

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
12 February 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“It’s All in the Mix/ed Messages”

Part of the Series, *Pace & Practice* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Matthew 13:24-43

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Sometimes Jesus is really hard to understand.

But hey, no worries, because according to a hundred million dollar Christian media campaign, Jesus is ‘relatable;’ “*He Gets Us.*”

Portraying Jesus as a refugee, activist, and outcast, the “He Gets Us” campaign claims: “*Whatever you are facing, Jesus faced it too.*” (Except perhaps, multi-million dollar Superbowl ads; Jesus did not face that.)

Unsurprisingly, this “He Gets Us” campaign is facing criticism for pouring 20 million dollars into fleeting 30 second Superbowl ads instead of using that money to address the very social issues the campaign says we are all facing (and that Jesus faced too.)¹

Beyond the financial critique of this campaign, I’ve been wondering about its message this week, too. Especially after reading Matthew 13. Sure, Jesus Gets Us. But do *we* get him?

“*Let anyone with ears listen!*” Matthew writes. (13:43)

I don’t know about you but it’s hard NOT to listen to “*and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,*” (13:42)!

I got so caught up in those five words this week – “*weeping and gnashing of teeth*” – that I almost stopped listening to the rest of this passage. I’m not kidding y’all. I took a deep dive. Matthew’s Jesus uses this phrase quite a bit, so I really wanted to try and understand it.

¹ AJ Willingham, “The truth behind the ‘He Gets Us’ ads for Jesus airing during the Super Bowl,” *CNN* (Feb. 12, 2023), accessed on Feb.12, 2023 at

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/11/us/he-gets-us-super-bowl-commercials-ccc>.

I'll spare you all my research, but I did learn some interesting things. First, the Greek word for weeping *klauthmos*, refers to the kind of lament that is about a loss or calamity that has befallen you – it is the dramatic wailing of one who has suffered great loss,² not one who has caused great loss.

Second, the Greek root for the word gnashing is *brucho*. It means anger. It literally depicts a kind of snarling or growling that reveals one's teeth. References of 'gnashing of teeth' throughout the Old Testament and New – whether referring to humans or the divine – are related to rage or frustration at someone, something, or a situation.³

Neither of these words are about regret or remorse for doing something, but rather about the feelings one has when something devastating happens *to* them. This is a very important distinction. Because in Matthew's gospel this phrase does not describe a feared future reality of hell, as a book like Dante's *Inferno* might have us imagine. No, for Matthew's readers, "weeping and gnashing

of teeth" was their present reality.

Remember, Matthew's gospel is believed to have been written to people of Jewish faith shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Their whole world had collapsed. Their entire city – homes, marketplace, their *Temple* – was burned by Rome and scattered to rubble. And this siege lasted 5 months. Day after day they saw everything they knew and loved being destroyed around them. Not unlike, I'm sure, what Ukrainians are experiencing today.

So, yes there was much weeping and lament over what had befallen them. Wailing. And yes, there was gnashing of teeth – anger. Rage.

And Matthew's context is still all to relevant today. He was probably writing to an audience in what is modern day Syria. Syria, who along with Turkey, experienced a devastating, destabilizing earthquake this week that, to date, has killed 35,000 as of this morning's count, but that is likely to double according to the UN Relief Chief Martin Griffiths.

² Jeff Doles, "Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth," *The Faith Log* (July 2, 2016), accessed on February 12, 2023 at "<https://www.thefaithlog.com/2016/07/weeping-and-gnashing-of-teeth.html>."

³ Doles, *ibid*.

The World Health Organization estimates that 26 million people have been affected by the earthquake.⁴ The loss of human life is catastrophic. The devastation stretches across a total amount of land equal to the size of France, I read in one report. And of course, many many structures collapsed and fell because they were not built to acceptable code. Which means a LOT of this loss could have been prevented. Weeping and gnashing of teeth. Here and now today.

As long as we are living in this age – and not at the end of the age – there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The other thing that can make you think this passage is about the future when it's really about the present is this word "heaven." "Heaven" makes us think about a future reality after we die. But that's not what the word means here. When Matthew's Jesus says "kingdom of heaven," he simply means the "kingdom of God." He just doesn't use the name of God, because Jewish people do not say the name of the Lord out

loud. So he says "Kingdom of Heaven" instead. The kingdom (of God or Heaven) that Jesus proclaimed – in all the parables and all the gospels – is about the here and now.

