

Year B, 4th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6)

June 13, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“We are always confident... for we walk by faith, not by sight.”

Good morning everyone. Welcome to the Season after Pentecost... Ordinary Time... Year B. As promised, we are moving from COVID crisis footing to church. Good old fashioned, open the gospels, deepen our knowledge and love of God in Christ and of ourselves and the world we inhabit church. As the collect for today, Proper 6, bid us, “...that we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion...” You know, church! We’re back. And it is good to be back.

So here we are, in Lectionary Year B. There are also Years A and C. That letter designates which gospel our worship is centered upon, particularly in Ordinary Time. Advent, Christmas and Lent are dominated by St. John’s gospel, and the Easter season sort of bounces around; but in Ordinary Time, we spent Year A with St. Matthew, C with St. Luke, leaving B as St. Mark’s year. The Good News that St. Mark brings us is more sparse than the other gospels. There is no birth narrative, no early life of Jesus. It begins at age thirty-ish with Our Lord’s baptism. The other gospels emerged a generation or two later, and the writers of those later books had the benefit of *Q*, not Q-Anon, but *Q*, from the German *Quelle*, or Source, a collection of the sayings of Jesus. Some thought we had discovered the fabled *Q* when a shepherd boy discovered the Gospel of Thomas and a slew of other ancient codexes in that cave at Nag Hamadi, Egypt in 1945... It wasn’t, but *Q* probably looked something like Thomas, not a story but a list of sayings. And the other gospel writers also had a copy of Mark, and some other sources as well. As time goes on we’ll dig in deeper to the world of literary and historical criticism of scripture. The scholarship is fascinating and it can really help us understand what Jesus was up to, what He was trying to teach His disciples, and through them, us and the rest of the world. I just wanted to locate us in the lectionary aspect of our liturgical life together.

Today we have the simple wisdom of the parables. Well, maybe not simple, but certainly wisdom abounds.

The subject is the Kingdom of God. I sometimes use the term Commonwealth of God; its less royal and patriarchal, but refers to the same thing, the way it is *supposed* to be, the way God intended, or more accurately, it is a description of how the world actually is, its true nature (and ours) even if we can’t always see it this way. There is a lot to the Kingdom of God, everything, actually. So much, that you can’t just describe it, the Kingdom. It takes wisdom to grasp it, and wisdom is poetry, not prose, so Jesus taught poetically.

Jesus said, “The kingdom 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, he 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 he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

I've been growing things for a long time. Windy and I started our first little farm out in Amherst, Mass back in 2000. What an adventure. I was in transition from the business world to school and the farmer I was working had let Windy and I have a couple of acres on the bend of a little creek just down the hill from Emily Dickinson's homestead. (Pretty romantic). Then I went off to divinity school and (long story) ended up as the caretaker at a monastic retreat center north of Boston while I went through the Episcopal ordination process. At Emery House we started up another farm, feeding the monks and their guests as well as 15 families in Newburyport. It was fun. We had dozens of varieties of vegetables, berries, chickens, turkeys, pigs, maple syrup. It was pretty idyllic.

I've been around living systems for a long time. And I have studied. I been to dozens of conferences and classes, workshops at the Common Ground Fair, Acres USA, NOFA and a bunch of extension services trainings. I've taught farm interns. My doctoral thesis was on the theology of sustainable agriculture. I know a fair amount about the soil-food web and soil chemistry and structure and plants and how different species of birds and mammals interact in agrarian system. We'll be able to serve you a pretty phenomenal salad in a few weeks, and the girls have gorgeous eggs right now, and as soon our borrowed buck bucks up a bit and contributes his bit to the dairy process, we'll have some splendid goat milk and Windy's chevrè is remarkable... I, we know, and I've seen a lot of your gardens, a lot of you all know a lot about growing things, about how life works. But you know, no matter how hard I try, no matter how much I invest in compost or genetics or land, I do not have it in my power to create a tomato. Or a cucumber. Or even a single leaf of spinach. My body is not capable of that. Our technology can't do that. A spinach plant can. A chicken can make an egg, not me. “He does not know how...” but, “The earth produces of itself...”

Oh we work at it. Prepping the soil. Planting carefully. Cultivating it in a timely fashion. Protecting the plants from marauding deer and beetles, mildews and blights, over-privileged cats and free-range chickens. And if we didn't do those things we'd be shopping at the farmer's markets on Saturdays instead of hoeing the shallots. But if you say, “I grew these amazing beets!” I'd say, “no you didn't.” You may have had a hand in creating the conditions for others to do their work, the tomato plant, God and the soil microbiology in particular. Because it is not up to us. We could go to sleep and the rains will fall and those plants will grow and we just don't have as much to do with it as we might believe.

