

Some Thoughts on Manure, Mustard Seeds, & Yeast
Parables Series: Stories About God's Generosity
Sermon on Luke 13:1-20 (6/27/15 & 6/28/15)
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I tend to reserve Friday as my primary sermon-writing day. I spend a lot of time earlier in the week thinking, dreaming, and praying about what should be said in the coming weekend's sermon, but very little gets put to the page until Friday.

And some Fridays are more difficult than others. Fridays, for example, like the one we just had where news breaks of the Supreme Court's decision that banning same-sex marriage is unconstitutional.

Now. Speaking politics in a sermon is not my favorite thing to do, and, before you get nervous about what I might (or might *not*) say, let me assure you I will not say much. What I *will* say is I take seriously my vow to uphold the *Discipline* of The United Methodist Church.

This means I maintain a promise to publicly preach and teach the law of our denomination regarding any particular issue where politics and Christian faith intersect – the issues surrounding human sexuality and same-sex marriage fall squarely within that intersection.

In case you are unaware of this fact, United Methodists are to abide by what's called *The Book of Discipline*, our book of "church law"... and, as our United Methodist *Discipline* currently stands, we do not allow same-sex marriages to happen within our churches or to be officiated by our pastors. This is the case regardless of state or federal law.

For many United Methodists across the country and around the world, this is the way it should be. For many other United Methodists, this is *not* the way it should be. Whether you are aware of it or not, many folks here at McCabe agree with our *Discipline* on this issue... and many folks here at McCabe do not agree with it.

So here I stand, the weekend after our nation's highest court made a significant decision on an issue that affects many United Methodists. The reality is, however, while the law of the *land* has now shifted, the law of the United Methodist Church has *not*. Wherever your perspective lies within this issue, that is either good news or bad news.

I am not going to stand here and pontificate – one way or the other – on the Supreme Court's decision. I'm just not. This is a place of worship for all God's children and I *promise you* there are good, faithful people sitting just a few feet from you right now who disagree with your perspective on this particular issue – whatever your perspective happens to be.

Lucky me, I get to be pastor and preacher for *all* of you...all of you, in your beautifully opinionated diversity! But, this is not about *me*. As United Methodist Christians, we exist today just as we did before this Supreme Court decision: people of deep faith and conviction, often disagreeing with one another, yet worshiping God together as one body of believers in Jesus Christ.

And that is all I am going to say about that today. It was probably too much for some of you...and not enough for others of you. For today, the larger message of this sermon needs to focus elsewhere.

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If you were here in one of our four worship services at McCabe last weekend, you are aware I was not the preacher. It was a great gift that I did not preach last weekend...and it was a great gift for several reasons:

First, it allowed me to go to a wedding in Valley City on Saturday evening. Second, I had preached nine weeks in a row prior to last weekend and, frankly, I needed a week off from preaching. Third, it allowed Chris Chase, our guest preacher, to offer a kind of message for Father's Day weekend I never could have offered.

That said, there are times I'm *not* preaching when I sort of wish I *were* preaching – even when I know the guest preacher will bring a powerful message...and even when I know I need the time off.

Last weekend was one of those times for me because it was so close to the June 17th shootings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

For a whole host of reasons, that was a tragic event I felt a strong need to speak to in some sort of public forum...perhaps especially because the shootings happened in a church – and, not just any church, but a church that is part of a Methodist denomination.

The nine lives taken at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17th are sisters and brothers on our own Methodist family tree. Especially for that reason, *my* heart – and so many of your hearts – broke in a new and different way when news of that shooting broke. Since I wasn't to be preaching last weekend, I struggled to know how to speak to the shootings in the best way possible.

So, a week ago Friday night, 48 hours after the shootings, here at McCabe, we planned and hosted a prayer vigil in response. The vigil was small...but important. And I have posted many things to my personal Facebook page and Twitter account in the days since the shootings – my own thoughts, as well as things written by others.

But all of that wasn't enough. As a preacher, *this* is my most "public forum:" this pulpit, this music stand, this podium. When something happens of such epic, tragic, societal proportions – like the shootings in Charleston a week and a half ago – if I don't speak to it *here*, it is as though I haven't spoken to it at all.

That tragic event was an honest-to-God experience of evil intruding upon a church of Jesus Christ...and it happened, primarily, because seeds of racist hatred were allowed to be nurtured in a young man's heart and mind.

