

# THE PEOPLE OF GOD AT WORSHIP

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER  
PENTECOST – JULY 27<sup>TH</sup>, 2008  
COMMUNION SUNDAY

## INVOCATION

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## MORNING PRAYER

We rest in the promise LORD that we will never be separated from your loving and compassionate care. We pray for strength and wisdom to live our lives with You at the very center of our hearts and we humbly offer the energy of our spirits and the strength of our souls so that we may live and know You eternally. In the name of the Living Christ we pray – AMEN

## SCRIPTURE

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46**

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; {32} it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." {33} He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

(Mat 13:44-46) "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. {45} "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; {46} on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

~ SERMON ~

## *Choosing the Kingdom of Infectious Love*

*How do the parables do their work?*

We live in very trying and often very scary times; this is hardly news to anyone here this morning.

I can easily imagine that everyone present could easily come up with a laundry list of things we might be scared of everyday we get out of bed.

The environment, the economy, the tension and wars in the Middle East, nuclear weapons

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*Choosing the Kingdom of Infectious Love*

*A Sermon preached by Gary McCaslin ~ Sunday 27 July 2008 ~ First Baptist, Painted Post, NY*

are only a few items that can get us started.

Infectious diseases are often at the top of my list. Maybe that's because, as a minister and a chaplain, I take many trips to hospitals and I have seen the films and heard the lectures about how deadly diseases can spread very quickly within a population.

But enough of this cheery stuff...

### JESUS' INFECTIOUS LOVE

Of course, the people in Jesus' day did not know anything about infectious diseases or how germs were spread ~ they attributed all sickness to demons and bad behavior. At the same time, I believe they were very aware of some thing mysterious that spread from person to person and brought about changes in the lives of people.

I am calling it something like an infection because there was something about this man Jesus and the Kingdom of God He was always talking about that were changing people's lives right and left.

The change was sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic.

If these people had had the words, they might have wondered:

*What kind of "infection" was this that got into people's minds and hearts and souls and opened their eyes and ears?*

As Jesus walked around the Jerusalem countryside, more and more people were following him. The crowds were getting bigger and the passions of the people were becoming more enthusiastic.

The authorities of both the religious and political establishments were getting a little nervous.

*Who was this man Jesus and what was his message?*

*How was he changing their ways of thinking?*

No doubt, these authorities decided to check out this guy Jesus and so they went into the country side and tracked him down.

These authorities were probably all dressed down like the common folks and just decided to mingle and listen in on the conversation. What did they hear?

Well, they heard Jesus talking about mustard seeds ~ that were thought of by most people as weeds ~ growing as big as trees.

And they heard about women hiding yeast in flour and men finding treasures and buying pearls...

These people who were trying to find out more about Jesus must have wondered to themselves:

*What's the big deal?*

*Why are people getting excited about Jesus when he is just talking about ordinary stuff?*

### THE SECRET WORK OF PARABLES

Clarence Jordan describes parables as a kind of "literary Novocain" that allows the story teller to soften up the listener and make it easier to get the real message inside the listener's head before he realizes what has happened.

Jordan added that a good time to use a parable was when the situation was delicate, dangerous or dull and in those times, the parable could sneak in like a Trojan horse.

The parables I read for this morning's scripture are so short... they are each barely more than a sentence but in the most important ways, they are just like the longer, more familiar parables Jesus tells.

My personal favorites are the story of *The Prodigal Son* or as I like to call it *The Story of the Father with the Outrageous Love* and *The Story of the Good Samaritan*.

### EVERY PARABLE'S THREE JOBS

We can say three things about my favorites and these one-liner poems for today.

1) There is something very *unexpected* somewhere in the story ~ either the beginning or the end or in the main message but at some point, the people listening are probably going to say something like:

*Wow ~ I wasn't expecting that...!*

2) and each parable is going to have some kind of *extravagance* in there somewhere which will probably serve to do one of two things ~ either get the attention of the listeners or make them smile.

3) And finally, the parable is going to be *subversive*. In other words, the message will, in some way, seek to undo the established way of thinking, the way of the world.

The parable will attempt to seriously weaken and eventually

tear down the three major roadblocks to Kingdom of God ~ Fear and Ignorance and Greed.

### BUT THERE IS MORE...

In addition to the surprise and the extravagance and the sneaky way parables try to upset the expected way people think things should be, I'd like to propose some other things these parables do for us as Christians.

*First ~ parables provide an easy way for us to remember the life of Jesus.*

Christians are often ecstatic in their praise of God for sending His Son to Earth but then they promptly forget how Jesus lived his life ~ at least what we know of his life ~ which was so different from any other person who has ever lived.

