

I remember the first time I ever watched the movie *Titanic* through from beginning to end. Back in the day, this lengthy cinematic masterpiece was only available on two separate VHS tapes because of how much space it took up. The movie came out when I was pretty young, so for a long time I was only permitted to watch the first VHS tape, the first half of the movie, where we meet Jack and Rose and all the characters in their separate yet joined worlds, and experience the incredible beauty of the set and people and costumes. I knew what happened to the Titanic in a detached sort of way that was easier to handle, that the boat hit an iceberg and a ton of people died and it was a giant tragedy that no one expected. The second VHS tape is where these really tragic parts of the Titanic story came to life.

I watched the whole movie through for the first time with a friend and her mom in high school, and I absolutely positively sobbed my eyes out as I watched that second VHS tape part of the movie. Actually seeing the experiences of the characters we grew to know and love over the course of the film - from the couple holding each other as the boat flooded to the people below decks who had no means of escape to Jack not getting on that door - made the tragedy so much more alive and real to me. It was that personal connection with the characters, the people, seeing how this event was either the end of their story or simply a tragic chapter within it, that made the tragic nature of the Titanic event more real. It wasn't just a big boat accident that happened almost a hundred years ago anymore, it was a defining, heart wrenching event for thousands of people.

Stories have incredible power to unite us in a common experience and help us to see the humanity in one another like few other things in life do. Jesus knew this power, this way of uniting and getting at deeper and more human parts of what he was preaching and teaching about, and often used stories, called parables, in his ministry.

In our Gospel today, it ends with this verse: "With many such parables, Jesus spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it."

Oftentimes the parables and metaphors can seem more confusing for us than just simple statements from Jesus, like God so loved the world. Peace, be still. Repent, and believe the good news.

But parables, instead of confusing us, are actually a way to communicate something deeper about our faith, about the kingdom of God, about who God and Jesus truly are. They're more visceral and comprehensive. That experience of a story gets to something deeper that words alone can't always access. It's the whole idea of showing, and not telling. Jesus shows us what the kingdom of heaven is like in the parables we read today, rather than simply telling us what it is or what it's like.

I don't think that the stories, parables, or words of Jesus are meant to have one simple meaning for one static time or place. Stories stay with us, shape us, and inform us, long after we've completed hearing, seeing, or reading them. The initial telling of the story is perhaps the seed that is planted, and the way it influences us is the growing of the fruit over time. We understand things more as we take time and tending and consideration for them.

So what seeds of stories are planted in your hearts and minds these days? What stories do you hear, do you tell yourself, do you ponder in your heart?

The parables today are about the kingdom of heaven using stories about seeds - the process of someone harvesting a scattered seed that they initially forgot about, and the process of the mustard seed growing and thriving.

Oftentimes we think of the kingdom of heaven as a destination, the place to which we go once we have died, to join with God and Jesus in some place we've not yet seen. But, the very first proclamation Jesus gives us in the Gospel of Mark (after he is baptized) is "the kingdom of heaven has come near. Repent. Believe the good news."

So when Jesus teaches and gives us parables about the kingdom of heaven, it's not simply the heavenly place in which we will dwell with our beloveds once we have passed on. No, the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus, in his ministering, in his teaching and healing and being

human and divine brings the joys of the kingdom of heaven near. To his disciples then. And to us, here and now.

The kingdom of heaven is also like these seeds. A seed that might get forgotten about but then still grows over time and has enough inherent strength and wisdom within its bounds to create and grow something bountiful and worth harvesting. A seed that is so tiny and insignificant that you could never imagine how big and useful it could grow into, providing not only the intended fruit but also the sheltering place for birds and their nests, creation supporting creation in a new and life-saving way.

The lessons we can take from these stories are not just simple directions given to us by God or Jesus. There are times where that is needed and helpful, of course, like the 10 commandments or the powerful Lord's Prayer which Jesus himself taught us how to pray. But embracing the fact that there is more than just the words, more than just the surface, more than a simple expectation in this kingdom of heaven, is an incredible gift. There is always more to discover and learn not only about Christ Jesus or the kingdom of God or even God himself in the parables, but also about how to live and be in relationship with our fellow people, how to exist in a way that is loving and glorifies God in this world, how to indeed bring the kingdom of heaven even closer.

Sometimes, just like these seeds we need some time to figure things out. We need some time and space to listen and learn and let the seeds of stories germinate within us. We need some tending, some seeking, some genuine care in order to grow. Especially when we are learning new things about new people, situations and things that are entirely new to us, we need some time to work through it - to do the hard and holy work of both making use of the energy within us and the necessary parts of the outside world. It's vulnerable, the work of growing upwards and stronger and bearing good fruit. And that's okay. The kingdom of heaven is like these holy journeys of growing for the sake of bearing fruit, and the fruit we bear may look very different from what we are used to or expect.

And friends, we are never alone in that need for time to let stories grow and change within us. Even the disciples had Jesus explain everything to them in private after the public nature of providing parables.

The way these last two verses are written in the Message, a biblical translation/interpretation done in the modern way of speaking, read as such:

“With many stories like these, Jesus presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.”

Even the people closest to Jesus needed that support and time to do this holy work of growing and learning in the name of Christ.

So let's give ourselves and each other some patience as we work out the tangles and untie the knots. Let's be open to the stories and experiences both of Jesus and of our fellow people, especially people whose stories are very different from our own, leaning on the guidance of Christ to support us in our growing and learning. We gain so much more and bear so much more good fruit when we truly take the time to listen, to ponder, to do the hard and holy work of growing. You never know what good fruit can be borne of this growing from the seeds of stories that are planted, and it may just be that good fruit which brings God's kingdom of love, grace, justice, and joy closer each and every day. Thanks be to God, Amen.