

"Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down...in a most delightful way"

How many of you can hear Mary Poppins (Julie Andrews) singing that?

Nanny Mary Poppins sang this song in the 1964 movie to get her employers' closed-mouth children to open up and swallow down their daily dose of nasty-tasting stuff. Could any nanny get away with that today? Given the skyrocketing rate of childhood obesity, I suspect that any child-care worker caught shoveling spoonfuls of sugar down their charge's throats would be instantly sacked.

"Sugar-coating" is our attempt to disguise that which is truly awful with an artificial top-coat of sticky sweetness. We love to take our sourest lemons and turn them into lemonade.

But this attempt to "sugar-coat" the negative is not a part of biblical faith. A faith that is founded on the crucifixion of its founder as a blasphemous criminal cannot be good at coverups.

Jesus never sugarcoated. He spoke openly to his admittedly uncomprehending, disciples about his impending arrest, conviction, and execution. Jesus baldly declared that "the poor will always be with you" and advised the rich, young man that the cost of discipleship was to "sell everything" if he wished to follow Jesus. Discipleship was never advertised as anything but a big-ticket item by Jesus, a commitment that, as its reward, demanded that followers "take up their cross," embrace the real probability of suffering and death.

Paul had first-hand, hard-core, hard-time experiences of the "hardship" that discipleship could bring to one's life... He was beaten, imprisoned, ship wrecked, but through all the hardships & distress because he knew that nothing, could or would separate him from following Christ. This week I experienced something that was the hardest thing I have had to do so far and that was to assist at the funeral of my 15 week old great great niece. The priest mentioned the 35th verse of Romans 8 in his homily sang that we cannot possibly understand why, but that as Christians we believe that the love of God gives us hope and sustains us through the worst of experiences. We may have times of uncertainty and believe me I have had plenty of those... However I always come back to the fact that it is Jesus who is the source of life and love, who redeemed me through his death and resurrection.

The parables are also important in our journey of following Christ...

Without the present solidarity of God with humanity and the rest of creation, the future hope Paul speaks might be received by those suffering as so much pie in the sky: a promise, yes, but

one of little use to those hungry now.

Without the future hope, God's present involvement in the lives of the suffering might amount to little more than a feeble expression of the company that misery loves. Together, the actions of God--past, present, and future--on our behalf testify to a fierce, compassionate love from which nothing in all creation can separate us.

Some weeks it can seem that the appointed Gospel yields slim pickings, but this week, we have five rich parables with which to work. F

If you scan chapter 13, you can see how Matthew has interwoven some of these parables with commentary on parables in general and then explanations of the first two parables resulting in another split lesson for this Sunday. Narrative speaking, these delayed explanations serve to heighten interest in the parable, especially given the stakes for those who do not understand them.

Overall, this collection of parables drives to the conclusion provided in today's text in verses 51-52: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." The emphasis is on the newness of what Jesus is teaching, but it is based on his announcement of "what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." (Jesus cites this text from Psalm 78:2 in verse 35. The idea is also similar to the string of "You have heard..., but I say" statements Jesus makes in Matthew 5.)

And what is this ancient message Jesus is now proclaiming anew? Its clearest expression is provided in the three parables for which allegorical explanations are given, and it's a theme that runs through Matthew, namely: The dominion of God may not always appear to be succeeding in the world, and even the Church itself is a mixed bag of good and evil, but in the end, God will sort things out. The evil will perish, and the righteous will be part of God's bountiful and glorious harvest.

That summary works well for the three parables which have an explanation supplied, but it doesn't work as well for the other four parables in today's reading. Part of the problem is that these parables aren't as easily allegorized. They work better as true parables that should be

treated metaphorically so that they engage and challenge us to consider what God's dominion is like.

The Mustard Seed parable has often been sadly reduced to "From small beginnings come great endings." Since it is set among the accounts emphasizing abundant harvests, Matthew may have this idea in mind as it pertains to the ultimate triumph of God's dominion, but such a reading also overlooks the parabolic difficulties it poses. Mustard is closer to being a weed than wheat.

For a symbol of success, the cedar tree is a better choice. According to Ezekiel 17:23, the "noble cedar" provides the kind of shelter birds' need, so Jesus is providing a stark and surprising contrast here. To say it becomes the "greatest of shrubs" is faint praise and to call it a "tree" can only be hyperbolic irony. What becomes striking is that this lowly plant is the unexpected symbol of God's dominion. Is there any other "tree" that could so scandalously become part of God's plan?

The Yeast parable is misnamed. Today, yeast comes in those tidy little packets. What Jesus is talking about is leaven which is a rotting, molding lump of bread. It usually is a negative symbol of corruption. (Matthew 16:6; 1 Corinthians 5:8) It is a "woman" who takes this leaven and "hides" (not "mixes" -- cf. below) it in the flour. Given the cultural perspectives of Jesus' day, all these details make it sound like something potentially sinister and furtive is going on. The only thing more astounding in this parable is that the woman uses "three measures" of wheat, enough to make bread to feed more than 100 people. Another example of a little can make a lot? Yes, but it also indicates that the dominion of God may take hold in hidden and unexpected ways.

In the Treasure parable, one's "treasure" (*thesaurus* in Greek) is an important metaphor in Matthew indicating where one's allegiance ultimately lies and its nature. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (6:19-21; also cf. 12:35; 19:21) The discovered and claimed treasure in this parable also anticipates the scribe's treasure mentioned in a moment in 13:52. Like the hidden leaven and like that which "has been hidden from the foundation of the world" (13:35), this treasure ultimately cannot be kept secret.

Is the guy's behavior ethical? Depending on the imagined circumstances, opinions vary, but that's hardly the point. Rather, this parabolic illustration becomes a real one in 19:16-22 when Jesus tells the rich young man, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." This kind of singleness of purpose also is the thrust of the Pearl parable where again everything is sold in order to obtain the one prized pearl. Together, these two parables can be used to talk about the cost of discipleship.

With the multivalent character of parables, however, we do not necessarily need to take these as encouragements that we need to do all the work in obtaining the kingdom. What if we understand the treasure to be like God's dominion, and Jesus is the one who gave up

everything to obtain it for us? Or better, what if we are that treasure, and Jesus is the one who, "because of joy," who gave his life in order to "buy" us? (Note that the word for buy, *agorazo*, is the same word translated as "redeem" in passages like 1 Corinthians 6:20 or Galatians 3:13; 4:4f.)

So what does this all mean for preaching?

1. The Net of Fish parable warns of the threat of punishment for the "evil," but its main point of emphasis is to provide assurance to the "righteous" that God's will is accomplished in the end.
2. The Mustard Seed and Leaven parables highlight the dominion of God becoming present in an unexpected and, by worldly standards, scandalous way, in the way of the cross.
3. The Treasure and Pearl parables can emphasize both the cost of discipleship needed from us and the cost of redemption that Jesus paid.

Jesus' closing statement about scribes bringing out new and old from their treasure describes the preacher's task here. This treasure of old, yet always new, words must become new again in our lives. We can talk about the costs involved in the dominion of God, but ultimately the good news we preach is priceless.