**Rewilding the Human Heart** Rev. Anna Kendig Flores

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Matthew 13:1-9 Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Good morning. My name is Anna Kendig Flores, and I'm the Antiracism Coordinator for the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, which is a ministry cooperative of around 55 congregations that includes House of Hope.

One thing that often confuses people about the work of antiracism in the church is they perceive it as something "borrowed" from secular culture instead of as a core piece of Christian life. An add-on - one more thing we've assigned ourselves. But I like to clarify that actually antiracism is just our current language for what Jesus has been inviting since the beginning of Christianity: a path toward liberation and wholeness *for all*.

But sometimes we can miss this because of interpretations of Scripture that replicate themes that feel far more familiar: power plays, fear mongering, and even a dollop of consumerism and advertising.

So I'm going to read this parable of Jesus and I'm actually going to boldly skip the explanation that Jesus himself offers about what it means, because I think it can unintentionally cause us to veer off course of what's *really* going on in the parable - and Jesus' ministry overall.

So Jesus is going to tell the gathered crowd a parable, and then the disciples will ask, *what’s with all the weird stories, Jesus?* And Jesus basically says, 'Because I’m not here for *those* people over there -- this is an age of those who will listen and those who won’t… and *you* *will* and they *won’t*, so I’ll give YOU the inside scoop: here’s what the parable means… but For Your Ears Only.'

Honestly, the whole thing feels like a setup arranged by the early writers of the gospels to make early Christians feel good about themselves and their insider knowledge - or, more generously, as a gentle way for Jesus to let the disciples off for not understanding his teachings right away.

Now, I’m not saying that’s *all* we could get out of that long section we’re skipping, at all, but it’s obvious from *how Jesus actually uses and teaches from parables* even five seconds later in this chapter and throughout the gospels that this isn’t actually “the whole story” about his use of stories, so instead I’d like us to focus on what Jesus was actually *doing*, which is floating in a boat offshore and teaching by telling story after story… after story.

Let’s pray: Holy God, we come to you today in worship seeking wisdom, and an experience of your grace. Grace can come as comfort, it can come as truth, it can come like a bolt of lightning, but it comes bringing life in its wake. May we likewise bring life as we allow the words of Scripture to dwell in us richly. In Jesus name, Amen.

Matthew 13: 1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

*The word of the Lord*

*Thanks be to God*

Too often we reduce the parables of Jesus, and consequently, the opportunity to preach about them to a game of “but what does Jesus *really* mean?” Frustratingly, even the explanations that Jesus offers of *his own parables* in Scripture can also come out sounding sort of flat, pat, and “couldn’t you just have *said* that, then?”

Jesus may not have gotten good grades for his communication skills according to those apps like Grammarly that supposedly help you clarify your communication.

And while I love getting into the weeds with a parable, turning it this way and that, teasing out the details and the context to see what it might say to us today that feels exciting and relevant…

… there’s another way to go about engaging with a parable. When Jesus first told these stories, they were so impactful, that, even when people were confused about “what it meant,” they were also electrified, intrigued. They probably walked home still arguing about them. Because they had *an experience* in that moment of listening at the lakeshore or on the hillside that MOVED them. Sometimes that story moved them for a moment, sometimes it changed them forever.

I’ve just spent the last three years of my life helping a dozen people from our congregations across the presbytery of the twin cities area, which includes House of Hope, figure out how to tell a BIG story. Their task was to take a deep look at how we either advance equity and antiracism, or… manifest harm and inequity in our congregations and the presbytery overall.

To be clear, there was no question at any point in the process that we would NOT find some harm, due to both the nature of complex systems, and the roots of Christianity in the United States. So for three years, during all of COVID, the diverse group gathered data, made hypothesis, and checked their conclusions. But before they were done, they did one final thing: they collected people’s stories.

These stories, in many ways, formed the heart of their final report, even as the data shaped the conclusions.

Why? Because stories have the capacity to MOVE us like little else can.