Whether we want to admit it or not, our society tends to value *whiteness* over other skin colors – a fact which is hard to understand and face, especially for the vast majority of us in this congregation who are white.

And, if we think it isn't true that our society values whiteness over and above other skin colors, we need only to think about slavery, Indian reservations, and the Japanese internment camps of World War II.

Yes, those things were established in our nation's *past*, but they are symptoms of a disease that continues to live and to thrive in our nation today...call that disease "racism," call it "white privilege," call it what you will, it's tragic. And it's *not* how we are called to operate in the kingdom of God.

We who are white should not be valued *more* – we should not be given "the benefit of the doubt" over anyone else – simply because of the color of our skin. And we should be outraged when the lives of those who are not white are somehow made to be "less than" ours.

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I have had a very hard time getting the Charleston shootings off my mind these past 10 days...and that's perfectly okay. That event *should* haunt me. It should haunt *us*. Not because it's a reminder that such violent evil can happen anywhere – even in churches – but, rather, it should haunt us because we have work to do.

Violent hatred against non-white human beings is being nurtured in this country... and that's not okay. The God we worship is a God for all people – white, black, and brown. We need to raise children who respect and honor God's love for people of all skin tones.

The tragic irony of the shootings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church is that the nine people who were murdered that night had opened their doors and their hearts to the man who became their killer..a young, white man who hated each of them simply because they were black.

The shooter was, almost literally, a wolf in sheep's clothing, present among people who wanted only to welcome him and to help open his mind and heart to God's word in Bible study.

Instead of receiving their welcome, that young man unleashed white supremacist hatred in the form of deadly gunfire.

In addition to properly mourning the nine lives lost, perhaps the best thing we can do in response to these shootings is to search our own hearts and minds for any prejudice...any hatred...any preconceived ideas about who someone is on the *inside* because of the skin they wear on the *outside*. //

Now. You may be listening to all this and thinking, "I thought she was somehow supposed to be talking about one of Jesus' parables. Just how exactly does all this connect to the Scripture reading we heard?"

If you happen to be thinking that, I understand. So let's get there. Let's turn to Luke chapter 13.

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For much of June and July here at McCabe, we're exploring a bunch of Jesus' parables – a bunch of the stories Jesus told. I'm using the parables of Jesus as springboards to jump into a year of sermons that will focus on the many aspects of Christian generosity. And the parables of Jesus are a great place to start... because, when you look at them carefully, you see they are all about generosity. //

As I've said in previous weeks of this *Parables* series, the parables of Jesus are nuggets of stories that often seem a little strange, but that are meant to illustrate some major truth about God and about faithful life in this world. The parables might strike you at first as having *one* meaning... but will then hit you with new and deeper insight later, after the story has settled-into your mind and heart for a while.

That's the power of a good story. It's not only interesting to listen to or to read, but it also *changes* you.

Today's reading from Luke 13 includes stories and analogies that are meant to illustrate this very fact – this fact that some things *work on you*...that some things are dropped into your mind or heart and create a chain reaction that transforms how you think, speak, and live.

So, let's turn more specifically to today's reading from Luke 13. It starts first with a story about how helpful it can be to add a little manure to whatever it is you're trying to grow. Jesus said:

"A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. One day he went out to pick some figs, but he didn't find any. So he said to the gardener, 'For three years I have come looking for figs on this tree, and I haven't found any yet. Chop it down! Why should it take up space?'

"The gardener answered, 'Master, leave it for another year. I'll dig around it and put some manure on it to make it grow. Maybe it will have figs on it next year. If it doesn't, you can have it cut down.'" //

If you know anything about gardening or farming – two subjects about which I know only a very little – you know that manure can, in fact, help make things grow. As icky as it seems, it's a fact of nature.

And, if you're someone who has been made stronger after a difficult experience in life, you know the truth of how something "icky" can help make things grow and bear fruit. But there's more to the message of today's reading than just that.

Jesus did not want to leave people with the simple message of "icky things can help make you grow." Because, frankly, that message isn't quite *big* enough for Jesus. As much as Jesus loves *each of us individually*, he came to be salvation for *all of us collectively*.

As such, Jesus' message *is* never – and *can* never – be only about our own individual selves and needs. Jesus' message is *always* bigger than *us*.

