

SERMON: “My Little Glass of Wittenberg Beer”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, June 27, 2021

PRAYER: “May your Spirit, O God, indeed break open your Word for us, that it may be as bread and soul-food. May we find our minds enlightened, our hearts emboldened, and our spirits encouraged. We pray in the name of Jesus, your Living Word. Amen”

Those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer are now rolling out before us. And the quaffers among us sense how appealing those advertisements are that say: “*Ex says it all*”; “*Mountain Cold Refreshment*”; or, “*Your table is ready in the life Artois*”. Rest assured, this sermon is not promotional. Blessed are those who choose to abstain. Any ice cold drink on a hot, muggy summer’s day will offer refreshment and relief. Almost 500 years ago, before breweries came up with advertising slogans for their products, the father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, made this journal entry: “*While I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer, the gospel runs its course.*” It’s a rather laid-back remark for a pastor and theologian to make, but it’s utterly accurate.

I TEXTUAL TRIGGER

One of the triggers for Luther’s observation is found in one of the brief parables of Jesus heard today that we find in the fourth chapter of Mark.

It definitely distills some of the essence of what Jesus was on about.

Among literary forms, the uniqueness of parables is their intent on making one point, and only one point. That point may have several layers or facets.

In derivative way, parables become instructional or directive, but they are focused.

Over 55 years ago, Bible scholar A. M. Hunter wrote that a parable is

“a comparison drawn from nature or daily life designed to illuminate some spiritual truth.”

Jesus used parables to illustrate what God’s realm is like, or how God operates.

So, let me run the first little parable we heard from Mark 4 by you again.

Listen for any inner spiritual bell beginning to go “bong” inside.

Be alert to any intuition that some switch of enlightenment has been pushed into the “on” mode.

“The realm of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow,

the farmer does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once the farmer goes in with a sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26-29)

Any bells going off already?

This little story is often called “The Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly”.

Among other titles given to it are: “The Parable of the Patient Farmer” [B. T. D. Smith] or “The Parable of the Confident Farmer” [Karl Weiss].

The titles seek to point to the parable’s intent.

Bible scholar Dennis Nineham’s comment seems to hit the mark:

“the emphasis falls on the incapacity of the farmer after sowing.”

We could also say the emphasis falls on the in-built capacity of seeds to grow and bear fruit.

That’s the point, isn’t it?

The realm of God, where God’s will and vision for creation becomes fully realized, the times and places whenever and wherever God gets God’s way, is comparable to farmers flinging oats, or alfalfa, or such on their fields in spring and scarcely lifting a finger after that to help them along.

Chemical and organic fertilizers are a more recent development suited to larger acreages.

Farms in ancient Palestine were spread over much smaller plots, as was weed control.

The basis truth isn’t altered much by recent interventions into grain-growing.

Primarily, those seeds just sprout and grow all by themselves.

The word in the NT Greek text is “*automate*”. We might hear it as “No problemo!”

Secretly, automatically, mysteriously those seeds grow.

The realm of God grows and develops that way too. That’s the God’s truth.

II GETTING IT

We can readily imagine that some of those who first heard Jesus share such little stories remained dumbfounded while others clued in and found his illustrations encouraging.

For so many Jewish peasants growing up under the oppressive thumb of Roman power life was fearful, anxiety-producing, and riddled with uncertainty.

Using simple-sounding yet deeply resonant seed stories, hope and reassurance sprang up in for some hearers, for Jesus as much as told them:

“Don’t worry so much. Rest assured God is still in charge of your future, creation’s future. God’s love, God’s will is going to win out. Feel free to help spread that Word in any manner comparable to the way in which you engage in crop-farming or gardening. In fact, if you notice and pay attention to what I am already saying and doing, you will see and sense how the presence and transforming power of God’s realm is already in motion.”

Within three decades after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, Mark publishes his gospel. This first collection of God’s good news is given to handfuls of believers likely spread out over several Galilean locales.

The Romans are still in control of the country.

Some Jewish authorities have attempted to shut down Jesus’ ministry and mission, and remain intent on suppressing it wherever it continues to crop up.

And Mark captures the attention of his audience with little seed parables as if to say:

“Keep on letting your faith in Jesus, your hope for the realm of God keep cropping up. Share the stories. Make your witness. Hold your ground against your detractors. Advocate for social and personal changes. It’s like planting seeds. God has already guaranteed there will be growth and fruitful outcomes.”

And then, sixteen hundred years or so after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, a pudgy, feisty, Augustinian friar named Martin accepts a post as a lecturer in Bible at Wittenberg University, publishes several of his own commentaries on Scripture, makes numerous guest preacher appearances in congregations throughout Saxony, and will get to fasten 95 theses for church reform to the outer doors of Wittenberg Castle church. Often he would wind out his busy days by going to bed for a nap, or by heading to some pub with his friends Philip and Amsdorf to enjoy “a little glass of Wittenberg beer”.

