

“Holy Imagination”

I Corinthians 13; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts
and minds to your Spirit, to liberate our imaginations. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

Have you ever heard such a rapid succession of similes? You’ll remember from grade school literature class that a simile is a comparison that uses the word “like” or “as”. Our reading today calls these similes “parables,” and we can call them that too, but they’re not stories like many of the longer parables. They are descriptions, metaphors – all aimed at trying to help us understand the mystery of the kingdom of heaven. But the thing about metaphors is that, by their very nature, they cannot be taken literally. So even though the parables themselves are short, their impact can linger, as we ponder the implications of each comparison. And it’s that space of pondering that I want us to explore today.

Many years ago, when I was pastoring my first church in Anniston, Alabama, a woman named Robin and her husband, Lloyd, joined our church. I warned her I was going to preach about her today, and she let me know that Lloyd has just had back surgery, so we should pray for both of them today. I don’t remember exactly when within my ten years in Anniston that Robin & Lloyd joined, but it probably got started when we held our Earth Day service basically in their backyard. You see, Robin &

Lloyd lived right behind the Disciples church there, except that the church also owned a weird little plot across the alley from our fellowship hall, that really seemed more like their yard than ours. Wonderful things can emerge from weird little plots of ground, can't they?

Anyway, after Robin & Lloyd joined the church, she and I were talking one day, and she told me why she decided to join. Apparently, the first Sunday they came to a regular service, I was preaching on First Corinthians 13. And though it wasn't my main point, apparently somewhere in the course of that sermon, I made an offhand remark about how that last line – “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” – gives the impression that there might have been two lost chapters about faith and hope, similar to this familiar chapter focused on love. I'm sure I hadn't thought that much about it; it was just something that occurred to me as I was trying to find something fresh in a well-known passage. But for Robin, who had been raised Baptist in the Deep South, hearing me suggest that maybe there were parts of the Bible that we were missing, having me casually toss out such a conjecture was revolutionary. I don't think it was even about whether it was a serious question or not. Certainly someone could research such a possibility; the literary hint is there. I think what struck a chord with Robin was the idea that you could be playful with scripture at all, that you could have a creative relationship with scripture that stretches the boundaries of what is on the page. As a lifelong Disciple,

this didn't seem like a big deal to me, but Robin helped me understand just how liberating it could be for someone who had been raised with a much stricter approach to scripture.

And so what I want to talk about today is Holy Imagination – both for those of us who might not think to name it because we've always had access to it and for those for whom it is a new thing that might take some getting used to. Holy Imagination is what I am calling a Spirit-empowered approach to interpreting scripture. We are created in the image of a Creative Creator God; no one can convince me that we've been given the gift of creativity but we're not supposed to use it in our faith lives. That's preposterous. And yet, somehow, the idea that we can use our imaginations to inform our understanding of scripture is forbidden in fundamentalist approaches to the Bible. The Spirit that I know as Holy invites us into the Living Word with the freedom to run – or plod, or frolic – in whatever direction it takes us. I can't understand how someone could look at this passage full of similes and try to insist that we read all of scripture “literally.” It's nonsense.

So just in case no one has ever made this clear to you before: you have permission – and even more so, you are encouraged to use your imagination when you're reading the Bible. You can read this succession of similes and contemplate why each one was included. You can critique the relative strength of each comparison, totting up the pros and cons. You could even write your own! You can

get to the end of the 13th chapter of First Corinthians and wonder how Paul can simply declare love to be greater than faith and hope, when as far as we've seen, he's only bothered to list the virtues of love, with barely any commentary on faith or hope. You could draft your own chapters on faith and hope – or peace or generosity or joy or gentleness, or any other fruit of the Spirit you like! It's allowed! It's appreciated. It's a blessing!

So let's practice a little today! Let's look at these metaphors for the kingdom of heaven and see where they lead us. One of the best ways to live into our identities as creative creatures is to practice, to exercise our imaginations. We've got five main metaphors here. I wonder if you have a favorite? There's the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great value, and the net full of good and bad fish. They're not all teaching the same lesson, so that might influence how they strike you. What do you like about the mustard seed parable? This is the longest story of the five, with a transformation happening from something that is tiny into something that is expansive. What do you like about it? [D] I particularly appreciate how this one names hospitality as a value of the kingdom and insists that it's possible even when our resources are seemingly limited. Anything here that doesn't work for you?

What about the yeast? Where does this take your mind? [D]

For the sake of time, we can consider the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value together, since their primary points seem similar: we should be

willing to give up everything else for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. How do these two strike you? [D] To be honest, I find these two similes a little weak. They certainly make the point that following Jesus is worth leaving other things behind. But both stories imply that the gospel is something to be held to ourselves, like we're Gollum with the One Ring or something. The idea that we could "own" the good news just doesn't compute for me. In fact, that sent me down a whole other rabbit trail, wondering if Jesus really said all these himself, or if he was crowd-sourcing at this point, asking the disciples to throw out any simile they could think of, and they'd evaluate them later. Such an idea is not orthodox, of course, but we have permission to use our brains here – imagination and critical thinking both! Finding a treasure hidden in a field, covering it back up, and selling everything you have to buy that field, without telling anyone why you want it sounds a lot like "hide it under a bushel" to me. And what is the answer to that? No!

Finally, there is this net of fish, all of which are drawn into shore, but not all of which are kept. Now, of course, the interpretation offered here in Matthew implies that this is about "evil" and "righteous" people, but we know those lines are fuzzier in reality than they are on the page. Another interpretation could see this metaphor reflected in the very activity we're doing now – looking at all of it and then deciding what to keep. Even the training Jesus refers to has a simile involved – and here we are looking at the old we've brought out, while welcoming the new. I would love to hear a

metaphor for the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God that makes sense to you. What do you know to be true about the realm of God that you can best describe with an image or comparison? Any thoughts right now? We can also keep thinking about it, and you can send it to me when something comes to you.

It might seem as though this permission for and encouragement to use holy imagination only matters for our approach to scripture, but that's not the case. This liberatory approach to our faith also shapes how we relate to our wider culture. There is so much creativity out there in the world. Rather than practicing a faith that assumes everything that's not inside our walls must be bad, we can see all of that creativity as a gift, but with that same discerning eye that tosses out the bad fish and keeps the good. It's not that there are no standards; it's just that the boundaries are wide and permeable. We can celebrate the incredible wealth of creativity happening downtown this weekend at Comic Con, even if we don't understand it all. We can encourage each other to practice using our imaginations, through reading, writing, art and even Bible study. Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is like a fully stocked art studio, with instructors who can help us bring to life the visions inside our heads! Our imaginations are holy; let's give them the love and respect they deserve! Hallelujah and Amen!