And so to hear what Jesus is saying in the "here and now" about the kingdom, we have to understand the function of the parables.

Two Greek roots make up the word parable: *para*, meaning "alongside, together with," as in "parallel" and *balo*, meaning "to cast, to throw."⁵ When Jesus tells a parable, he's casting ideas or concepts alongside one another, like two parallel train tracks. We want to make them mix and mingle and make sense. Or we want to make them intersect in some way. But often, they are meant just to sit side by side (in paradox), one reality informing another, or one aspect of the kingdom making us question one assumption we might have about another aspect of the kingdom. Parables aren't meant to be reconciled, but wrestled with.

⁴ Johanna Treeck, "Turkey-Syria earthquake deaths expected to top 50,000: UN aid chief," *Politico* (12 Feb. 2023), accessed on Feb. 12, 2023 at <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-syria-earthquake-deaths-expected-to-top-50000-un-aid-chief/>.

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 7.

If we read a parable and think we understand it, we've missed the point.⁶ Parables confound our understanding by pointing out our assumptions and misjudgments about how the world works. Parables reframe our vision⁷ by refracting our perspective. And often what we begin to see is very unsettling⁸ at first. Until – we realize that the unsettling feeling is because we've become far too settled into the ways of the world's kingdoms, instead of God's kingdom.

Parables can't help but invite a "Spirit of Curiosity" into our faith. They slow the pace of our reading and invite us into a practice of imaginative thinking and listening. So let's listen again, shall we?

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds can be scary, particularly after reading Jesus' explanation of it to his disciples! It's easy to immediately jump to a place of wondering – am I wheat or weeds – am I good or bad? Will I burn in the furnace or shine like the sun in the kingdom? Both of which, interestingly, involve intense fire-y heat! It's just that the burning that happens in a

furnace is typically a refining, purifying kind of fire. And the burning that happens within the sun emits a shining Light that illumines the world with Light and heats the earth with warmth. But both images – for the 'righteous wheat' and the 'evil weeds' – are ones of fire.

And – burning weeds at harvest time is a necessary process. It gets rid of what is not needed, what does not nourish. As Jesus describes to his disciples, at the end of the age – whenever that is – we *hope* that all that causes sin and evil and suffering is burned, refined, purified – don't we? And yes, there will still be weeping and gnashing of teeth because at that point – there is still pain and evil and suffering in the world. As long as we are in this life as we know it – until that purifying and refining happens – we are weeping and gnashing teeth because we are suffering.

This passage really hit home for me this week, because of weeping I've been doing for a ministry colleague of mine, a fellow American Baptist pastor, who died by suicide. The news of his death has rocked our small American Baptist world of

⁶ Levine, 3.

⁷ Levine, 25.

⁸ Levine, 25.

clergy colleagues and friends. His wife is also a pastor. I know her well as she is part of the Women's Pastors Colloquium I attend every year. They have two boys. I've known their family over a decade.

Suicide is always devastating, but it's the destabilizing part that always gets me. It seems to linger longer than other forms of death. Suicide shakes the foundation of what we think we can control in our lives.

Depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts – these things are so often way beyond us and way beyond what we can know and understand or make sense.

Certainly that's the case when we are depressed, but also when we are witnessing someone else's depression. We can't understand it, we can only stand beside it. And suicide causes so many questions to arise within us. What ifs. And if onlys. And suicide shakes the foundation about what we *think* we know about other people who are in our lives. We never know what someone is going through. What they might be struggling with or living through. Depression and internal wrestling and struggle can be like an earthquake inside of our souls and hearts; and something like suicide creates aftershocks for loved ones that

go on for days and days and miles and miles.

Depression does not discriminate based on faith. Pastors get depressed too, because pastors are people – and people get depressed. It has nothing to do with the kind of person you are or aren't or how much faith you have or don't have. If you are depressed or having feelings of ending your life, please seek help. Talk to me, another pastor. or anyone you trust in your life. Or call the suicide prevention lifeline at 988. You are not alone. And you do not have to go through this moment of suffering alone. You are loved. You are accepted just as you are. You are not alone. We need each other; we need you.

