

Spirit-filled Soul Soil. Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (A) – July 16, 2017

By Tim Hall.

[RCL:] Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“Listen! Let anyone with ears listen!” Did you notice the explanation marks? Twice, even. Jesus is preaching from a boat because the crowds following him have grown so huge. And this is important stuff. Jesus wants the crowd, with us there in it, to hear what he is saying. And not only to hear, but to heed. He bookends this parable by imploring us to listen.

This is the first parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Matthew and we begin this morning a 3-week mini-series on the parables found in chapter 13 of Matthew’s Gospel. What I especially love about this parable is that not only is it outwardly filled with hope, but we also are privy to receive, with the disciples, as explanation of the deeper meaning found in the metaphor of this story.

You see, there are a few verses omitted. After Jesus tells the crowds to listen, the disciples pull Jesus aside to ask why he has begun speaking to the people in parables. He tells them that they, the disciples, have been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven but that the people don’t easily understand and this is another way for Jesus to reach them, to paraphrase the prophecy from Isaiah that Jesus quotes... to open their ears to hearing and their eyes for seeing and their hearts to understanding. And then he draws the parallel between the parable of the sower and sowing of the word of the kingdom.

There are two lessons to be learned here. Oh, that our hearts and our lives would be the “good soil” so that we might hear and understand the word and bear fruit and yields far greater than what we receive. And as sowers, oh that we would have the faith and courage to spread the word, the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven and salvation in Christ Jesus, and to cast it wildly knowing that in some cases it may fall on rocky ground, or thin soil, or among thorns. But in so many other cases it will catch root and flourish abundantly.

This past Thursday evening I was home alone and, after fixing myself a bit of dinner, thought I’d sit down and watch a bit of TV. As is my habit, I first perused the networks where I found “America’s Got Talent” the latest in the line of “Amateur Hour” television showcasing the many bizarre talents of our fellow Americans, Howie exclaiming in the opening trailer as we see a man lying on a table face-up with a sharp object hanging over his throat, “Someone’s gonna die here!” <Click> Then some new game show with Jamie Foxx as host... “Beat Shazam”... with an overly energized crowd amid wild lights, buzzers, and trumpet fanfares. <Click> And finally the premier of “Boy Bands”, which I must admit held me for a couple of minutes as they moved from song tag line to song tag line of many of the huge boy band hits of the 80’s and 90’s. But then the actual show began with screaming audience, enthusiastic host, panel of judges... you get the idea. <Click> I’ll try PBS, I think... first a nature show with squirmy things all over the screen and on the UK channel another British murder mystery... you’d think there would be no one left to murder in Midsomer, Oxfordshire after just a few episodes that show. <Click>

My last resort is Netflix. Now, while we're waiting for the red screen to clear, I want you to know that this whole survey of the available entertainment has taken me but five minutes or less, not even enough time for my dinner to cool. The Netflix menu has appeared and there they are MA-14 after MA-14 show. Not in the mood. But then I find what I want to watch... amid the many disturbing dramas and inappropriate comedies I find "just released and now available on Netflix", the Disney movie "Moana" released last Thanksgiving. A story, I remembered from the trailers, of a South Pacific Polynesian girl who saves her village through acts of selfless heroism.

Have any of you seen it?

Well, I have to tell you, I thoroughly enjoyed this movie. It has beautiful animation, interesting and fun characters, engaging musical numbers, comedy and adventure, and a story with a lot of heart. And I found it interesting that among its Polynesian mythology, which I'm led to believe was well researched by the Disney production team, there are many parallels with our Christian theology.

The movie opens with the creation story. After finishing her work of creation and seeing that it is good, the goddess Te Fiti rests, just as God rested on the seventh day of our creation, and as she reclines her bodily features are blurred and she is transformed, in a wonderful sequence, into one of those many beautiful South Pacific islands, her hips one high mountain, her shoulders another, her head a third smaller one, and her extended arms and legs the shoreline.