He did that confidently trusting that “the gospel runs its course”, that God’s Word itself would serve to weaken the Papacy more seriously than any prince or emperor could. Little did he expect to set off a major Reformation movement. But, he did.

Hear bells tinkling? Sense some lights being switched on? Feeling a swoosh of encouragement? Since our baptism, throughout our Sunday School days, or since ever any of us formed some church-going habit, and considered discipleship a viable option for our lives, seeds of faith have been sown in us.

At whatever age or stage that process takes root in us, how that faith develops within us and comes to bear fruit through us is God's doing.

Personal conversion, decisions of commitment that bring any of us to dedicate our life to Jesus, to seek God's wisdom and direction for our lives, cannot be forced.

New life, growth, fruitfulness will somehow happen. Just leave it up to God.

This means that there are times when preachers can merrily and trustingly step out of a pulpit, exit stage left from Bible study or book study sessions, satisfied that, to some extent, they have endeavoured to sow some seeds of divine Wisdom and guiding light.

Parents who have seen that their offspring get to worship, Sunday School or church camp, and then watch them as teenagers and young adults "graduate from church" for a time, see them stop participating or attending altogether, can stop fretting so much.

In God's own good time, sown seeds will sprout.

Seekers who venture into a church experience later in life, wondering if there's anything there that can help them find meaning, direction, and purpose, need only be willing to open the soil of their minds and hearts for planting.

What is truly of God will take root in them and develop at its own pace, intent on blossoming.

As some of us recently discovered or were reminded of, doubts also spring up within us.

These are not annoyances as much as welcome disturbances enabling us to sort more, live into questions, do the deep wrestling needed for spiritual maturation.

It calls to mind another parable of Jesus about wheat and weeds being sown together and left to grow side by side until the threshing and harvest time comes for keeping what's valuable and nurturing and trashing the rest.

A minister came to a pastoral charge that would soon prove to be unsettling.

However, two and a half years into that pastorate, on an inconsequential Sunday after worship, a layperson stopped during the customary handshake at the sanctuary door to say:

“I just want you to know that you have gotten to me, or, maybe through you God has. A couple of weeks ago when we had that guest speaker, I felt a tug on my heart. I realize that if you hadn’t been preparing the ground for that, it wouldn’t have happened. I want you to know that I have stepped up to volunteer for that prison ministry program that guest speaker was talking about: one on one visits with inmates. At least once a month, I will be going to a nearby penal institution to visit with inmates: one on one, for Jesus’ sake, God being my helper.”

Moments like that in a pastor’s ministry make the often thankless persistence rewarding, and go a long way to deflect focussing on real or imagined failure or ineffectiveness.

Ebenezer Baptist Church sits almost unobtrusively in a run-down block of row houses, small shops and empty lots in an Atlanta neighbourhood.

Its sanctuary would barely seat 200 people. The community hall downstairs is small.

Nowadays, a newer, much larger Ebenezer church facility across the street

bustles with activity. The smaller building is Ebenezer Memorial Baptist church now.

But that’s where Martin Luther King Jr. followed in the footsteps of his father and began his pastoral and preaching ministry.

The Ebenezer memorial Baptist church doesn’t look like much, but oh! oh!, what an amazing breeding ground it was for a movement that has impacted not only a city, a group of states, a nation, a whole continent, indeed, our world.

CONCLUSION

Plant gospel seeds. Bear witness. Spread the Word. Live God’s love. Act for peace and justice.

Worship, pray, sing praises. Have mercy. Be generous. Take care of creation.

Faith is implanted in us for broadcasting. God’s own grace guarantees the growth God wants.

The ever-unfolding realm of God is God’s “Hymn of Promise” to the universe.

Don’t worry about proof now, or about results in a hurry. Plant seeds. Sit back. Relax.

Sip some lemonade, a little glass of Wittemberg beer, or the beverage of your choice.

Plant more seeds. Rest again. Have another iced tea or such.

Jesus' seed parables are also a remix of another ancient melody.

Remember how the prophet who picked up the harp of Isaiah played his seer's song?

To gathered groups of despairing exiles, he offered a chorus like this:

*“For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout.... So shall my Word be that goes forth from my mouth.
It shall not return to me empty,” says our God. “but it shall accomplish that which I purpose
and prosper in the things for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11)*

In your own good time, in your own wondrous and mysterious ways, O God, bring it on!

We'll keep sowing seeds. You bring it on! Your kin(g)dom come.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Glory and praise to you now and forever. Amen.