

It is well known that Jesus spoke in “parables,” stories that are a kind of “extended metaphor.” Our Gospel lesson this morning indicates that he spoke only in parables to crowds that gathered, but then would “explain” everything later in private to his disciples. He did this because he knew that most people understand a vivid story better than abstract explanations and concepts. He also knew that his teachings could have very radical implications, so being too open with the public at large would shorten his life.

Another reason that Jesus spoke in parables, I think, is that a story can reach many kinds of people! Different people identify with different characters in the story. Take for example the famous parable of the prodigal son, or the lost son. A listener might identify with having been the reckless son, the one who went away and squandered any money the parents gave, the one who wanted the easy life full of temporal pleasures. Or a listener might identify with the older brother more, the one who stayed home with the parents, worked on the family farm, did all the things a responsible child should do, but was resentful of any love and gifts the parents gave to his reckless brother. Or the listener could identify or hope to be like the good and loving father in the story... (You may hear more on this next week; most followers of Christ think the father is the main point of the parable... the father’s merciful,

gracious, extravagant love, shown as he RUNS to meet his wayward son when he sees him coming home! The great thing about a good story is that it sparks the imagination; what other things may have happened if I read between the lines? What parts of the story are not finished? What if I'm the older son... will I eventually celebrate that my lost brother has found his right mind? Will I see any benefit in leaving the farm, in not being the goody-goody all my life? in striking out to have some new even risky adventures? If I identify with the father, will I see the healing of amazing grace? Will I also read between the lines and guess that the Loving father also drew up some guidelines for the chores and responsibilities for his son after the party time?

Yet another reason that Jesus spoke in parables is that he knew that spiritual growth is a long and lifelong process! We remember that Jesus said, "there is much more I could tell you, but you cannot bear it now." "The Holy Spirit will lead you into all truth." It may be another great parable will lead you into some new truth when you are ready to hear it. Jesus' famous parables about seeds and soils make the point of continual learning. Remember how Jesus spoke about the different kinds of soils? We can imagine that we each have these kinds of soil at different times of our lives. We could be like a hardened path where spiritual seeds would not take hold... Or

like rocky soil where God's seeds grow just for a while, but not have deep roots when hard times come? Or like good and deep soil, ready for God's seeds to grow with deep roots. This morning's parable about God's seeds also reminded us that first comes the stalk, then the ear, then the full kernels of grain. Jesus again is saying that the "Kingdom of God" (growth as a community of God) is a process.

Being a "full participant" in the "Kingdom of God" is indeed a process that starts with seeds; one implication of this is that we need a commitment to the process; we need to take practice and disciplines seriously, watering the seeds, watering the sprouts, planting more seeds. Jesus spoke of seeds as God's word... yes teaching through words, telling wonderful stories both within the Bible and outside of the Bible. There is the wonderful story or parable of the Crow and the Pitcher (Aesop's Fable I believe). Trying to get the water at the bottom of the pitcher, the crow adds pebbles until the water level rises to the top. A lesson in commitment and gradual progress.

And we find, as a growing community of faith, that the Bible is best studied and explored as a community; it is with other people that deeper meanings are explored and shallow meanings are challenged. It is with other people that we hear resonances of God's presence that enrich our own ideas and experiences. (When I was at Princeton Seminary, I took

advantage of having a regular “prayer partner” for study and prayer, committing to getting together once a week.) We have concluded our weekly Bible study here at Belleville for the summer, and will start again in September. But I would encourage anyone missing it to find at least one other person with which to read scripture and discuss how it relates to current daily life.

I may sound like a broken record, but we have wonderful resources in our “These Days” booklets, and also in the UCC national daily devotional. Daily may be too much for some, but try at least once or twice a week to read devotionals, preferably with another person, to get deeper reflections and viewpoints. With others, we find different ways that some passages of holy scripture resonate; we also find some passages we may argue with or disagree with. But study and prayer with others will always bear fruit. The seeds of God’s word and God’s will, seeds of wisdom and truth, will always grow, sometimes even in big ways! Trust seeds of God; water them and spread them! Amen.