The parable represents a new way of thinking and acting, which Jesus said was a little picture of what life would be like in the Kingdom of God.

People looked around and said  
*Where is this Kingdom of God, this Reign of Love you are talking about?*

And we can imagine Jesus replying

*You can see evidence of the Kingdom everywhere.*

*You know that old weed that tries to run rampant in your garden every spring ~ you know ~ the mustard seed, the one that starts from the tiniest of seeds?*

*Just like that seed starts from something so small... well imagine a seed that grows and grows so big that*

people stop along their journeys and rest  
in its shade and its branches are so wide  
that birds build their nests and  
raise their families.

Can you imagine a mustard seed  
going that big and wild?

Or imagine a woman who tries to hide  
just a little bit of yeast in her storage bin  
only to come back the next day and find  
out that her hidden yeast has spread out  
so much that she now has to make about  
one hundred loaves of bread. What is  
she going to do with all that bread?

Or imagine you and I talking  
about reaching out into the world  
with the Love of the Risen Christ in  
our hearts, just two people, what  
difference can we make?

What is preventing us from  
being like that mustard seed and  
that yeast?

As your pastor, I talk to a lot of  
people who say to me

Gary ~ I don't know what I believe  
about God or all those stories in the  
Bible ~ the Virgin Birth, the  
Resurrection, the miracles...

Do I have to believe all those things  
to be a good Christian?

And my response is simple:

You sound just like a good healthy  
Baptist to me. While there are some  
churches that make their people affirm a  
list of beliefs before they join ~ that is  
not what Baptists are about. Our beliefs  
are as individual as each person.

At the end of each day, I can  
imagine Jesus asking me:

Gary, how did your beliefs  
~ whatever they are ~ how did those  
beliefs get translated into serving  
those in need in the world?

Did you spread the Love of God?  
Did you plant and nurture a few  
mustard seeds today?

Did you make a little bread and  
invite a few folks to dinner?

We can't see the beliefs that are  
in a person's heart but we can see  
how those beliefs get worked out in  
the reality of their days.

Jesus' parables help keep us  
grounded in real life.

And a second thing the parables  
do is invite us to think in new  
ways that are out of the ordinary.

Sometimes I literally get a  
headache trying to understand all  
the new and possible things the  
parables are still trying to teach.

I received an email this past  
week from a man who was  
criticizing Michael Dowd and his  
ideas about evolutionary theology.<sup>1</sup>

It was a sad letter because the  
man was a fine example of what  
Michael Dowd calls a *flat earth  
theology*. The writer of the letter was  
not interested in any new  
perspectives, or scientific research or  
any of the things we might learn  
from other cultures and religions  
about making our spiritual journey  
richer.

If anything Michael Dowd said  
did not match this man's belief in the  
Bible and an understanding of God  
that was almost two hundred years  
old, then it was immediately labeled

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Dowd, an evolutionary evangelist, spoke  
at First Baptist on July 6, 2008. For further  
information see [thankgodforevolution.org](http://thankgodforevolution.org)

as something from the anti-Christ or the Devil or both.

It is as if the man was saying:

*We will have no new understandings about God because anything new is all bad.*

It is a sad life this man is proposing. We are not allowed to use our God given brains to discover and renew our faith.

There is a book now on the market called *The Shack*.<sup>2</sup> My Southern Baptist sister-in-law was excited about it when we just visited her in Georgia and when we returned from that trip, Carol Koziatek handed me a copy of the same book. I was delighted because my sister-in-law and Carol Koziatek come from two very different religious perspectives but both found meaning in *The Shack*.

While I am only part way through, here's what I like about the book: It's filled with lots of new ideas about different ways to understand God ~ I hope we can discuss the contents with many people in the coming months.

The parables help us remember the life of Jesus, keep us grounded in real life and make us think and

**Finally, parables invite our participation.**

Parables get under our skin and we carry them around everywhere we go. These stories ask us:

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<sup>2</sup> by William Young, Windblown Media, 2007

*Where are the parables in your life?  
What little parts of your life can you see  
as windows to the Kingdom of God?*

The Kingdom of God is like the woman who blew her nose and a million people were healed of the flu.

The Kingdom of God is like the cold, homeless man who received a single, simple meal and later, nearby a brand new hospital was built.

The Kingdom of God is like a boy who looked up in the sky and saw all the way back to the beginning of time and was comforted in ways he had no words to describe.

The Kingdom of God is like a man who held his newborn baby and a connection was made with every person who had ever been born on the planet in any place and in any time.

The Kingdom of God is like a man who never knew God but, one day, picked up the Bible and read just one sentence from the Gospels and knew he was saved from the hells of this world.

May God's infectious Love spread out into every corner of all your days. AMEN