

The Courage to Be Changed

Last week I spoke about the death-dealing hypocrisy of respectability politics, about how it serves to extricate the powerful and privileged from having to confront the demands—and, to be sure, these are exacting and unrelenting demands—of the Gospel. We heard in Matthew 11 Jesus express great frustration with those who are all too eager to reject the good news of God's kingdom by focusing on the supposed imperfections of those bearing witness to this good news. The idea is that by slandering the messenger, we can safely ignore the message. This is the strategy, and it's proven very effective, in Jesus's time and in ours. And when you stop to consider what's at stake, it's not so hard to understand why this strategy is so routinely employed. The gospel Jesus bears, if we are truly to comprehend it, is indeed a hard pill to swallow. Or we might say, in light of today's passage, a hard seed to plant. So I feel I should acknowledge that the vested interest that many of us (if not all of us) at some point or another have in not hearing and heeding the demands of justice is perfectly in keeping with the reality that these demands lay bare. The change necessary to accommodate this reality very often means uprooting our lives. And I don't care who you are or what your life looks like, for most of us, that is a scary proposition. Even thinking about this may bring about anxiety. I mention this because in an important sense, this primes us to see what Jesus is up to in our passage. So one of the great rewards of today's passage is that it offers what I think is among the most illuminating insights into the way our resistance to the Gospel message works and what parables, or illustrative stories, can do to break through that resistance.

It can be easy to miss, but it's important (I think) to note that the parables in Matthew do not show up until chapter 13, which marks the beginning of Matthew's third discourse of five. (Matthew structures his Gospel into five discourses, which is widely seen as a nod to the Torah,

as the author of Matthew's Gospel is widely thought to be a Jewish follower of Jesus.) Until this point in the Gospel, Jesus speaks with often startling, unfiltered directness. (The first 12 chapters offer a veritable treasure trove of call-out hits; chapter 12 gives us "you brood of vipers!") This, as we have seen, causes him to clash bitterly with his detractors, the religious leaders and power brokers who see in him a powerful threat to their authority and set about to trick him into saying and doing anything by which they can discredit him and ensnare him in scandal. What Matthew's organization of the Gospel may help illuminate for us, then, is why Jesus turns to the use of parables. The atmosphere tense, every word (even, I imagine, every inflection of every word) laden with baggage—intended and otherwise—Jesus recognizes that his words are facing stiff resistance, or hard, compacted soil. I feel quite sure that, at some point or another, we've all experienced such an atmosphere. With hackles raised and feathers ruffled, what words, what messages, what ideas can break in?

As we see in our passage, Jesus's turn to parables was not lost on his disciples. After he speaks to the crowd, they come to him and ask him, "Why are you talking like that? What's with the parable?" (my paraphrase, of course). Here Jesus makes clear the parable's purpose, loosely quoting Isaiah: "Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear" (v13). Their eyes are open, their ears are open. But they are not receiving what's spoken. They are closed-off, constricted, compacted. Their posture is fixed, the spirit language and often their body language rigidly and determinedly uncompromising. While it may be true enough that these characteristics describe some more than others, what I'm describing is actually a posture common to us all in some seasons of our lives. And I cannot stress this enough, because one very common reading, and I would call it a misreading, is that the four varieties of soil Jesus names in our passage is a typology of people. While it's clear that Jesus understands some people will

never be open to the Gospel message, the redemptive work he undertakes assumes that people are not fixed types with predetermined ends. The path became a path because it was trod and stomped on, time and again. There's no telling why the rocky soil lost its depth and became so compacted, but it almost certainly didn't begin that way. And the thorns and thickets that threaten to choke the life of budding plants were not always there. We all know healthy soil is teeming with life, but this life is a delicate and precarious balance that can tip all too easily toward decline. Drainage stops, nutrient absorption decreases, and microbes and other soil critters stop aerating the soil. Life diminishes. Most of the time, this can change, but that will entail a major transformation, and herein lies the dilemma: How can change come to that which is in its very constitution is resistant to change? How could Jesus's message reach those who seeing do not see and hearing do not hear?

The answer, for Jesus, is parables. Stories that illuminate and stimulate without explicitly provoking a resistance that is primed to stiffen up at the first hint of challenge. In its rawest form, the Gospel message is demanding; stories about life and death, which concern us all, are not. They speak to something that intrigues and, in turn, stir us to greater openness to their insights. We loosen up when we hear them, because remaining clinched and tight requires too much effort when we feel the lure of connection to the life that longs to teem in and around all of us. We begin to see more clearly and hear more deeply, and (ideally) our attachment to what felt so important to us before dissolves. Parables became a means by which Jesus could help his hearers understand that while ruthlessly demanding, the vision of justice that the Gospel message bears actually could not be closer to the vision that God has sown in the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds. Parables can till us, break up our attachments to certain ideas and assumptions about who we are over and against the world around us, make us dream again. But there's a catch—

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we, the hearers, have to be tillable, breakable, soilable. At a certain point, the compacted soil ceases to be soil at all. This gets to the root (I think) of what it means to be people of faith: courage. To be open to the challenge of the gospel, indeed to be open to the challenge of faith. It requires tremendous courage. It requires humility, that we simply do not and cannot know what the future holds from moment to moment or what the best possible response is to the problems that confront us. It requires openness to new ideas and expressions of values, perhaps even (or perhaps especially) when these scare us and make us feel challenged in our perspectives. And it requires a willingness to be broken, our longstanding sense of identity and belonging ruptured, and then we have to experience strange, disquieting feelings that make us feel really exposed and precarious. Such is the vulnerability of belonging to the most Beloved Community, the kingdom of God. And yet, there is in this vulnerability a peace that eludes any attempt to understand it. There is the freedom and, yes, the rest of being exactly—no more, no less—who God is calling you to be from moment to moment. When we allow ourselves to be broken in this way, we create space for the holy spirit to enter and aerate our spirits, to make our lives new.