And I want to explore today what it would look like to **own** that a little more in our congregations – to venture out into deeper waters with these stories and surf them like waves instead of settling for a bite-sized explanation in the shallows that we can forget about the second we walk out the doors.

What I want us to think about is *what it would take to rewild these parables* and Scripture in our hearing and let them become ***encounters***. And to consider how that rewilding might shift even our own hearts and lives as a result.

How can these confusing parables of Jesus help us Rewild our Human Heart?

If we’re going to talk about rewilding (which is the practice of introducing healthy changes to human-altered landscapes and then *releasing our need to control* every result) the first thing to remember is that there are **risks** involved in that: letting stories be powerful enough to MOVE us means we have to own that the effect of stories can break for good or for harm. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks compellingly about the danger of a single story[[1]](#footnote-1) that reduces an entire community or culture to a stereotype, for instance, a practice still often perpetuated against minoritized communities even today.

We know that stories can be used to justify wars, genocides, and harmful actions of all kinds, though we less frequently talk about the way that some stories are designed to STOP us from acting, allowing us to evade our role in everyday inequities and harms that occur around us. Stories can be dynamite, or heavy blankets that shield us from reality and put us to sleep. They can also wake us up, teach us to dream, reveal our gifts, and more.

Stories have power, then: to shift who we listen to, to change how we perceive (or ignore) what’s right in front of us, and, more importantly, to transform how and **IF** we act and respond.

And stories are also always political. And no, not “political” in the sense of partisan politicking, but political in the sense of how stories always have a communal impact (on the *polis*, the community) – there is no such thing as A Story Built for One. Even what are often called “fairy tales” have a way of shaping our mindsets – from the Brothers Grimm to Disney.

Stories are communal (and therefore political) acts, and if there’s anything I’ve learned from the Bible in my years of wrestling with it, it’s that **we have to be careful about how we let the stories we carry shape us**. Not just the Biblical ones, but the national ones, the historical ones, the family ones we hold.

So this is the question I’m sitting with as we listen to this parable of birds, thorns, seeds and soil today: *how will we let it shape us*? How will we, in this season where the Institutional Race & Equity report prepared over the last three years is out in the world, let *those* stories shape us? In a time when stories are being fed to us left and right on the nightly news, in ads, and more… *which* stories will we allow to shape us, and *how*?

Today’s parable of the soils is often understood (thanks to Jesus’ own explanation) as a simple story of having faith. Now, I can see how this was perhaps a helpful way to understand this story for the earliest followers of Jesus, and maybe Jesus did, in fact, explain it just this way. But here’s the thing: *why didn’t he just say that, if that’s all it can mean?*

Some people have argued that stories are just a fancy way to get an idea stuck in our heads, and there is some truth to the fact that stories are powerful memory devices. But that’s not *all* that stories do. Some stories defy easy explanations of their “idea” and yet we still care about them. Some stories have many meanings that shift over time, and those meanings are each important in their own way.

Whether Jesus knew that you and I would be here together this morning in 2023 or not, I have to believe that he didn’t just tell stories to trick people into remembering, or to invite them to think in slogans. “Be Good Peat Not Bird Meat” or “Don’t Mind the Buzzards” is weirdly catchy, but not really what I see Jesus doing here.

I wonder, then, if Jesus told stories *so we could imagine into them*, guided by some of the core ideas he set forth in his ministry. Because we all know that when Jesus wants to be clear about what he’s about and what he means, he is actually really, really, clear – we just don’t always feel comfortable with what he’s saying.

At the beginning of his ministry in the book of Luke, Jesus stands in the temple and reads from Jewish Scriptures, saying:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
    because he has anointed me
    to proclaim good news **to the poor.**
He has sent me to proclaim freedom **for the prisoners**
    and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
    to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

That’s pretty darn clear.

Later, he tells a rich man to sell everything and give it to the poor.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The rich young man ends up walking away; he didn’t seem to appreciate that kind of clarity.

