

Yet More

July 30, 2023

Repetition

I often say I enjoy being a 2nd grade bilingual teacher because you never know what each day will hold. Yet, we still have a lot of routines built into each day.

While we often consider repetition boring, it also serves us well. Running or walking is repetitive, one leg in front of the other, one breath after another, yet it clears the brain, builds capacity and stamina, leads to health, and maybe even to triumph.

Liturgically, repetition also serves us well. We have been reciting the same prayer for centuries: “Our Father, who art in Heaven.” Every week, we pray to confess, as well as to be assured of pardon. Why would we do it if repetition was not also life-giving?

While you may not have realized it, in Psalm 119, of which Traci read a portion today, each stanza represents a letter in the Hebrew alphabet. With 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and eight lines for each stanza and letter, we have the 176 verses in the psalm.

Then, in the Gospel reading for today, in the five parables, the writer is talking about the same concept—the kingdom of God—in a variety of ways. Both repetition and variety serve us.

This reminds me of our Building for Faith in Action testimonies. Each testimony was like a stanza in a psalm of our faith in action. Psalm 119, the liturgy each Sunday, and our testimonies express the extensiveness, fullness, and completeness of God and our participation in the kingdom.

We also use similes and metaphors to describe abstract concepts. While we could say the wind is like a feather’s touch or love is a journey, we know there is “yet more” to them. Literary devices, like the parables from the gospel today, give color, life, and meaning to concepts that can be difficult to understand.

Today, I’d like to focus on three ideas of “yet more” in Jesus’ five parables.

1. Yet more sustenance,
2. Yet more joy, and
3. Yet more peace.

Yet More Sustenance

We now know first-hand from the COVID-19 pandemic how something so small that it is invisible to the human eye can grow so rapidly and exponentially into a force that consumes all our attention and resources, as individuals, communities, and nations of this world. In Jesus’s first parable today, we learn how a tiny mustard seed can grow into a tree, providing a home for birds to make their nests. Likewise, although there is only so much each of us can do, God is at work, growing our influence. From small beginnings, can come a large culmination.

In the second parable, the yeast is also a small quantity. The woman mixes it with “three measures of flour.” We can’t see yeast in dough, as we can see larger pieces of grain, or nuts, or chocolate chips. Yet, breads and other yeasted products wouldn’t be the same without it.

Yeast is transformative and uplifting. Without it, and without God, life can be flat and dull. Once again, its small presence has big effects. And like we'll see in the next parable, the Greek says the woman "hid" the yeast or leaven in the flour. And like the first parable of the mustard seed, it performs its work somewhat mysteriously, yet inevitably.

Also important to note, in both these parables, there is some passivity on our part. While we may sow seeds, we say, "it has grown...and becomes a tree." We don't grow it or make the tree. While we may mix or "hide" yeast in bread, the bread is "leavened." We don't leaven it ourselves or make it rise.

Part of true sustenance, in Jesus's parables and miracles, the provisions are also for women, children, and creation, not only for men. In our reading for today from Matthew 13, the birds are able to make their nests in the branches of the mustard tree. Also, in this chapter, a woman mixes the yeast with flour. Then, in chapter 14, Jesus feeds five thousand men, besides women and children, and, in chapter 15, four thousand men, besides women and children again. The first two parables of the mustard seed and yeast teach us how God provides us with yet more sustenance, empowering us to influence others as well.

Yet More Joy

The first and second parables are linked to the third and fourth parables through the word, "hide" or "krupto" in Greek. In the second parable, the woman hides the yeast in the flour. In the third, the treasure is hidden in a field.

The third and fourth parables both point to discovering something so valuable that those who discover it are willing to give up everything in order to have it. In the third parable, it is "someone"/"anyone" who found the treasure in the field, then sold everything to have the field with the treasure. In the fourth parable, this time, it is a merchant, a businessperson in search of fine pearls. When he finds one pearl of great value, he sells everything to buy that particular pearl.

There is a continued emphasis on hiddenness or discovery in all four of these parables. When both the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value are found, their discovery disrupts the normal daily lives and priorities of the seekers. As such, in order to acquire the treasure, risk and sacrifice is required. Similarly, when we find God's plans and purposes so valuable, they shape our entire lives and fill us with "yet more joy."

This summer, I've committed to going through and giving up much of my "stuff." Some of that "stuff" is teaching stuff. As I've gone through boxes and boxes of papers from the last eighteen years, I've realized that I found safety in holding onto it. I also realized that by keeping it, I was avoiding the natural process of grief. If I still had my papers, my students' papers from each year, I still had them, right?

No, not really. And, I also didn't have time and space to enjoy my current life. As I've let go of the "stuff," I haven't let go of my love for my students or my love of teaching. Instead, I've found "yet more joy" in remembering them, yet being able to move forward.

Yet More Peace

In Jesus' fifth parable: "the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind." Let's focus on those words: "every kind." The net catches fish of every kind. The kingdom is diverse, inclusive, universal.

It is only once the fish are caught, only at the end of the age that the angels come out to separate the evil from the righteous. The fish can't sort themselves out. Not us—you, me, or anyone else who may try to judge. It's not that God doesn't know or doesn't care, but there is a process. The process of waiting for the mustard seed to grow into the tree that fills the world. The process of the yeast working through the dough, the kingdom still rising.

When I was part of churches that were focused a bit more on people's salvation than the world's well-being, it wasn't a peaceful way to live. It made me anxious to be worried about others' salvation, and even my own. By leaving salvation up to God, and focusing on making this world a better place, working together with you and others, there is a peace in trying to make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations.

The good news also is, if I can change and become more inclusive, we all can. So, if we all exist together, like the fish exist together in the sea, we can choose to live together peaceably, letting go of judgment. By turning our doubt, despair, darkness, injury, and even hatred over to God, the Spirit can make us a channel of peace, hope, light, joy, and love. Forgiveness brings peace, most especially for ourselves. When we give peace, we receive "yet more peace."

Conclusion

In conclusion, Psalm 119 and these five parables are an invitation. The ordinariness of the alphabet in Psalm 119 and each individual going about their work in the parables invites us to see signs of the kingdom of heaven in our everyday lives.

To practice seeing God's work among us, we can ask the following three questions:

1. What do we expect to see?
In Matthew 6:26, we are also told how birds receive God's care: "'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them.'" How else do we see God caring for all creation, including the most vulnerable? How can we help provide "yet more sustenance"?
2. Where do we expect to find it?
Later in Matthew, the image of the yeast occurs again. Jesus warns the disciples of the leaven of the religious leaders who "lock people out of the kingdom of heaven" with their teachings. Sometimes opposition may come from within the religious establishment. Instead, Jesus promises us "yet more joy" when we store up treasures in heaven. "Where our treasures are, there our hearts will be also."
3. Have there been times when our expectations have been overturned?
Sometimes, our expectations are overturned. It seems as though evil is prevailing and the good are suffering. It is at these times I am reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr., focusing on the moral arc of the universe being long, but bending towards justice.

Thankfully, we're not called to generate our own peace. God offers to make us a channel of peace, a channel of healing power, a channel of love. God offers us, "yet more peace."
Let us know yet more sustenance, yet more joy, and yet more peace.

Shana Espinosa
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Psalm 119:129-136; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
July 30, 2023