



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 12A, JULY 30, 2023

1 KINGS 3:1-3,5-12; PSALM 119:129-136; ROMANS 8:26-39; MATTHEW 13:31-33,44-52

RE-ENGAGING WITH IDEALS

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52 [Jesus put before the crowds another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”]

For incredibly long periods of human history very little in the way of substantive change took place in the course of a lifetime, over the course of multiple generations, things stayed pretty much the same, by today's standards. For most of human history, you'd likely have lived a very similar life, materially, culturally, to the one lived by your great-great-great grandparents. The same thing can't be said for those of us born in the last two hundred

years across much of the industrialized world.

As a result of the astonishing rate of change we've grown accustomed to today, you'd think we'd be a society full of dreamers and schemers, a society driven on by the belief that anything, truly, is possible, any problem solvable. And yet it is perhaps because we live in a time of such great and rapid change that we seem to find it so hard to conceptualize an

ideal future. Perhaps because the present seems so ... 'unstable' ... imagining a brighter, better future seems peculiarly tricky.

Even talk, these days, of a brighter, better future can ring hollow. Can feel somewhat utopian, and so pointless.

Before utopia became our word in our lexicon, it was the title of a book¹ written back in the early 1500s, written in a Europe torn apart by the violence of war and the relentless struggle for survival; danger, violence, poverty, fear, and death were both a constant threat and a reality. The story of the land of Utopia was written in response to this dark time. It's a satire, an idealized vision for what the world could be: egalitarian, communal, a free society of shared property, tolerance, and sustained peace, all through 'ideal' social changes, some as unimaginable then as they remain now.

In our own time, I find it fascinating that our technological and scientific imagination is very much alive, our market-driven imagination for new goods to sell, new ways to make a profit, it's on fire. Yet, as a culture, our utopian imagination seems to have stalled. Rather than explore utopian

possibilities, the Western world has instead cultivated an amazing ability to conceive of the worst of all possible outcomes and turn that into a mainstay of our entertainment, our opinion pieces, and our political rhetoric; dystopian depictions are everywhere.

And so this presents us, as Christians of this time and in this context, with something of a dilemma: take seriously Jesus' teachings about the kingdom, both already here and yet to come, or dismiss talk of the kingdom as somewhat utopian, as fantastical, idealized and so clearly unrealistic, or reduce the kingdom to be other-worldly or purely spiritual, talk of the kingdom as a dream reserved for the after-life. The kingdom of heaven: a bit of distraction from the real work of societal change.

To be clear, I'm not making the claim that the kingdom of heaven/the Kingdom of God and the utopian vision are one and the same. But I am curious to explore the ways in which we might re-ignite our imagination for the possible, truly believe that the world's transformation is not only possible but is assured by God, and so rightly invest in a future in which we fully participate in that life-bringing, justice and freedom offering transformation, in which we take greater care

¹ Full disclosure: I have never read "Utopia"! My knowledge of the text is gleaned from what I've read *about* it. A recent article I read can be found

here: Heer, Jeet. 2021, "UTOPIA Allows Us to Dream Together." *Nation* 313 (2): 12-14.

of one another, of ourselves, and of this planet.

As followers of Jesus, surely, our hope is in the truth of the kingdom.

When I was a teenager, I was a bit of a student activist, I was motivated by all kinds of causes, I wrote letters to my Member of Parliament, showed up at marches, gave talks at school, I really believed then my actions could make a difference, that we could change the world.

More times than I can count, the adults in my life rolled their eyes, making comments about my naïveté, they assured me that I'd soon lose all my idealistic tendencies as soon as I was out "in the real world."

And ... they were right. Over time the pressures of life and the stories that were told and retold around me slowly convinced me my efforts were pointless, and, like so many around me I lost my faith, buried it somewhere and forgot all about it. The "real world" got flattened, limited to the material reality I saw around me, it was no longer shot through with wonder or possibility. My imagination clipped, my cynicism ran amok. It became impossible for me to see how

anything or anyone could bring about substantive, positive change.

I did find my faith again, which might now be kind of obvious! ... but it's made me realize that it takes *robust* imagination to make meaning of Jesus' parables, just as it takes robust imagination to believe another kind of reality is possible. In a time when dystopian story telling on TV, in movies, and on our news feeds seems to be having a moment, it takes the suspension of our disbelief to make meaning from Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of heaven. We need to re-engage with ideals,² ideals as creative real-world possibilities set free by our faith-fueled, confident imagination.

We certainly do have the imaginative capacity to conceive of a more just and loving world. We might not have all the details of how this world could look, but Jesus tells us what it is like. We might not have a full and complete understanding of the kingdom reality, or precisely how we might get there, but Jesus tells us what it is like. We have enough to be getting on with, Jesus teaches us enough to commit to the transformation of our lives and this world. It is, undoubtedly, up to us, in our own time and in our own context to trust, to have faith, and to follow

² For more on this: Bregman, Rutger, *Utopia for Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World* (Little, Brown and Company, 2017)

where Jesus is leading us; especially when it seems impractical or unrealistic – utopian, even.

At the very beginning of his ministry in Matthew’s gospel Jesus declares, “... the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ Are we taking this seriously, incorporating the kingdom into our understanding of the “real world,” and allowing our commitment to it to transform life as we know it?

Our encultured, conditioned minds might struggle to see beyond the stories that surround us, stories that make the dystopian seem strangely rational, reasonable - but our Christian imagination can open us up to the true fullness of life, to the possibility, if we only let it, encourage it. Practice, practice

seeing the possibility of life as it could be, transformed.

Mind-blowing transformation is present all around us right now, if only we’d just pay attention; it’s showing us what’s possible, if only we’d take what it teaches us seriously. It’s present in the tiniest of seeds that become the largest of trees, and in the communities of microorganisms that can change the chemistry of a vast environment. Stumbling upon the hidden treasure of the transforming power of our imagination – that ... is a windfall find that truly changes everything, life after that discovery is never the same, it can’t be. This, Jesus tells us, all of this is what the kingdom is ‘like.’

³ Matthew 4:17

