

“High Hopes”

Back in the 1950s Frank Sinatra, having revived his acting career with “From Here to Eternity,” was hot in Hollywood. He made a number of well-regarded films including “The Man with the Golden Arm” and “Guys and Dolls.” One of his lesser-known films was “A Hole in the Head.” While the movie did fairly well at the box office the song was a hit for Sinatra and won the Oscar for best song. The song “High Hopes” is about taking on impossible tasks with persistence. There is an ant who moves a rubber tree plant and a ram that breaks down a billion-kilowatt dam. It was also turned into a campaign song for John F. Kennedy in 1960.

The first parable today reminded me of this song, because if read literally it conveys a situation where high hopes were the only way it would work out. But as I have said many times reading parables literally guarantees that we will miss the point. Imagine being a farmer who scatters seed and then goes to bed letting nature take its course until it is ready for harvest. At which time he brings in a plentiful harvest. It doesn’t seem like much of a story. What’s more is that anyone with even a little agricultural experience would know that is not the way to get a plentiful harvest.

Scattering seeds instead of planting them guarantees the birds will eat well. It does not guarantee that the seeds will germinate, grow, and bring forth a harvest. Planting the seeds would be a better way. Subsequently, a good farmer weeds the fields, waters the crops, and guards the growing plants from animals and pests. Getting plenty of sleep and letting things go is a recipe for a poor crop and nothing to eat. That lax attitude is “High Hopes” and nothing more. How can that be the Kingdom of God?

If the first parable is about high hopes, the second parable is the antithesis of that. Instead of being something hoped for, this is the farmer’s nightmare. Mustard plants of the sort that Jesus is talking about are noxious weeds. They invade croplands and if not eradicated will grow into big shrubs. In the process they soak up water and nutrients from the soil that the crops need. If they get large enough for birds to nest in, they provide those scavengers with a base to work from as they pillage the best of the crops. The farmer gets two problems for the price of one.

But Jesus’ parables are supposed to be telling us something about the Kingdom of God, at least that is how he framed them. In the past I have made the point that when reading a parable, the first thing to look for is what does not make sense. Parables are about taking something familiar and putting a twist on it that takes us aback. Parables make us think about the familiar in a way that reveals something new.

The first parable does not make sense on the surface. The farmer acts in an irrational way. If this is like the Kingdom of God then we think that we must trust in the mystery. The farmer plants willy-nilly and then let’s God take care of it. Jesus says that the seeds sprout and grow and the farmer “does not know

how.” Jesus follows this by pointing out that, “The earth produces of itself.” The farmer doesn’t know what is going on, only the earth does. The earth, not the farmer, is the active one. The earth produces the various stages of growth of the plant. It is only at the time of the harvest that the farmer steps in and harvests the grain.

While that interpretation works well for parable one, parable two may not seem so easily analyzed. Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like this also. Instead of a lax farmer not tending the fields until harvest we have the weeds and birds that will be “tending” the farmer’s his field. Their tending is different from an industrious farmer. Nonetheless the field is providing for them. The mustard plant grows topsy-turvy. Birds nest in it laying eggs and bringing forth new life in the form of chicks. The grain field provided chaff and stems for the birds to build nests. The growing grain provides food for the birds. The birds provide fertilizer for the mustard plant which grows even larger and allows more birds to nest.

There is a cycle of growth, new birth, and support that the plants and birds give each other. It may not be to the farmers’ liking but that is not the point. The point is that the Kingdom of God once it begins to grow provides for others to come in. Which provides for more growth in the kingdom which provides room for more. Instead of it being a finite field that can only accommodate a limited number this ecosystem provides for continuous growth. The Kingdom of God does not run out of room at the inn. The more who come into the Kingdom the more room the Kingdom makes.

If our little church were to have full pews each week, I do not think we would put up a sign to keep people out. We would find ways to accommodate more. More services or new ways of seating, better seating in the parish hall and more. That is how God’s Kingdom is. Once we scatter the seeds of love we can trust that God will make them grow. God’s love will produce from itself bringing forth the harvest that we can gather in. Even when we see something that looks like a blight in our field, we can trust that God will take it and repurpose it for good. The vile mustard plant will become the home to many and its growth which comes of God’s earth will be for the good, because many can make a home in it.

The mysteries of God’s Kingdom are manifold. None of us knows how it works. Only God knows how it works. If they say they do run away quickly for they are either self-deluded or a charlatan. Even Jesus could not explain the Kingdom of God with out resorting to parables (the Hebrew word behind this also means riddles). Our best understanding of the Kingdom of God is as an unsolvable riddle. The wise are confused by the parables. Only those who approach the Kingdom as a child have a chance of understanding.

It is frustrating and infuriating. We want certainty. We want concrete answers. It is no surprise that people turn to faiths that are black and white instead of living in the uncertainty of the grey in between. That is what Jesus is calling for us to do. Living in uncertainty. Live in the mystery of not knowing

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The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
10:00 a.m.
June 16, 2024

how the seed grows. Live in the uncertainty of a weed that grows so wildly that it can house new life. We do not need dogmas, fundamentals, or charismatic charmers to tell us what to believe. We just need the willingness to accept the mystery of the Kingdom and sow the seeds of love. Then wait to see what the seeds bring forth and wonder at all that can be when we trust in God.