The tragedy of suicide defies reason and explanation. It is caused by the existential weeping and gnashing of teeth of one person, and then its grief and pain ripple out to cause weeping and gnashing of teeth to countless others.

From the earthquake of suicide that takes one life and shatters countless others, to a literal earthquake that took tens of thousands of people and shattered the lives of millions –

this week has been shaken by destabilizing loss. The ground feels uncertain. Whatever certainty a foundation of faith can provide, it can also be cracked wide open – into cavernous pits that feel never ending. There is so much of life that remains a mystery – that only God knows.

So then, how then to we find our footing? Where do we root ourselves? What do we do when we feel so powerless to do anything at all?

Well, this is where we move from the understanding of “Jesus gets us” which is comforting – because he too was depressed and alone and crying out to God in the Garden of Gethsemane before his death – to the urgent call for us to “get Jesus” and try to hear what he is actually saying to us. Because Jesus speaks hope. Again and again. He proclaims a world, a kingdom, that is beyond what we can imagine. And he uses practical every day images in provocative ways to help us imagine and see and dream.

While it’s human nature to read the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds and start worrying about whether we are Wheat or Weeds and wonder what’s going to

happen at the end of the age – when we do that, we miss the point altogether.

Jesus makes it clear that the *Son of Man* (i.e. Jesus) is handling things at the end of the age. But he needs us to handle things now. Because guess what? The age has not yet ended. And he’s trying to help us see that the age does not have to end – if we bring the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven. Here and now.

So – what are we to do *now*? Now, today, in the day that the age has not yet ended? Well, for one, we are to *not* worry about what is wheat and what is weeds, or who is wheat and who is weeds. Let them grow side by side, Jesus says. Let us all live side by side. We cannot know fully what is wheat and what is weeds. And even if we could, how do we know that in pulling up what we think is a weed, we don’t also pull up wheat? OR, in pulling up what we think is a weed, we don’t realize that it is actually a crop of a different kind that has yet to bear fruit – even if it looks different than wheat? Weeds are not inherently bad, they are just really strong and persistent.

Jesus says, “*let both of them*

grow until harvest.” In other words – *let it be*. In the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, it’s your job to grow and to sow. It’s *not* your job to identify weeds and pluck them up. Nurture every seed with love, life, hope, grace – and maybe just maybe – the weeds might just be a different kind of crop than you think.

You see, Jesus is setting up his listeners to think one thing before he turns around and shows them exactly why their thinking isn’t the full picture!

Because immediately following this parable is the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Mustard is almost always described as a very invasive weed, that germinates quickly and grows kind of wild and out of control and withstands a variety of temperatures.

As such, often this parable stops at a simple interpretation of “the kingdom of heaven” comes from something small, like a seed, and grows into something huge – like a tree or a shrub or a far-reaching, wild and crazy vine!

But scholar Amy-Jill Levine points out two key points that are missed when we only focus on that aspect. First of all, mustard plants have medicinal, curative qualities.⁹ Mustard plants have antioxidants and possess antibacterial, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, and anti-cancer properties.

And second, while a plant and not a tree, the tree imagery is used as a comparison to how kingdoms are usually described in scripture (as tall and mighty and singular) – but the way mustard plants grow they are shrubs that are lined up and linked together as a community (not singular). And even, here birds nest. Jesus is challenging the traditional notions of what we think shelter is for birds, and inviting our imaginations to think of other, more prolific options for shelter and housing. The kingdom of heaven is like something that grows prolifically and provides healing and shelter.¹⁰ And – not only that – but the growth, for a long time, happens unseen, underground as a seed. This takes time, but as the growth happens, you’ll know the fruits of your labor in the kingdom of heaven by how much healing is

⁹ Levine, 181.

¹⁰ Levine 182.

happening and how much shelter is being provided!!

I can't think of a more hopeful image as we have lost so much life to COVID and other illnesses over the last 2-3 years, and as we face a housing crisis in our city and across our country, and as millions are now immediately homeless in Turkey and Syria, in Ukraine and really all around the world. If healing and shelter are signs of what the kingdom of heaven are like – then we know for sure we are not there yet.

