

“The Intractable Work of God”
The Second in a Series on the Parables of Matthew 13
Matthew 13:31-32

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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In the 1992 blockbuster film, *A Few Good Men*, the character played by Jack Nicholson uttered a line that is now listed by the American Film Institute as one of the 100 most memorable lines in cinematic history. The line? “You can’t handle the truth!”

That line was delivered by a tough-as-nails Marine Colonel as part of a court martial scene, but even taken out of context, those words are worth pondering. “You can’t handle the truth!”

Interestingly, the brilliant but reclusive 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson agreed with the gist of those words in one of her short but profound poems.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—¹

Let’s ponder Dickinson’s pensive poem as a preface to our continuing study of the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13.

Being a recluse, Miss Dickinson had ample time for reflecting on many deep subjects, one of them being the notion of truth. She believed that the whole truth should be told, but when telling the truth, she wisely urged that one be careful to tell it in a way that the listener could understand and accept. Truth in its purest form is so brilliant, so dazzling, that it must be given with gentle explanation—and gradually—or it could be rejected, or even cause damage. One literary critic summarized the theme of this poem as follows: “Exposing truth, is like looking at the sun, [it] must be done indirectly, or it can cause blindness.”²

Jesus was concerned for truth; in fact, his commitment to telling “all the truth” about the kingdom of God—that is, the redemptive activity of God in the world—led to his death at the hands of Pontius Pilate, who infamously asked, “What is truth?”

Yes, Jesus was concerned to tell all the truth about the most important truth: the kingdom of God. But truth, especially truth about the infinite God, is too intense, too brilliant,

too dazzling, that to look at it straight on will only serve to blind us finite creatures. In the words of the hymnist, “’Tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.”³ Jesus was well aware of our limitations, and so, in the words of Emily Dickinson, he approached truth about the kingdom of God “slant” and in a “circuitous” manner. Let me unpack that statement with a metaphor of my own.

Imagine the kingdom of God as the most brilliant diamond conceivable. Looking at it directly, straight on, would absolutely blind us. It would be like looking at the sun! In order to behold the diamond, we can only look at it “slant,” that is, we can only look at one facet of the diamond at a time. Then, after pondering that facet, we can gradually move around the diamond—“in a circle”—looking at all the other facets, one facet at a time.

Each of Jesus’ famous parables shows us one facet of the diamond that is the kingdom of God. So, let’s look at today’s parable and see what it reveals about God’s ongoing redemptive activity in the world.

On the surface, it seems fairly easy to grasp the meaning of the Parable of the Mustard Seed. The mustard seed was the smallest seed known in ancient Galilee, but as all of the hearers of the parable would have known, the mustard seed grows into a very large, bushy plant approximately 10 feet tall. In its branches the birds of the heavens are able to build their nests.

All this is true to daily life in ancient Galilee, and leads readily to the following meaning: “God’s redemptive activity in the world starts out very small, but over time, it will grow all out of proportion to its beginning. Originating in Galilee and Judea, the kingdom of God will gradually spread to all the nations of the earth, symbolized in the parable by the common Old Testament metaphor of the birds of the heavens.” That’s how this parable is commonly explained, and it’s a good explanation—but I suggest that this message, although true, is a bit superficial. Let me explain.

Last week, I said that the parables of Jesus arrested the attention of the original hearers not only by their vivid depiction of nature and daily life in ancient Galilee, but also—perhaps especially—by their strangeness. I also suggested that the depth of the parable’s message is connected to that strangeness. So, what about this parable is strange?

To the original hearers of the parable, that was obvious. The mustard plant was a weed, a pernicious weed. Why would Jesus compare God’s redemptive activity in the world to a hated weed? Now that’s strange! In fact, at first blush, it sounds a bit sacrilegious? What could Jesus be getting at with such a scandalous comparison?

Farmers in ancient Galilee felt the same hatred toward the mustard plant that US farmers feel toward the kudzu vine or bindweed. These invasive plants, once established in a field, are nearly unstoppable, presenting a nearly insurmountable challenge to farmers trying to

raise other crops. Kudzu, for example, has spread rapidly throughout the southeastern US, sometimes spreading as fast as 150,000 acres per year!

What spiritual point could Jesus be making by comparing God’s redemptive work in the world to an invasive, nearly unstoppable weed? I think his main point is that God’s work in the world is intractable, unstoppable. When anyone tries to eradicate it—as, for example, several of the Roman emperors attempted to do, thinking it was a “pernicious weed” spreading in their empire—it comes back even stronger. Nothing can ultimately stop God’s loving, redemptive activity in the world. God is intractable. God never gives up, no matter the obstacles.

This spiritual truth has served as a real lifeline during difficult periods of church history. In fact, I think this is a spiritual truth that we need to hear today. As I’m sure all of you know, numerically-speaking, Christianity in the United States has been on a steady, gradual decline over the past five or six decades. Considering our own denomination, for example, the high point numerically for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) occurred in 1958. The peak for most other denominations was roughly the same period of time. The reasons for this gradual decline lie beyond the scope of a short sermon—although it is possible to explore these reasons, and more importantly, what can be done to counter them. But in a short sermon I merely point to this sad fact of church life today because too many Christians I encounter believe that “the glory days” lie in the past, the present is depressing, and the future looks downright bleak. (Sounds like a Bruce Springsteen song, doesn’t it?)

This parable teaches us not to be so resigned to the current state of affairs. When it comes to the redemptive activity of God in the world, God is downright intractable. God never gives up. God’s work may not be as apparent in America today as it was in, say, the 1950s—but God is still at work in the world. What is needed is for the church to wake up to that redemptive activity.

This is not the first time the church in America has needed an awakening, a rebirth. Perhaps you recall reading in your American History classes about the First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s, or the Second Great Awakening from about 1800 to the 1840s, or the Third Great Awakening from the 1860s to the opening decades of the 20th century, or the brief Fourth Awakening following the end of World War II to 1960? Perhaps a Fifth Awakening lies in the not too distant future. I believe it does, but it will require the church to wake up to what God is attempting to do in our own time. What new work is God initiating? Will we join God in that new work, or will we keep looking back wistfully to “the glory days” of old, lamenting the present state of the church?

If last week’s parable taught us that God is an extravagant sower, this week’s parable teaches us that nothing can ultimately stop the intractable activity of God.

And that is today’s good news. Amen.

¹ *Emily Dickinson* (1830-1886)

² An anonymous contributor called "Tinker" (<http://www.voy.com/108142/34.html>)

³ Walter Chalmers Smith, "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" (1867).