Now, I’m not saying all this to get us worked up about *everything Jesus has ever said* --- The reason I’m putting this out here is because even if Jesus is using parables to teach in Matthew 13, those stories are still in the context of *who he is overall* – and that matters when we look at the stories he tells. We have to ask ourselves: if Jesus isn’t just using stories to tell us something simple in a memorable way, *why leave room for so much mystery and interpretation?*

Patrick McNamarra is an experimental neuroscientist who focuses on understanding the role of religion in human community. Based on his research, he believes religion is not just some simplistic way to argue for a version of truth, to gain comfort about what happens to us after death or even to self-soothe our fears in an anxious world --- instead, religion and spiritual systems are **a way for us to *update our understanding of ourselves* and our place in the world.** [[4]](#footnote-4)

In other words, religion is *a way to reality check ourselves* by using ritual, community, and our imaginations. “*The kindom of God is like*…” Jesus says, and we, in return, have to spend some time wondering together about what the heck he’s talking about. What *does* it matter what some middle eastern teacher said 2,000 years ago when we live in a world of overpacked schedules and overdue water bills, TikTok beefs and war in Ukraine, striking workers at Amazon Centers and Starbucks just wanting safe jobs and decent pay?

McNamarra says that **there is no way any of us can actually thrive or flourish in the world if we are *not* regularly updating the way we understand ourselves and the world around us**. Religions and spiritual paths, like Christianity or Buddhism, Islam or Jainism, Judaism or Hinduism have rituals, like baptism, as we did today, prayers, song, and stories that allow us to ***experience*** something, to free ourselves *to be changed* by it, and to emerge different.

Yes, thinking matters, and we Presbyterians really pride ourselves on our learning together, but it cannot be just neck-up engagement, if we actually want to grow. We have to allow ourselves to hear the organ vibrating through our bones in the pews, the songs echo off the walls even online, feel the words of prayers spoken together in our lungs, and savor the richness of silence shared. We have to give ourselves space to consider Scripture *outside the space of this hour*, and let the words of Christ dwell in us richly[[5]](#footnote-5) as the letter to the Colossians invites us.

We have to allow ourselves to sit with the stories we care about, not just passively, like, *I don’t know, I’ll understand someday,* but actively holding these stories alongside our work in a garden, our commute to work, or wandering the aisles of the market.

And, maybe most importantly for McNamarra’s argument, **we have to practice being wrong.** Like, actively, *self-aware* that we are wrong. It’s distressingly easy to be wrong and not know about it or just not pay attention – but it’s *a lot harder* to practice self-awareness when I see that I’m wrong and need to update my understanding about who I’m being and how it’s affecting others.

And here, *just here*, is where the Parable of the Sower has been taking root in me in the last few weeks. It first led me back to Octavia Butler and her incredible early 90s novel of the same title, her fearless way of talking about change, loss, community, and hope. It’s led me to a book about a British land owner and the uproar after they stopped farming it and let it return to nature --- angering neighbors, but healing the soil and saving endangered species in the area.[[6]](#footnote-6)

And most of all, letting this parable sit with me has led me to James Baldwin and the quote on the cover of the bulletin today:

*“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy, but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."*

It’s a helpful reminder that the “love” that James Baldwin is talking about here isn’t about me feeling ‘loved enough’ to have courage to be wrong, to be REAL… but rather it’s about me and you *risking loving the world, loving our neighbor, loving our families …enough* to remove the *performance* of goodness and really ask ourselves, *who am I being right now, and where am I being called to change?* How could we let that sort of change take root among us instead of choking it off?

And this brings me back to the work of the Institutional Race & Equity Self-Assessment Report.[[7]](#footnote-7) We could limit our reflection on “being changed” to the Bible, but even Jesus didn’t do that – he expanded his language around the Scripture of his own religion and moment to point to issues and stories that he felt were connected – and *the same is true* of the work to understand how race and racism operate in the way we do church in our congregations *across* the presbytery, and the presbytery structures themselves. Spoiler alert: the team didn’t find overt racism in the way we think of slurs or racial intolerance, but instead they found patterns of behavior that limited our Christian witness, harmed and overburdened people of color, and disconnected us *all* from genuine relationships.

