

*Persuasive Story*

Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

Whitefish UMC

July 24, 2011

- † In the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of Jesus’ sayings from the first century, Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, but you do not see it.”
- † I don’t know about you, but when it comes to national politics, it’s hard to see any signs of God’s kingdom in play these days. It feels as if American society is polarized as never before, with civility in shreds and partisanship so toxic that government has become inoperable.
- † Just when it seems that there is light at the proverbial end of the tunnel, some “true believer” torpedoes any real compromise. Because “compromise” is now a dirty word, and “give and take” has all the appeal of defeat to some lawmakers. And in some ways, we understand. It’s hard to give up long-held beliefs and positions: there are important principles that ought not to be relinquished.
- † How is it possible to transform minds and hearts—to persuade others with opposing views that there may be a different and better way? We turn to the teachings of Jesus, and to those who turned their lives around to follow him—both when he walked this earth as an itinerant preacher and as he lives in history and today.
- † How did Jesus try to persuade people to see things differently and re-orient their lives toward the kingdom of God? In today’s gospel reading, we see

one of his methods—the use of parables: little stories that use familiar subjects to teach upside-down truths.

- † In the parables and stories of Jesus, things aren't always what they seem to be on the surface—they trip the listener up and make him or her think differently than before. Take today's parables about the kingdom of God: Jesus says it is like a mustard seed, like leavening in bread, like treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great price, like a fishing net—relatively ordinary things, insignificant or small on the surface.
- † The world the way it ought to be, he seems to say, begins with what appears to be very little, but these seemingly small things make a big difference. That was comforting to his first hearers, for when he asks them if they understand, they eagerly answer “yes!” If these small things matter, then maybe they matter as well. And that would be a world of difference if they did.
- † In fact, Bernard Brandon Scott's book, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, provides an almost jarring perspective on these stories. His keen concern is to read the parables from the underside of society, where women lived, and the poor, and the outcast. Where they lived was underneath the Empire, and underneath organized religion and the burdens it can impose (in every age, including our own). In a patriarchal culture, how can a woman, of all people, illustrate matters of God? Under the heel of the Roman Empire, how could one speak of the reign, the empire – the "basileia" – of God?
- † The Roman Empire was not a nice place for the people of Israel to be in the first century, as Scott writes: The "Pax Romana...was pax only if you were Romana, otherwise it was oppressio, oppression." Perhaps Jesus used such language and such images to offer an "alternative" to that way of life, to

offer a word of hope and possibility: "For all those who are leaven in their society, this parable assures them that the empire of God is like them. In Jesus' society this was a large majority of people," whether they were unable to fulfill the demands of their religion or barely able even to survive, or pushed to the margins of their society. Scott says that this "leaven" consisted not of a minority at the bottom but a majority, "at least 80% of the population of first century Palestine who lived a subsistence existence."

- † So Jesus used stories, parables, about simple, small things to challenge and to comfort, and to persuade. And there's a lesson there for us, as well. For some times seemingly insignificant people can and do make a huge difference for the kingdom that Jesus spoke so passionately and frequently about.
- † Did you realize that is the sesquicentennial of what one writer, Annette Gordon-Reed, in the *New Yorker* calls "a moment when politics truly failed and the American government splintered? Between 1861 and 1865, Americans did more than hurl verbal brickbats across the political divide; they fired canons and rifles, killing one another in astonishing numbers. And they did so, in part, because a large number of Americans had been persuaded that they could not live in a country that countenanced slavery."
- † Slavery had been a contentious issue in the U.S. from at least the time of its founding. Yet by the eighteen-thirties, Southerners were offering the country a new vision of slavery, as a positive good ordained by God and sanctioned by Scripture. Naturally, abolitionists in the North believed that the Bible told them the opposite.
- † This was the country that Harriet Beecher Stowe addressed in 1852 when she published "Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly," one of the most successful feats of persuasion in American history. Stowe's novel

shifted public opinion about slavery so dramatically that it has often been credited with fuelling the war that destroyed the particular institution.

- † Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said when he met the author, “Is this the little woman who made this great war?” The historian David S. Reynolds, in his passionate “Mightier than the Sword: ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ and the Battle for America”, shares that opinion.
- † Stowe, born on June 14, 1811, in Litchfield, Connecticut, was the seventh of the nine children of Lyman and Roxana Beecher. Reading and storytelling captivated Stowe from childhood. Her father considered her the most brilliant and intellectually promising of her siblings—he predicted that his later famous son, Henry Ward Beecher, would be tongue tied and slow. (Beecher went on to become a famous and influential preacher.)
- † Harriet loved the Arabian Nights and the stories of Cotton Mather, which “made me feel the very ground I trod on to be consecrated by some special dealing of God’s providence,” she wrote. Her grounding in Puritan background in radical independence and rebellion against authority informed her life and work.
- † She was educated at female academies, and when her father became president of Lane Theological Seminary, in Cincinnati, she went along. It was a fateful decision, personally and professionally. Cincinnati was in the upper south, close to the culture of slavery, and she began to hear stories that would provide templates for her writing.
- † She married Calvin Stowe in 1836, and the couple had seven children. When their son Charley died, in 1849 at eighteen months, Stowe began ‘her fixation on Jesus Christ as the humble sufferer, the grand symbol of the burdens borne by the lowliest members of society.’

- † She explored this theme in a number of short stories and of course, in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” when she portrayed the title character, an enslaved man, as a Christ figure. She said that losing Charley made her understand “what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her.”
- † Harriet wrote stories to supplement her husband’s small income; her religious fervor, combined with what she learned about slavery, produced her “visions.” The first vision that led to “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” came in February of 1951. The novel that resulted appeared in forty-one weekly installments in a Washington-based anti-slavery newspaper from June, 1851, to March, 1852, when it was published as a book in two volumes.
- † “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” exploded this myth of the South as a land of paternalistic slaveholders. Stowe said of the book that she had a ‘vocation to preach on paper,’ just as the men in her family preached in pulpits. It’s a crucial point, because the Beecher men, especially Henry, had helped to modernize the art of preaching.
- † They moved away from sermons that followed a strict trajectory and that discussed doctrine in a routine way. Instead they relied on narrative. Telling stories from the pulpit made the message of the gospel more accessible to congregations by using drawn-from-life vignettes. *“Stowe, too, understood how influential narrative could be, and with Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” she achieved what endless speeches in the halls of Congress, political tracts, harangues, and newspaper articles failed to do: she made the reality of slavery palpable to the American public.”*
- † With a southern and a northern plot component, Stowe took pains not to condemn all southerners nor beatify all northerners. The Fugitive Slave Act made northerners complicit in slavery along with their southern counterparts. But her characters helped put a human face on the numbing

statistics of slavery, and the story, though overly religious and dramatic for our contemporary senses, compelled many to rethink their long-held beliefs.

- † Stowe saw things, knew things, heard things—that we, thanks in part to her, will never be forced to confront—American slavery as it was.
- † Arguments will continue about the novel’s literary value and about her handling of race. For all that, it’s still possible to see “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” for what its author intended it to be: a *cri de coeur* to the American people, one that forced them to ask what kind of country they wanted their nation to be.
- † So, all this may be interesting, (or not), but what’s the point, you may ask. How can we use not only the methods of Jesus, this storytelling and upside-down vision of the way things ordinarily are, but the life and grace of Jesus to transform the world? For even though the world may be okay from your or your family’s perspective, is it so for the rest of the world, for our community, and in our politics? As a follower of Jesus, I hope the answer is obvious.
- † In his casting small seeds of hope and even promise, Jesus reminds us that God’s dream for us and our world is full of joy, beyond price, and a greater treasure than all of the nations’ debts combined.
- † And though we may feel smaller than a mustard seed, the passion for Christ and his longing for abundance for all can fuel amazing change for the good. Just look back at the persuasive story of Harriet Beecher Stowe.
- † What story do you have to tell with your life? Will it be a kingdom tale that brings the vision of Jesus closer to reality? I pray that it will be so. Amen.

Sources:

Annette Gordon-Reed, “The Persuader,” The New Yorker, June 13 and 20, 2011.

Kate Huey, “Weekly Seeds,” <http://www.ucc.org>