

In our Gospel today Jesus tells the parable of the sower. This is one of Jesus more well-known parables, one I think many of us would say we understand or at least we think we do. The sower scatters the seeds willy-nilly some landing in the path where the birds eat them, others in the rocks where they begin to grow but are scorched by the sun, some are choked out by the weeds and finally some fall in good soil and produce.

Our notoriously thick headed disciples, as usual, don't seem to get it and Jesus finds it necessary to explain the meaning behind this parable, he explains that the seeds represent those who hear the word of the kingdom and how they react to it determines their path in life. Some have the word snatched away by the evil one, and are lost to it, some receive it gladly but when they are persecuted or have to stand up for the word, they turn away from it.

Some are lured by wealth and the cares of the world, away from the word. Finally, there are those who hear the word of the kingdom and understand it, and through their understanding of it they are able to spread its message up to a hundredfold.

What I would like to explore with you today is just what this word of the kingdom Jesus speaks to us about might be and just who it is for. Many Christians will tell us that this word of the kingdom can be found in the Bible, more specifically in the Gospel. In the opening of John's Gospel we hear that in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. I am going to step out on a limb here and say what Jesus means by the word of the kingdom in his parable, is God's kingdom here on earth. Or more precisely our faith or belief in this kingdom of God. Pretty simple so far, but is this word of the kingdom found in Christian scriptures the only path to God?

Or can this path be found elsewhere as well, perhaps in the scriptures of others beliefs, words that in the end mean the same to each person or faith tradition seeking a pathway to the Kingdom of God, only told through a cultural lens we as Christians have never looked through. For instance think about how the Jewish culture interprets the Hebrew Scriptures without all the foreshadowing of Jesus we as Christians want to read into the story. To Jews it is “their” story, the story of their nation, their culture and their God. It is the story of their growing relationship with God as they grow closer and closer to this word of the kingdom. What about the Bhagavad Gītā of the Hindus, or the Muslim’s Quran, or the words attributed to Buddha in the Pali Canons. Can we say these are not the word of God or that our Christian scriptures carry more weight than any of these Holy writings?

More importantly can we deny that they are alternative paths to the same God? I believe these scriptures are all saying the same thing but in ways that speak to those who follow these different paths. In Matthew's Gospel we hear, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets." In Buddhist scriptures we hear, "Treat not others in ways that you would find hurtful." Or this from Hinduism, "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." In the Sacred writings of Taoism we find, "Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbors loss as your own loss." Or from Sikism, "I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all." Or these words from Islam, "Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself."

Or perhaps my favorite, these words from Judaism, “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is just commentary.”

Unless I am crazy it sounds to me like all these words, are saying the same thing, something our Baptismal Covenant in our own Book of Common Prayer calls us to do, “to strive for justice and peace among all people, and Respect the dignity of every human being.” (SLOW DOWN)

I am spending this summer, as many of you know, doing my Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE, at the UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento. I am learning what is to be a Chaplain in a hospital by, well, being a Chaplain in a hospital for a couple of months. One lesson I am experiencing loud and clear is that there is no room for religious elitism among the doubt, worry, and fear found in a hospital environment.

It is in these times of despair that it is my responsibility as a Chaplain to help guide a person back to their God, however it is they understand God. In order to be that guide I have spent hours in diversity training, learning about the traditions, customs and cultures of numerous different nationalities, cultures and religions. During this training many of the myths and misunderstandings we have developed over the years with each other as fellow seekers of the Kingdom of God, have been dispelled for me, and I am beginning to see the truth about what these different people have to say about themselves and what they believe. One of the things I have learned that has really had an impact on how I view the world around me now is,/ that even though our differences can be scary and uncomfortable in the beginning,/ if we take the time to learn why people believe as they do,/ we will find that we have more in common than we realized before.