None of this is about blame, but it *is* an invitation to change behaviors and practices that will strengthen our Christian witness and relationships – ***IF*** we let them. **IF** we let our love for one another lead us to choose this powerful quest of change, growth, and honesty.

About three weeks ago, I was on the House of Hope youth mission trip as a volunteer with some of the wonderful young folks from this congregation. The theme for the trip was “Grow Where You’re Planted,” and the themes of seeds, growth, change, and community wisdom echoed through our 6-day journey through a wildfire-smoke-filled Chicago. From a northside seed gathering event in a restored prairie to a Westside afternoon learning about the racial and cultural dynamics of community services in Garfield Park, and a tour in Hyde Park in the near southside that covered everything from WWII concentration camps here on U.S. soil to the creation of the technology for the atom bomb… these youth wrestled with the multiple ways that our imaginations, our choices, and our stories shape us and the world around us.

On the last night, at our closing devotions on the shore of lake Michigan over s’mores, one youth reflected that something she was taking away from the week was the need to look and listen differently to the world around her, and to the communities she wanted to interact with. She needed to change so that she could be *who she wanted to be* in the world.

This is all of our story, no matter our age. We *all* need to keep changing to become more and more the people we say we want to be. It’s not a game of Good Person/Bad Person, but Beautiful-Transforming-Flawed-but-Growing-Person in a changing world.

It’s not simple or pat. It’s not even easy – but it is *real*. Like, growing healthier in challenging times real, like finding beauty in the midst of grief real --- and it’s maybe my biggest argument about why religion, and specifically, *showing up and doing religion in a church-type space together* matters more than the things we can tend to convince ourselves are more pressing. No, this isn’t a scold, and it’s not a plea: *it’s an invitation to do* ***deeper, wilder work*** *here together*. We as the church -- and I say this as a pastor originally trained to serve a model of church that basically no longer exists -- *we collectively* have not done enough to make the communal life of faith as transformative as it can and should be.

*We need each other and each other’s imaginations and voices* to do this now. NOT because we are starving for numbers, or because we’re trying to rebuild the old model of Church. (We can’t, and we shouldn’t.) This is about enlivening and enhancing our courage to do HERE what only places like HERE can do in our lives.

Whether it’s the parables or the stories in the Race and Equity Self-Assessment, I’ve met people who have been bowled over when they let these stories take root in them and shift their understanding of themselves and the world around them. It’s a wild and wooly ride, siblings in Christ, but it is worth it.

* So we let the words of Christ dwell in us richly, and transform us,
* We sit with the stories of our community with openness and courage
* We let ourselves experience Scripture and Christian community -- not just think about it,
* And we *practice being wrong* sometimes, so that we can grow stronger in what leads us toward life.

I invite you to listen to this final parable, also from Matthew 13, which was used on the final night of the youth mission trip, and let it speak in *your* heart about the possibilities, surprises, and even delights that we might find in taking on this call to rewild our relationship to Scripture, to each other, and within ourselves. Let these words grow wild in you. See what happens next.

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,

which a man took and planted in his field.

Though it is the smallest of all seeds,

yet when it grows,

it is the largest of garden plants

and becomes a tree,

so that the birds come

and perch in its branches.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

 May it be so. Amen.

1. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Ted Talk on The Danger of a Single Story can be accessed here: https://bit.ly/3pV7evb [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 4: 18-19, based on Jewish Scripture like Isaiah 61:1,2 (see Septuagint); Isaiah 58:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A brief video on McNamarra’s work: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tchhS0ckUQ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Colossians 3:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm* by Isabella Tree, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Find the report here: https://sites.google.com/view/ptcaraceandequity/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew 13: 31-32 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)