And yet – we have hope. We must. And this is what the Parable of the Yeast shows us. We can do something. But we may have to break some things down first before other things can rise.

As an aside, it's wonderful that the kingdom of heaven, the realm of God's love and abundant life – is depicted as a woman baking bread...for there is no more nourishing image than bread in our scriptures. From manna in the wilderness, to multiplying loaves for 5,000 – bread physically and spiritually nourishes. And this parable reminds us we must do

our part by kneading in yeast. But what is yeast?

Yeast is a decomposing agent.¹¹ It breaks down sugars in flour (things that seem 'sweet' to us and that we enjoy even!)...in order to release carbon dioxide – which is what creates the space in bread to rise. The kingdom of heaven requires some decomposition, some deconstructing of the ingredients of our world as they are now (even though they might seem sweet to some of us) – in order to create space and levity for bread to rise – for nourishment to rise. Just think of Jesus' body, another metaphor related to bread – Jesus' body must be broken down before it rises up again!

In other words, the kingdom of heaven is like whatever we do that helps make life lighter and creates space. That lives into the cycle of decomposition and rising – death and resurrection.

And not only that, there is more good news! The woman is mixing the yeast in three measures of flour!

Father Dominic Garramone, aka

¹¹ Levine, 121.

the Bread Monk, explains:

“Three measures is a little over a bushel of flour (1.125 bushels, to be precise). That’s 144 cups of flour....which is enough to make 52 loaves of bread...each with 16 slices...which totals yielding 832 slices, enough for 416 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (we’d need 33 jars of jelly, and 64 of peanut butter).

What’s the message of the story? It’s simple: The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who wants to do more than feed her family. The kingdom announced by Jesus is like a woman who wants to feed the village. The kingdom of God is like a woman who wants to feed the world. The kingdom is for everybody.”¹²

Indeed, the kingdom of heaven is for everybody. And it takes all of us – every one of us – to help it come about. Doing our part.

These parables remind me that I will not understand everything about faith, but that that is okay. Jesus is not actually asking us to understand the kingdom of heaven, he is asking us to help

bring it about. It’s not ALL up to us. But SOME is up to us. The kingdom of heaven is going to grow and grow and spread and we may not always be able to identify what is wheat and what is weeds; something we think is a weed may in fact be something as healing and sheltering as mustard! But even beyond the kingdom looking like something we don’t expect, *we are agents* in its growing and rising in ways we may not expect.

Just as a seed grows unseen under the ground, and just as yeast is hidden in flour unseen – there is work that God is doing for the kingdom of heaven that we do not see. But the seed has to be planted by someone for the healing and sheltering kingdom to grow. And the yeast has to be mixed into the flour by someone for the breaking down of and rising up to happen in order for the feast to be prepared.

“Let anyone with ears listen!”
Jesus says.

As I listen to these three seemingly juxtaposed parables, what I hear is this: Jesus is inviting us to consider what we

¹² Fr. Dominic Garramone, “Three Measures of Flour,” *The Bread Monk* (April 2, 2012), accessed on February 12, 2023 at <http://breadmonk.com/my-bread-blog/three-measures-of->

[flour#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThree%20measures%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20usual,your%20leg%20to%20knead%20it!">flour#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThree%20measures%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20usual,your%20leg%20to%20knead%20it!](#)

CAN do and not obsess or worry about what we CAN'T do. So much of Kingdom growth happens in secret or beyond our sight and understanding – and it is a mystery – but what's not a mystery is that Jesus invites us to do our part even when we do not see the full picture or have full understanding.

So maybe we should focus less on the seemingly “mixed messages” and trust that somehow it's “all in the mix” – and maybe it's supposed to be because Jesus is the mixer, the one with the recipe for hope, love, transformation, and redemption.

As much as I would LOVE to have all the answers and worries and contradictions of faith figured out – that's not going to happen. Jesus himself says he is speaking in parables to proclaim what is hidden. In other words, not everything is for us to know and understand. Even if “Jesus Gets Us,” Jesus doesn't ask us to “get him.” He asks us to listen to him. And if we listen, then we will follow. And if we follow, then the kingdom of heaven will too.

Amen.