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Field of vision

Roger Karban | Jul. 26, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

The fact that Jesus of Nazareth frequently employed parables while he was teaching tells us a lot about what he was trying to accomplish during his earthly ministry.

Teachers don't use parables when they're just adding to their students' store of knowledge. Parables only come into play when someone is striving to change a person's whole frame of mind, when they're attempting to alter the way people process all the knowledge they receive. Parables are a means of retooling one's brain.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12
Psalm 119
Romans 8:28-30
Matthew 13:44-52

Remember the old story of the young man who pulls his sports car up to a grizzled New England farmer and asks for directions? The farmer climbs off his tractor, stares at the ground for a few seconds, then looks up and solemnly announces, "You can't get there from here."

That's exactly what parables do. They tell us, "You can't get to where I am unless you first change the way you look at the world around you."

As Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan assert in *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Birth*, "Jesus' parables subverted conventional ways of seeing life and God. They undermined ? a taken-for-granted way of seeing 'the way things are.'" But even more insightfully, the two scripture scholars note, "Seeing differently is the foundation of subversion" (HarperOne, San Francisco, 2009). Perhaps more than anything else, Jesus' parables caused his crucifixion. Jewish and Roman authorities simply didn't like the way he looked at reality. Anyone who processes people and situations through a different mindset is always a threat to the status quo.

We know from Matthew's Gospel (4:17) that his Jesus, like Mark's Jesus, has one basic message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Probably because of his Jewish hesitancy to speak of God directly, Matthew changed Mark's "kingdom of God" to "the kingdom of heaven." But the phrase still conveys Mark's original meaning: God present and working effectively in our everyday lives. The historical Jesus is convinced we don't have to say another rosary, participate in another Eucharist, or even read another scripture passage. We can't do anything to force God's

hand. God is already here among us.

There's only one condition for experiencing God's life-changing presence: repentance.

Jesus believed most of us don't even notice God's kingdom among us. Our culture and peers (and sometimes our religion) condition us to look for something else. Only those who repent, who go through a 180-degree change in their value systems, will even begin to experience God's kingdom. More than anything else, Jesus wanted us to focus on people. How subversive can you get?

In today's Gospel pericope, Jesus presumes we'd sell all we have to buy a field with a buried treasure in it, or acquire a pearl for which we'd searched a lifetime. Why then wouldn't we also sell everything we have to possess the kingdom of heaven? It's far more valuable than any treasure or pearl.

Scholars are convinced Jesus speaks from his own experience; he only brought that kingdom to light in his life by giving up his old frame of mind. And he would eventually lose his life because he insisted on sharing his vision-changing insight with others.

This subversive Jesus insists his followers not only create a new frame of mind to experience God working in their lives, he insists they also recognize that God's kingdom doesn't automatically annihilate all other kingdoms. They're always in our field of vision, often playing important roles in our lives, blotting out what Jesus wants us to see.

Jesus was convinced that God's kingdom is one element in a "mixed catch." We can't wait to make our faith moves until everything and everyone around us is perfect. Jesus expects us to play the hand we're dealt, to act on the insights our new mentality provides, no matter the environment and circumstances that accompany those insights. Though we, along with Solomon in today's first reading, long to have "an understanding heart," most of us will spend the rest of our lives employing our understanding heart in a world intermingled with good and bad.

Yet in the midst of surfacing God's kingdom, it's essential to know, as Paul believed, that God is constantly present and working in our lives for our eventual good. "Brothers and sisters," he reminds the Christian community in Rome, "we know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

His assurance reminds me of a line from the recent movie "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel": "Everything will be all right in the end. If it's not all right, it's not yet the end."

Perhaps we can hasten that end by being just a little more subversive, and using a lot more parables.

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