

4 Pentecost, Proper 10 – July 10, 2011
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Isaiah 55: 10-13
Psalm 65: 1-8, 9-14
Romans 8: 1-11
Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Transformative Metaphor

In the name of God the Creator of Love, God the Beloved, and God the Spirit of Love –

We live with parables all around us; we love story and we think in metaphor whether we are conscious of it or not. In fact Jesus chided his disciples for not understanding parables; he chided them for being too literal! In today's Gospel reading, we skip from the end of verse nine to verse 18. Here is a portion of the missing middle part:

*Then the disciples came and asked him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?'
¹¹He answered, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets* of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given... The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.... For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn —□ and I would heal them."*

Indeed, as followers of Jesus, to listen with our ears and understand with our hearts means thinking and comprehending in a new way – a way quite different than interpreting literally from supposed facts – a way different from Pharisee-like rigid thinking. Truth lies, for each of us, in a much deeper process of inner listening – metaphoric listening accomplished by embracing the life-symbols all around us.

I just finished teaching a one-credit graduate Counseling course at UVM yesterday on Sand Tray Therapy, a metaphoric therapy that grew out of the work of followers of Carl Jung. Sand Tray therapy employs the use of miniature objects, representing all parts of creation, placed by the client in a tray with sand to represent the client's inner world. The therapist begins the process by saying, "Create your world – or your universe – in the sand." This is powerful work for children, teens and adults and opens a window to the inner working of their psyche that does not depend on words.

Jung's house was located on the shore of a beautiful lake in Switzerland. He loved to walk and play on the beach, and found powerful meaning in arranging small natural objects in patterns inside a circle inscribed on the sand. Today's Gospel begins, *Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.*" The shore opens up for us – as it did for Jesus - opportunities for reflection and deeper understanding; it is a place of powerful metaphoric work!

Human beings have always derived deep meaning from symbols, parables and metaphor. From the first time we looked up into the arc of the night sky spangled with

billions of stars and framed by tree tops, we imagined ourselves on the arc of the earth and began our never ending journey to understand the divine. We made a metaphor of the heavens above us, the earth and sea around us, and we began to ascribe meaning to all things. Dora Kalff wrote this about the power of metaphor and symbol.

The great dignity of the symbol [is] that it allows, and even stimulates, different degrees of comprehension, and leads from the truths of the physical life to those of a higher spiritual order. The symbol embodies an image of a content transcending consciousness and points to the eternal foundation of our nature given us by God. Once recognized and experienced, it leads [us] to the actual dignity of [our] experience as...human being[s].

Today Jesus teaches us through the metaphor of the parable of the sower, a metaphor as much about the quality of soil as about the sower.

For Matthew, insight and understanding are an essential part of the Good News; insight and understanding are an essential element that flows from metaphor. The parable today centers around three types of soil. I am reminded of all the instances of folk tales, fairy tales, Bible stories, and other occurrences where the metaphoric content involves three factors or entities, three people, or three wishes or choices. These stories serve to deepen our thought processes, or to increase our insight and understanding. For a deeper understanding of this story, it is important to know that – at the time of Jesus – farmers did not plow and prepare the soil in advance of planting but, rather, broadcast the seed and then plowed. Thus, the quality of the unprepared soil was much more important to the crop yield than for sowers today. The message is NOT that we refrain from broadcasting or sowing the Good News on difficult soil, but that we should seek to gain insight about the soils we encounter. Understanding the world of the metaphor is an essential part of seeking deeper truth and of asking ourselves important questions. What is the soil upon which you sow, and how do you take seed, root, and grow?

Most of us know the story of the Three Little Pigs and can recite it by heart. Here we also encounter the lives of the pigs imperiled by three types of home construction that are threatened with destruction by the wolf's breath. Again, the story is not so much about the evil of the wolf as it is about how we build our lives around us – the structural integrity of our lives. In my experience these powerful children's stories exist to help children more deeply understand the world, to develop resources for dealing with frightening experiences, and to form a strong resilient internal image of protection – of God. And the parables do the same for us.

Remember with me some other stories of three that serve a similar purpose.

- Three Billy Goats
Gruff – a test of the
strength of good
against the feared
unknown
- Goldilocks and the
three bears – a story
about finding the right
place for ourselves
- Aladdin and his three
wishes
- The Three Blind mice
- The Fisherman and
his wife
- The Monkey's Paw

What are we to do with all this metaphor? Jesus, through his parables, and our culture through our folk stories and our literature, beckon us to look inward, turn the stories over and over in our minds and - as we move through our day-to-day lives - listen

to the interpretations of others as we create our own meaning from shared tradition. When coaching sand tray therapists, I remind them to “honor the metaphor” and not kill it by ascribing rigid meaning for the client. Instead, it is the therapist’s job to open the door to multiple possibilities and expand the potential for the client’s own interpretation. The word is alive; stories and metaphors are alive, and neither is meant to be rigidified and frozen in time. Remember – in the end - the deepest truths lie in the spiritual and practical meaning we find on this journey with symbolic and metaphoric images.

What we think of as scientific or rational fact is also a matter of interpretation, just as in the story of the Three Blind Men and the Elephant. In this story the listener is clued into the presence of the Elephant as a fact. We all know what an elephant looks like. However, the blind men do not – they have never seen an elephant before. Each of them reaches out and feels a different part of the elephant: one its tusks, one its tail, and one its skin. Each of them describes the elephant entirely differently and a huge argument ensues. And...they are all right and they are all wrong! Could this also be the case when Christians of deep faith argue the literal meaning of Bible passages – perhaps we all carry some piece of the truth? Wouldn’t it be more powerful, more spiritual and more Biblically faithful to share our myriad interpretations of each passage, pray over them, turn them over, feel them deeply and mold our lives around the deepest of truths revealed through this process rather than wasting time arguing over supposed fact?

Our scripture readings for today began with a beautiful, lyrical and poetic passage from Isaiah that sings with delight and wonder at God’s creation. Listen for the metaphors and images in this passage – filled with deep meaning and truth. Close your eyes – if you feel comfortable doing so – while I read. Imagine the amazing God of love who created this world. Feel through the images - more than through the words - the divine welcome to you as part of God’s extravagant creation. This is God’s word for you to interpret – rich in meaning - and alive for you today, tomorrow, and in years to come.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
...For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

AMEN