So, after telling the parable of the fig tree – the story about how you need a little manure to grow and flourish – Jesus found himself in a bit of a debacle during Sabbath worship...a debacle during which he healed a woman he wasn't supposed to heal because healing on the Sabbath was "work" and you were not supposed to work on the Sabbath.

There are good and important reasons behind strict adherence to the commandment about not working on the Sabbath. But Jesus wanted to make a point about how, sometimes, *people* are more important than rules...more important than traditions...sometimes *people* are more important than how we've always thought, spoken, and lived.

Then, after the "healing on the Sabbath" debacle, Jesus said this: "What is God's kingdom like? What can I compare it with? It is like what happens when someone plants a mustard seed in a garden. The seed grows as big as a tree, and birds nest in its branches ...

"[And what] can I compare God's kingdom with? It is like what happens when a woman mixes yeast into three batches of flour. Finally, all the dough rises."

According to Jesus, God's kingdom is like something small that gets nurtured and then grows into something expansive...something that protects and nourishes the life around it – like a mustard seed in soil that grows into a plant, providing shelter for birds...or like yeast in flour that expands into dough that is baked into bread, feeding a family.

The kingdom of God is like small things that are nurtured, incubated, and that grow into something that protects and nourishes the life around it.

Let me say that again: *The kingdom of God is like small things that are nurtured – incubated – and that grow into something that protects and nourishes the life around it.*

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Because the Charleston shootings have been so prevalent on my mind and heart these last 10 days, on Friday afternoon, I watched President Obama's eulogy for the Reverend Clementa Pinckney – the slain Senior Pastor of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. When the president got to a certain point in his eulogy, I couldn't help but think about today's reading from Luke chapter 13.

I'm going to read this portion of his eulogy and, regardless of how you may feel about President Obama's politics and policies, I hope you will be open to the powerful message these words bring.

He speaks to the power the church has held – and continues to hold – in the black community here in our country.

The church in the black community has been an incubator for justice...a place where small ideas are nurtured and are grown into actions that protect and nourish the lives around them. In his eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, President Obama said this:

"To the families of the fallen, the nation shares in your grief. Our pain cuts that much deeper because it happened in a church. The church is and always has been the center of African American life ... a place to call our own in a too-often hostile world, a sanctuary from so many hardships.

"Over the course of centuries, black churches served as hush harbors where slaves could worship in safety, praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout 'Hallelujah' ... rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad, bunkers for the foot soldiers of the civil-rights movement.

"[Black churches] have been and continue to [be] community centers where we organize for jobs and justice, places of scholarship and network, places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm's way and told that they are beautiful and smart and taught that they matter. That's what happens in church. That's what the black church means – our beating heart, the place where our dignity as a people is inviolate.

"There's no better example of this tradition than [Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church] ... a church built by blacks seeking liberty, burned to the ground because its founders sought to end slavery only to rise up again, a phoenix from these ashes.

"Where there were laws banning all-black church [gatherings], services happened here anyway in defiance of unjust laws. When there was a righteous movement to dismantle Jim Crow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached from [Mother Emanuel's] pulpit, and marches began from its steps.

"A sacred place, this church, not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion of human rights and human dignity in this country – a foundation stone for liberty and justice for all. That's what the church meant.

"We do not know whether the killer of Reverend Pinckney and eight others knew all of this history, but he surely sensed the meaning of his violent act.

"It was an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, not random but as a means of control, a way to terrorize and oppress ... an act he imagined would incite fear and recrimination, violence and suspicion, an act that he presumed would deepen the divisions that trace back to our nation's original sin [of racism]."

President Obama then closed this section of his eulogy with these words: "O, but God works in mysterious ways. God has different ideas ... Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer would not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group, the light of love that shown as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join in their prayer circle.

"The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness.¹

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Today's reading from Luke chapter 13 is about how things that seem small can work their way into our minds and hearts to create something big.

Kind of like racist hatred that starts small and grows into an unconscionable act of violence.

But, thankfully, on the flip side, it's also kind of like generosity of thought, generosity of word, and deed...because, like a mustard seed and like yeast, generosity, too, can start small and grow into something beautifully big – something that incubates, something that grows in ways that protects and nourishes the life around it.

And when *that* happens – when we see *all lives* protected and nourished – we know the kingdom of God has become real among us. May it be so.

¹ Eulogy transcript from <http://www.washingtonpost.com>