This little parable is about the nature of the world and our agency in it. (Or lack of agency). So little about what happens to us in the world, the important things at least, have anything to do with us, with our effort or how skillful we are or how hard we work. The truly important things in life, like when we are

born and to whom; when and how we die; what our children are like; the state of the world in which we live; what opportunities present themselves, and what tragedies befall us. The big things, the important things have very little to do with us, with our effort or lack thereof.

That's the lesson of this parable. Pretty simple, but, wheh... A lot of us have been told otherwise, that we are masters of our own destinies, that we sink or swim by our own effort, that we have bootstraps that we can pull ourselves up by. And that happens, but for most of us, most of the time, what we have and do has more to do with when and to whom we are born than any effort we could ever make.

This is pretty disconcerting teaching. I told you we were going to get back to the challenges offered in the Gospels. The COVID free-ride is over, we've got things to dig into to, things to answer for. It is disconcerting, it is a hard lesson in any place, but maybe particularly in an Episcopal church, maybe particularly in an Episcopal church in a place like Blue Hill. Having a house on the water in a place like this, maybe a second house, is not a sign of failure in life, not by the standards of our culture. It is a sign of success by most any measure of such things. And if not your personal success, or that of your spouse, then of some previous generation's success. There are of course exceptions. Gobs of them. And of course not everyone in this room hails from privileged stock, or is reaping the benefits of privilege right now but more of us here do than do not. It is our Christian duty to examine it, especially when the lectionary so neatly sets the table for us to do so.

For people of privilege, I certainly come from privileged stock. I'm a white, straight, male. I'm healthy, highly educated, had a trauma-free childhood, and was told repeatedly throughout my life by my family and the larger society that I could do whatever I wanted to do. The world was my oyster. The back side of that being the implication that if it didn't work out, if I failed it was my fault. That's the meritocracy, right? It is all about earned; deserved; hard work and great effort. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that's right in our culture's source document. That is what our culture preaches; it is just not what the Christian gospel does.

So much of what happens in the field happens when the farmer is asleep. So much of what happens to us in this world has so little to do with us. Has so little to do with what we do, how we act, what we accomplish. It has so much more to do with forces beyond our control. It has everything to do with Grace, with things beyond the scope and scale of our vision.

Now there is a real upside to this disconcerting lesson. Yes, we don't, generally, deserve the good fortunes we receive. Our effort may contribute, but is rarely decisive. We're clear on that. The upside is two-fold. Where we don't deserve the credit for our success, we largely don't deserve the blame for our failure. Oh sure, we make mistakes, moral and material, and these can contribute to failure, but the rain falls on the good and the evil. Misfortune happens. Tragedy. Disease. Pandemics happen. People, like

markets, fluctuate and often there is no one to blame. No one to assign fault to. It is not God moving the chess pieces for our against you, it is the Kingdom of God, things happen, happenings vary, but God, the unmoved mover, is forever, and is ever with you.

And that is the second upside, it is the spiritual lesson reflected in the very practical lessons of this parable. As we are not responsible for many of the blessings or curses of life, we do not have any power over God's love for us. You can be a total scoundrel, living in great comfort on ill-gotten wealth and God loves you, and day by day God's love for you, God's yearning for you grows. And grows. And grows. Like a stand of Japanese knotweed, God's love grows and spreads and wants to encompass you, we know not how, but God is ever leaning in. And there is nothing we can do to deserve it, God loves us all in exactly how we need to be loved, and there is nothing we can do to dissuade God from loving us. The worse we behave, the further from God we withdraw, the less we care about God, others, our selves, the more God loves you. That's the economy of God. The preferential option for the poor, in God's eyes, means the poor-poor, the down trodden and sickly, the oppressed and all of that, but it is also a preferential option for the poor in judgment. The poor in manners. The poor in social skills and moral choices. The more unlikeable, sour, hard to get along with, hard to love by other humans, the bigger a place you have in God's heart. (That's a good thing to remember when someone really annoys you at a committee meeting. God prefers the annoying). That is grace. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more or less, that love just happens. Grace.

But we are not powerless. Like in our temporal lives, our starting place is fixed by forces beyond our control, and the vicissitudes of life are, too, but we can make an effort. (Wormy apples aren't as good as unwormy ones). We can't make God love us more, but we can do a fair amount to notice God's love happening. To open our hearts to God's heart. Our minds to God's mind. Our bodies to God's body. We can't make God do anything, but we can notice what God is up to, and we can do our best to return the grace of love to God, which usually happens best through loving our neighbors, which God does as much as God loves us.

Well, we're back. Jesus is rather a task master when it comes to figuring where we are in relation to Himself, the world and everything. But He is an immanently forgiving task master. Immanently loving. And that love is the spoon full of sugar that makes His holy medicine go down. It is good to be back.
AMEN.