For example, did you know that Muslim's have four sacred books? Do you know what they are? The Torah, the Book of Psalms, the New Testament and the Quran. The first thing that came to my mind when I learned this was that Muslims are familiar with all of our Christian scripture yet how many Christians have ever attempted to open a Quran. Muslims also believe in God's prophets, many who should be very familiar to us. in Chap. 21 of the Quran it states, "Say, O Believers: We believe in One God, and in all that has been sent down to us in the Quran: and in all that has been sent down to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob and to the prophets of the Tribes of Israel: and in all that was given to Moses and to Jesus; and in all that was given to all the other prophets from their Lord. We do not differentiate in Faith between any of them. Thus are we Muslims, in willing submission to God alone."

When we break through all the myths and misinformation and take a little time to discover the truth about different religions and cultures we knock down those walls that separate us from each other. When this happens the “other” becomes our neighbor, through understanding and education we begin to see that we are all working toward making the kingdom of God happen here on earth, we’re all simply going about it a little differently, we are all following the path God has laid out for us, different paths all heading in the same direction towards a kingdom full of the love and grace of God.

I have sticker on my coffee mug that states “The road to world peace is religious tolerance.” If you Google tolerance you will find that some people believe that tolerance means to give up or hide your beliefs in order to achieve the goal of harmony and unity. There are such quotes as “tolerance is the virtue of a man without convictions.” Tolerance does not mean that we should all be the same or hide our own beliefs to keep harmony.

In his book, "In Living Color, An intellectual Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling," Emmanuel Lartey discusses this tie between tolerance and harmony in these words, "Harmony does not imply uniformity any more than a harmonious melody can be played using a single note. It is the very fact of diversity and difference of view that makes harmony or unity possible. The pastoral function lies in the active and creative search for means to bring people together in ways that are respectful of their differences." Personally I have learned that I need to put my personal beliefs aside for a moment while pastoring to others at the hospital. This doesn't mean that I abandon my beliefs, I believe with my whole heart that Jesus Christ is my path to God, and I make no excuses for my belief. But when I am faced with a person who is of a different faith or who does not share my personal theology, I attempt to find that common ground where we can be with God for a moment without all the baggage and prejudices of our separate traditions.

Voltaire said over two hundred years ago, “What is tolerance? It is the consequence of humanity. We are all formed of frailty and error; let us pardon reciprocally each other’s folly, that is the law of nature.”

Tolerance is trying to understand other’s beliefs and cultures, their practices and traditions, without sharing or even accepting them. It is to be content that in the long run we are all working toward the same thing to make the kingdom of God a reality.

Jesus said, “. . . as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Quoting Voltaire once more, who said back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “Of all religions, the Christian should of course inspire the most tolerance, but until now Christians have been the most intolerant of all men.” I am sad to say there are still people in the world who believe precisely this about Christians. The good news is that we can change this perception of us as Christians. As our world shrinks smaller and smaller every day, and as we come in contact more and more often with people of other faith traditions and cultures we need to remember we are all on the same

journey, we all, I think, have the same goal, to make this planet the kingdom of God here and now. We accomplish this by nurturing those whose seed is in the good soil helping them to learn about each other while respecting each other's beliefs and traditions. We as Christians need to live into Jesus' call for us to love our neighbors. Always searching for that common ground between us that will help each of us see that we are loved and cherished by a God who does not see, Muslim or Christian, Jew or Buddhist, but sees us all as her children. I have found that many times the common ground we are searching for is usually prayer. Even people who have no faith life what-so-ever realize the value of prayer. When I take a person's hand who is barely hanging on to life and we pray for comfort and courage in the days to come, the world disappears and there is just us and God. It is in these quiet moments with God that his healing takes place. So now, if you feel comfortable with it, I would like you all to take someone's hand as we invite God to join us in a moment of healing. Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, we lift up to you today our broken hearts, broken because of our intolerance towards those we do not understand. We ask you to forgive us and to open these same hearts and minds, to understand those we do not understand, and to help us to find the common ground we need to make this world a better place for all of humankind. Help us to understand that diversity is a blessing from you and teach us to respect and honor it. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.