

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 19, 2020

ISAIAH 44:6-8 | PSALM 86:11-17 | ROMANS 8:12-25 | MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43

Jason and I frequently send texts back and forth right after services end. Usually these are either the usual “nice job today” or recommending some early 70’s folk rock that we’ve been into. But last week, Jason sent me a text about something in the gospel reading that he thought was unusual. And since it comes up in today’s reading as well, I thought it might be helpful to start with his observation.

The thing Jason noticed was that usually Jesus tells a parable and doesn’t explain it. *The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. You figure it out.* Or, *The kingdom of God is like a lost coin. Talk amongst yourselves.* But occasionally Jesus does explain his parables in great detail. And today’s reading is a good example of this. What we’ve been hearing the past couple of weeks is this long sermon Jesus gives that’s just parable after parable. Parable of the sower. Parable of the mustard seed. Parable of the yeast. Parable of the wheat and weeds. Boom. Boom. Boom.

And notice that in today’s gospel reading, Jesus finishes this long string of parables and the disciples’ first question is, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” Jesus doesn’t explain it to the crowds. And he explains it only because the disciples ask him to.

But why is it that the disciples wanted Jesus to explain this parable in particular? Why not the mustard seed or yeast? It’s probably because this parable is about responsibility and progress, outcomes and endings. The other parables seem to be about things you can watch from a distance, but this parable is about our own actions. In other words, it’s a story about responsibility and progress, outcomes and endings.

It begins with a group of servants who work in a field planted with good seeds. But someone comes in at night and plants bad seeds so that the good wheat and the bad weeds are all mixed up together. And the servants’ reaction is, quite understandably, *Well, we put all this effort in to plant the good seeds. We should go pull out the weeds.*

But the landowner in the story tells them not to. Not because the weeds are good, but because it’s not their job to separate the weeds from the wheat. For one, it’s not their responsibility. Their job is to plant the seeds, not to reap the harvest. Second, because the seeds are still growing, if you try to pull out the weeds now, you’ll just end up pulling the wheat out, too. In other words, if you want to get the wheat, you need to wait and you need to trust.

We often like to think that when we live out our vocations, we plug in a bunch of time and a bunch of effort and a bunch of sweat and elbow grease, and then we get a good outcome that makes the whole thing worth it in the end. We ran this program, and then this thing happened. We had this event, and this was the outcome. We formed this relationship, and look how it’s paid off. Jesus actually tells us something else. That when we live out our vocations, we plug in a bunch of time and a bunch of effort and a bunch of sweat and elbow grease, and then we never get to see the desired outcome at all. We have to do things not because the final product is worth the effort, but because it’s Jesus who tells us to do them.

Last weekend, I finished a new biography of Dorothy Day.¹ Dorothy Day isn’t a household name in this country, but she very well could be. When Pope Francis visited the US a few years ago, he referred to Day as one of four exemplary Americans alongside Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thomas Merton. So not exactly bad company.

¹ John Loughery and Blythe Randolph, *Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

Day ran a series of homes called houses of hospitality in New York City in the middle of the twentieth century.² And the basic idea was that she and her fellow volunteers would live in voluntary poverty alongside anyone who needed food, shelter, and clothing. Around the time of World War II, there were a few dozen of these homes across the country, all locally run by volunteers. Day believed that the church had given into material comforts and wasn't doing enough for the poor who were written out of the American century. These homes were Franciscan in their rejection of material wealth, Benedictine in their emphasis on communal living as a Christian virtue, and very annoying to most Catholic bishops.

But there's a scene in part of the book that helps us understand today's parable. Day would frequently find people on her doorstep covered with lice and urine. And Day would drag them inside and get them cleaned up. And one day as she was doing this, someone asked her whether she was getting the results she wanted from her program. And Day's response was that she wasn't doing this because she wanted outcomes. She was doing it because Jesus told her to.

She didn't really know what the outcomes of the hospitality houses were. And, at some level, she didn't particularly care. Her job, as she understood it, was just to love people. Some of them would stay in a home for a little while and get back on their feet. Others of them would spend the rest of their lives in one of her homes. And Day's belief was that it wasn't her job to decide which one of those was more worthy of her attention. It wasn't her job to separate the deserving poor from the undeserving poor. Her job was just to love people. Her job was just to plant seeds.

Part of what makes Day an interesting character is the combination of stubbornness in the fight for justice combined with a deep humility about the impact of her own efforts. She understood that we never fully know the good that we bring into the world. When we perform an act of love, we trust that it will carry on beyond ourselves and our own lives. Which is why acts of love are intrinsically acts of hope. As St. Paul puts it in the letter to the Romans, "Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." We believe that redemption can outstrip our expectations. We believe that transformation is not limited by our plans. And we believe that the kingdom of God is not bound by our own efforts.

And I think that's why Jesus agreed to explain this parable to the disciples. Because the risk for the disciples and us, is not that we will laze around and not help bring in the kingdom. The risk is that we will become so anxious about making things perfect, making things efficient, making things pretty, that we will forget our calling to make things better, to empower those who come after us, and to pay attention to what is important, even when it isn't always urgent.

Jesus reminds us that the most profound acts of faith are not the ones with the most impressive results. The most profound acts of faith are the ones whose results we never see at all.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² Part of what makes Day so interesting is her political and theological beliefs don't sort along 2020 American political lines. In ecclesial and social questions, she could be extremely conservative, but she was closely aligned with left-wing groups in economic and foreign affairs. For example, Day was arrested while protesting multiple times, expressed frustration that labor union leaders weren't committed enough to undoing the foundations of capitalism, and believed the American use of the atomic bomb undercut any claim of moral standing over the Soviet Union, but claimed that she would have stopped publishing her newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, if the ecclesial higherups asked her to.