

Year A Proper 17 Light the Dynamite Matthew 13 vv31 to 33 and 44 to 52

Jesus tells us, today, a series of parables – as I said a couple of weeks ago, as preacher Clarence Jordan describes it, Jesus is lighting sticks of dynamite and covering them with stories. God is a disrupter, disturber of the status quo, God speaks a new word, brings into being a new creation. If you are comfortable hearing the Gospel of Christ then you are not truly hearing the Gospel of Christ. But, that is partly because it can be very difficult to take in and process and understand the pieces of the Gospel that you hear during our worship services, especially pieces like today. The Gospel proclamation goes by in a blur of images – you can't stop and hold onto one, trying to make sense of it because then you miss all of the rest of them. So, let's slow down and grapple with these images and discover why hearing these stories should shake us up like an exploding stick of dynamite.

Jesus is providing us with glimpses of what the kingdom of God is like. He first tells us it is like a mustard seed – the tiniest of seeds, he says – that grows into the greatest of shrubs. Birds come and nest in its branches. We need to know a few things about the mustard plant Jesus was talking about in order to understand what image of the kingdom he is placing before us. The mustard seed is a very small seed. It grows incredibly fast, like a weed. It grows into a tangled mess, about 12 feet tall at the most, and it grows more sideways than it does upwards – like an out-of-control hedge. Calling it “the greatest of shrubs” should throw a wrench into your mental picture of a gorgeous, tall, sturdy tree. The greatest of shrubs? Really? Shrubs are not great. They don't compare to a magnificent oak tree towering over the landscape around but, this shrub is useful – birds are

nesting in it after all. Jesus, and his listeners, being Jews well-versed in their sacred writings, would have known this was a comparison to a couple of other trees in Scripture. Most notably is the tree found in the Book of Daniel. It is a tree that appears in the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar of the mighty empire of Babylon. The description of the tree should remind you of the story of the Tower of Babel and, hopefully, we all remember what happened there. The tree is described like this: “Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed” (Dan.4:10-12).

The massive tree represents the worldly power of the mighty empire of Babylon – and other worldly empires – and its ruler, King Nebuchadnezzar. And God cuts it down...God chops down the huge and mighty empire and Nebuchadnezzar is reduced to a mindless fool, naked, and eating grass like an animal until he realizes that God is the creator, sustainer, redeemer of all things. The powers of the world who think they are self-made, in charge, top of the heap, are reduced to rubble by the God who made them. The world’s power puts all of its stock in visual magnificence – like the mighty and beautiful tree – in Rolex watches, 100-foot yachts, big homes, and fancy cars. The level of our visual magnificence depends on the level of our wealth but the pressure is on – everyone is pushed to display their worldly power.

And Jesus points us to the ridiculousness and uselessness of our worldly power and displays of wealth with his biting sarcasm: the kingdom of God is like the

“greatest of shrubs.” It starts small, is quick growing, wide-spreading, supporting of life, and most importantly, it is not like worldly kingdoms. Once again, I stress that worldly power that values property, position, and pocketbook is not true power. It is useless decoration that will be cut down in the wake of the true power of God’s kingdom that is love, justice, peace, unity, joy, and mercy. Each time we gather for worship, we enter into God’s kingdom in its fulness. Our liturgies are Spirit-led and transformational – they teach us and lead us into the life of love and mercy and then send us out into the world to grow and spread like the mustard seed...to be the greatest of shrubs.

Jesus’ stick of dynamite tells us that although we are small, we are powerful – powerful when we, like Nebuchadnezzar, come to our senses and know that we are not to desire or try to be the mighty trees of the world, thinking we can do without God, believing we, as individuals and as the church, are successful only when we have money and status but, rather, we are powerful when we realize we are to be different.