Enter Maui, a demigod, who is given responsibility to oversee the world, much like Adam in the Garden of Eden. And he serves humankind well... lifting up islands from the depths with his magic fishhook, lassoing the sun with his hair to provide longer days, filling the oceans and the earth with good things to eat. But he wants to do even more, to be more like god, and so he steals the small, green pounamu stone that is the mystical heart of the island goddess, and in so doing unleashes evil into the world. Maui is overcome by this evil, loses the stone and his magical powers, and is banished to a desert island for eternity.

Fast forward a thousand years or more and we see that this whole creation story is being told by an elderly woman, Tala, to a classful of entranced island children. Most are thoroughly frightened at what they hear, but one, Tala's granddaughter Moana, is totally entranced and already, at a young age, realizes the importance of restoring the world to its original condition. She is the daughter of the island chief, Tui, and her destiny is to become chief one day herself. The people of Motunui live a happy and contented life, with everything provided for them by the island and the lagoon, never venturing beyond the reef, as Moana is often reminded by her father.

But Moana is called by the ocean to a greater mission. First, as a toddler, the ocean gives her the pounamu stone, which she loses as her father drags her from the surf. But grandmother sees this gift from the ocean, finds the stone, and saves it for Moana. Years later the evil has found its way to Motunui... the crops are failing, the fish in the lagoon have disappeared, and the people are becoming more and more unhappy. It is now that Tala, both the grandmother and a prophet, now old and dying, calls Moana to fulfill her alternate destiny of restoring the

world and from her death bed anoints her and sends her forth on a journey to find Maui and return the stone to Te Fiti.

Suffice it to say that an epic journey ensues, filled with mythological adventure much like Odysseus' return to his home after the Trojan War or Jason's journey with the Argonauts, with the ocean acting as her holy spirit even parting the mighty waters at one point, and finally the heart of the goddess is returned. And then a resoundingly joyful, Disney happy ending.

Moana's world is a world of flesh and a world of spirit. Moana's father, Tui, refuses to look beyond his own small world and to hear the spiritual words of his mother. He is content with what he has and when his world falls apart he has nowhere to turn for answers. He has no spirit to help him see the way to a bigger, brighter future and instead turns to anger and remorse. Moana, on the other hand, through the spirits that surround her, Tala and the ocean (the water of life), sees beyond the immediate devastation to a better world.

Paul preaches about this kind of world. A world where those who live in the flesh are condemned to a life of sin and death, but those who live in the Spirit, the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, are set free from sin and death to live a life of peace and righteousness. It is by living in that very spirit that we provide the good soil in which the Word can thrive. It helps us to understand the Word when we hear it, to take it in fully and let it put down deep roots in our souls, and to withstand the cares and temptations of the world.

Esau and Jacob, each destined to be the founders of great nations, were far from perfect examples of human righteousness. Esau lived in the flesh and sold his birthright for a bowl of red lentil soup. Jacob lived in the flesh and bought his own brother's birthright for a bowl of that same soup. Could Jacob not just have shared his soup with his brother? Is everything in life about making deals? How did Jacob and Esau feel about this transaction, once completed? After all, this one event in their young lives ends up following and haunting them throughout their lives. The lesson here is for us to try not to be like Esau or like Jacob, but acknowledge that even when we are, which we most certainly will be, God has a plan for us. And if we return to the Spirit, God will free us to do great things in his name.

Remember... our seed must be sown or there will never be a crop. But by no means is the harvest all up to us. We must sow the seeds, but we must also trust that what will grow will grow and what doesn't is out of our control. The parable of the sower calls us to trust that we are not the Lord of the harvest -- that the state of our communities, like the state of the sower's soil, is not ours to worry over. ⁽¹⁾

The parable of the sower calls us to sow seeds of grace and mercy over new ground --worried not over where it will land -- concerned only with casting as much seed as possible -- leaving all the rest up to God. ⁽²⁾

The parable of the sower demands that we prepare our own spirit filled soul soil and that we venture forth to sow seed vigorously -- seeds of love in Christ -- and leave the rest up to God.

~Amen

Footnotes (1) & (2): The Rev. Joe Evans, The Sower's Lesson, from http://day1.org/3038-the_sowers_lesson, 10 July 2011