

14 June 2009  
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This morning's Gospel has two parables. And these parables are interesting little devices. Their purpose is as a teaching but not just in a linear sense—not just to provide information. If that were the case you'd probably come up with more gardening hints than you would anything of a spiritual nature.

What these parables are helping do is to draw us into a new state of being, a personal transformation. Jesus talked about that as the Kingdom of God, the reign of God. Paul in this letter to the Corinthians—second letter to the Corinthians—that last sentence we just heard: "If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" It's that new creation, it's that kingdom mentality. It's not just an intellectual state; it's not just about our thoughts being changed but our very being is being transformed.

So these little stories have within them the means of moving us along on this path of transformation. Most people don't have this sudden - sort of like Paul's Damascus road - experience of just being zapped and suddenly being an enlightened, fully realized being. I don't think that Paul had that experience exactly to its fullest. Most of us—it's sort of the difference between being stir-fried or steamed. You know? Most of us are steamed. It takes a while. And these stories are the means of working on us.

So for instance, that beloved story of the prodigal son. Now if you hear the story—it's a pretty straight ahead little story. Young man takes his fortune, goes off, blows it all on wine, women, and song. Gets a job tending the hogs. Is jealous of the hogs because at least they have something to eat. Goes home. Dad meets him. Dad's fine. Big brother's not. It's a pretty straight ahead story.

But when we reflect on that story we can start to peel away the layers of this story. We can mine it for all sorts of things. And the beauty of these little parables is that they work on everybody. All of us bring our own personal experience and needs into these stories and the story has the means of working on us. Of going in—we need to focus though on the reflection on these stories so that they keep working on us. Maybe we see ourselves as the prodigal son. Some of us are more adept at that than others, out of life experience. Maybe we've been in the position where we can project ourselves as this all forgiving father. Or maybe it's the older and jealous brother. There's all sorts of layers that we can peel away and mine for our own personal spiritual growth.

Or maybe it's the story of the Good Samaritan (which is much more challenging) that we often think about, that our own—those who we are most prejudiced against may be our best friends and the ones who will do us the most good. May in fact save us.

So there's all sorts of ways we can in which we can enter into these stories and that they can begin to teach us, but we have to actually engage the stories. The particular little parables that we get this morning are some of those that come out of that agrarian

culture. And so we actually get to see the process being described in these stories though not necessarily—certainly not the content. You can look at these as possibly being stories about how parable themselves work on us. The seeds are planted with the parable, say.

And we don't understand exactly how the growth takes place. We don't understand it in our gardens. We know we go out there, we cultivate, we water, we fertilize, and something happens in there that makes the plants bigger and they flower and they bear fruit but we don't really know how that works. We don't exactly what the mechanisms are. Yeah, you can take the class and they'll tell you but do you really know how that works?

It's like the spiritual life. We embrace the spiritual life, we embrace the parable, we enter into, we have to cultivate this thing and growth takes place. We don't really know exactly how. But the promise is that it's going to bear fruit. You could also see it from the mustard seed story. That these are tiny little simple stories. Tiny little mustard seeds of stories. And that those mustard seeds get planted in our heart and that they can grow into an amazing thing.

Now the reality is: Jesus is using hyperbole. Mustard seeds don't grow into trees. It's a bush. Right? But it's not supposed to be agronomically accurate. It doesn't have to be accurate. It's about the story. It's getting your attention with this overstatement. And the overstatement is involved in talking about how this seed is planted in our hearts and it grows and it grows and it grows...And it's about hospitality to the birds and generosity.

You can see it from all these different angles. You can see how it has the potential to work on us and to transform us into something so much bigger than we could ever have imagined. In ways we don't have to understand but have faith and trust that it will take place.

Part of what we're doing in looking at these parables and making those connections is seeing our story because they are very domestic mundane stories. See our story and God's story and see how our lives are actually parables themselves. It's not about the little stories that Jesus told alone. That our story, our life story, when reflected upon can act like a parable. And that our collective stories are parables. Our family stories can feed us, can give us insight when we reflect on our lives in addition to parables in scriptures we see at work there that same principle. That within this story there is an avenue for personal growth into this reign of God.

Now, in just a minute or two, we're going to all gather around—most of you will stay in your places—but some of us will come forward and Alyssa Moore is coming forward and she will be experiencing what we call Rite 13. It's a rite of passage and it becomes part of her story. It becomes part of her family's story. It's a way of acknowledging that Alyssa is moving in a process from childhood into womanhood. And that that is a very real transition and it is the stuff of story.

It will be something for her family, for her peers, for all of us who know and love her who are surrounding her in this ceremony. It becomes part of *our* collective story. And today she will be, in a sense, a sacramental element. She will be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace that we can all connect to. And it creates a story that we can reflect on then and we can see ourselves in her. It's a way that we all take notice—even if it's just for a moment—of our connectedness. And that she is entering into a part of the stream of life that will feed her and the experience can feed all of us together.

These wondrous little stories - whether they are stories given by Jesus, whether they are stories that come from our lives - can be the stuff of alchemy. They can transform us and take us into that new creation, the Kingdom of God.

Amen.