William Wilberforce came to this life-altering realization and it led to life-altering behaviour. Our Church celebrated Wilberforce just yesterday (July 29). William was a wealthy young British politician best known for his fight to abolish slavery throughout the British empire. However, he did not begin his fight for moral reformation in England until he experienced a personal transformation as a Christian. He came to the realization that being a Christian actually means living differently. He became more than a "name only" Christian and actively lived his Christian faith. He began his 40-year campaign for emancipation of all slaves in the entire British Empire. This didn't go over well with rich landowners who relied on

slave labour. The powers of the world will always fight back when their power is threatened.

God was leading Wilberforce, just as God leads all of us, out of the trappings of empire into the formation of a counter-cultural society. As it was with Abraham, and the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, that is what God continually calls us to – life in God’s kingdom where there is a level playing field...no social status, no economic groups, and everyone has enough. Walter Brueggemann describes this constant call of God – out from empire, into God’s kingdom – and stresses that we, as the Church, are to live as if the perfection of this counter-cultural society was already here...the new norm of God’s way of life. We are to walk the walk and talk the talk of the turn-the-word-upside-down, light a stick of dynamite good news of Jesus Christ.

This notion of the small but persistent, steady and sure, transformation of the world into the fulness of God’s kingdom continues in the next parable of the yeast in the dough. Jesus tells us that the small taste of the kingdom that we are together, is hidden in the flour of one woman making bread. The small bit of the kingdom works its way through all of the flour until the mixture is changed into the growing, delicious, huge amount of bread. One woman – with three measures of flour – is making about 40 or 50 loaves of bread. One woman feeding the entire village.

Jesus has hammered home that we, though small and, perhaps, feeling insignificant, will grow and change, will reveal the world to be God’s kingdom when we realize we are to be – and have the courage to be – different. He then changes gears to show us what this means for our lives and for the lives of those

around us. Life, God's way in God's kingdom, is like finding a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great value. In both cases there is great joy and the selling of all one's current possessions in order to possess the treasure and the pearl. The fulness of God's kingdom is accompanied by great joy because there is no more sorrow or death, no sickness or disease, no oppression or injustice. But, this comes with the cost of letting go of what the world values. Wanting what the world wants always leads to wanting more – thinking that we need more – and this puts us on the path to the brokenness around us.

Jesus clearly lets us know that life according to God's ways is worth it and, even as we slowly change and grow more Christ-like through worship and prayer – learning and living God's ways, we are tasked with working with God, like the yeast in the dough, to help the world do this as well. We have spent time discerning our gifts and discovering the issues we are passionately concerned about and we will align our gifts with our passions and choose the brokenness that we will actively go about mending just as Wilberforce tackled slavery and other social brokenness in his time. It is worth it. We will reveal God's kingdom and we will experience joy in doing so.

We do not do this without God's help. It is God who, in the end, makes the final decision on who is in and who is out. We, thankfully, do not need to be perfect to be in. Jesus, for the second time recently, tells us that the angels will gather out the bad fish – the stumbling blocks in our relationship with God and with neighbour and with creation – and these stumbling blocks will be burned, purged from us so that we are left spotless. For those who, despite repeated invitations – widespread, inclusive invitations like a massive fishing net pulling in every person

on the planet – for those who turn down life in God’s kingdom, there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This is the ancient way of telling us they will be grieving. Life without God means continuing the life of constant competition, never completely satisfied, never truly happy, living a life where a few people have it made and the rest daily struggle and work.

Choosing to live God’s ways in God’s kingdom is the tough choice. It means severing our attachment to what the world thinks is valuable. It means being different. It is a life of nothing but love, working with God to heal, with that love, the brokenness that surrounds us. But it is immensely worth it and it is happening – in us and around us.

Have you understood all of this? Jesus asks. When they say, yes, Jesus responds with, “That’s great – you are all now scribes trained in the kingdom of God.” The scribes were the people with the knowledge of God’s ways and every village had at least one scribe. You are all now scribes, says Jesus. It’s time to share the treasure of your knowledge - bring out the new and the old. New – because the knowledge is life-changing and world-changing. God is creating a new creation – we and the world are being made new. New is different. Old – because this isn’t news. God has been striving toward the fullness of his kingdom on earth as in heaven since the foundation of the world. We are a part of that striving. It’s time to light that dynamite.