! (That's the Kingdom-Come by threat!) Of course, kingdom is eschatological—that's a fancy word that means it is "being fulfilled and points to the end of time," because of course, we can't see it all from our small and limited vantage point. Or is the kingdom something from the past? Like those who yearn for home as they remember it—perfect, without the pain or disappointments that time has faded or erased. The Kingdom remembered from the past comes from good standard Jewish imagery. It takes root in the days of exile when the *longing for home and origin* were the only tastes of hope. Or is the kingdom something that happens now? Is it in the future, past, or present? Maybe it operates at several levels at once, but the PRESENT is where we encounter God, where we can know the transforming presence and power of God in Christ. Though an invisible realm, it is real and it is transforming and it is the gift and the promise we are here to receive. Here to recognize. Here to partake. Here to enjoy. Here to discover the reversal—the true richness of life. Here to be touched, healed, and transformed. Here to be transformed and to be transforming people in and for the world. The Kingdom of God is not merely an abstract exercise in theology or definition. It is designed to impact life. It is the in-breaking of God's presence and power among people, forming them into communities that look forward to the total in-breaking of his authority expressed throughout the world. It leads to a relationship, a call from God to the disciple, the student, the follower, the one who has caught a glimpse of the kingdom. It is always ethical—it inspires a new way of seeing and being and responding to the everyday experiences of living.

On the night before my last day, at the last church I served, I went to bed with a good-bye and a thank-you sermon ready to preach at my farewell service. But in the middle of the night, around 1 am, I received a call from my mother. She said, "I think your father is dead." I said, "I'll be right there." As I arrived the paramedics also arrived. They gurney-ed him into the ambulance.

We followed in the car. When we arrived at the hospital they ushered us into a small private room. I knew what this meant. An attendant came in to tell us that he had died. I don't remember much after that, except that by the time I got home, it was time to get dressed for church. Of course I would go to my final service at a church where I had served for eight years! I arrived at the service without sleep and a bit dazed. The one question that kept circling around in my head was, "Where is home now?" I had just lost my father. I was losing the community of which I had happily served for many years—now what? My eyes were drawn to the altar. It was set with chalice and paten, ready for bread and wine to be broken and shared—a meal, a foretaste of the Kingdom—a glimpse, here and now. In that moment, I came to understand that for me, wherever an altar is set, where the people of God gather and share a meal, a feast— there is home.

Home. I don't mean the 14 or so homes I've lived in over the years. Home. Jerusalem. I don't mean the one in Palestine/Israel. I mean home. It may be anywhere in the world, it *is* everywhere in the world—happening right now. Here is the Kingdom. Here is home. It is made up of experiences from the past and it includes hopes for the future, but it is offered now, embracing us now, healing us now, effective in our lives now. And when we leave, we leave with a vision that is shaped and formed by a dependence and reliance on God alone— and gives us a new strength and courage that is sustained by being part of something bigger—a community of those who are growing together in this new light. Some call it a "claimed potential." It's not just to be found in this church or that church, but the vision finds its footing here. Shaped like clay from the earth, the Kingdom has its roots in the past which kindles our hope that the world and and will be a better place. The miracle of all miracles is that Christ pulls the past and the future into the present! Here and now, the Kingdom of God has come near. It is in our midst. It is reachable. It is happening. It is real.

Listen again to these Kingdom words of invitation:

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who muster the courage to question the powers that be,
the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people,
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Amen