

HUNDREDFOLD
Sermon for Pentecost 6A (Proper 10)—Mt 13:1-9, 18-23
LPC, 7/16/17

Last week I happened to read a homily by a professor of theology called Dr. Julia Upton. Dr. Upton is a Catholic sister who lectures on “Global Spirituality.” She says that she begins such lectures by asking her audience how many of them daydream about what it will be like “when the world lives at peace.” As of the writing of the homily, she said she has yet to get a positive response to that question.

By contrast, when she next asks her audience how many have spent time imagining “what nuclear war might do to the world,” many people respond. Upton says she worries that what people consider imaginable, i.e. nuclear holocaust, could possibly be more likely to happen than what they consider unimaginable, namely, world peace.

I am not sure about her assumption that the pre-imagined is more likely to happen than the unimagined, but I share Dr. Upton’s concern that human beings, especially Christian human beings, seem to spend so little time and energy imagining the possibility of peace. That peaceful relationships are possible is the Christian message, Dr. Upton says, “But how can we live in peace if we have given it all up as hopeless before we’ve even begun?”

Dr. Upton’s little exercise of the two questions draws us up short. As Christians we are supposed to be people of hope. We are supposed to be apostles of hope, sharing a hopeful gospel with a needy world. But if, as Upton posits, the probability of disaster holds precedence in our minds over God’s promise of the world’s redemption, we are giving the Christian hope short shrift.

The preeminence of disaster over hope is, of course, enforced by the culture around us, especially through the media. There are at least two reasons for this. Negativity sells. Would you subscribe to a newspaper or webpage whose recurring headline read “Another Great Day—everything good and normal!”? (I don’t know ... maybe at this point some of us would welcome non-news like that....)

But commercial interests are not the only reason bad news dominates. There is also a biological reason. Apparently the human brain is hard-wired to give precedence to the negative. This finding was presented at a clergy wellness seminar I attended a couple of weeks ago, and I later confirmed it in a *Scientific American* article. Logically enough, being alert to what is threatening at the expense of what is soothing naturally enhances survival in the human species. If we’re walking in the woods, we are going to notice a fierce growl over a trilling birdsong.

This sharpened awareness of negative phenomena is not confined to life-threatening situations. We all know that if twenty people say nice things to us throughout the day and one person is nasty to us, the comments that keep us awake that night are going to be the unkind ones.

We are bombarded by bad news. We are preprogrammed by survival mechanisms to focus on the negative. Add to this that there is plenty of evidence of badness around us. Now of

course none of wants to be an ostrich, with our head in the sand, blithely ignoring how far our world falls short of the redeemed cosmos we believe, as Christians, was intended by God. To close our eyes to evil and suffering is also to neglect our calling as followers of Jesus.

But as followers of Jesus we must also not fail to nurture and commend the hope that is in us. Please turn to page 861 of your Prayer Book and read what is on the bottom of the page: “The Christian to hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world.”

Dr. Upton challenges us to ask ourselves: are we living with confidence in newness and fullness of life, awaiting the coming of Christ in glory, or are we focused on everything that is bad, expecting the catastrophe that surely awaits if the world continues on its current trajectory? It is clear from scripture which of those two attitudes is appropriate for the follower of Jesus. Today’s scripture lesson from Matthew is a case in point.

Today we hear the Parable of the Sower. Jesus tells of a person sowing seed profligately and indiscriminately on all kinds of ground, both good and bad. Naturally enough, what falls on beaten earth fails even to germinate. What falls among rocks or weeds sprouts briefly but fails to thrive. What falls on tilled and fertilized soil not only prospers but generates a preternaturally huge return. To me, a thirty-fold yield seems generous, and one hundred-fold seems unthinkable.

Jesus later makes clear that the seed represents the word of the kingdom: Jesus’ gospel of love and forgiveness, peace, hope and redemption. The different kinds of soil represent people who hear this gospel and either bear fruit or don’t.

Most of us hear this story and immediately wonder what kind of soil Jesus would consider us to be, based on how well our lives have yielded the fruit of the kingdom. This, if we’re honest, is a discouraging thing to do, because few of us can claim a generous harvest from our life in Christ. How many people have you brought to Christ, or, to put it in less evangelical terms, how many people have seen the kingdom of God through you? 100? 60? 30? One?

Fortunately, analyzing the quality of the soil we represent based on our kingdom productivity is beside the point of Jesus’ lesson here. The parable of the sower is primarily about God and God’s kingdom, not so much about us. This parable is in fact about the inevitable triumph of God’s kingdom despite all the evidence we see to the contrary.

That evidence of course abounds. We see God’s goodness falling on unreceptive soil. We see signs of goodness that thrive briefly and die. This can be discouraging. This can enforce our natural tendency to focus on the negative.

What we as Christians must not neglect to do is remember that the ultimate fate of the world is in God’s hands, that God’s purpose is cosmic redemption and that God will not fail in this purpose. God will, in fact, multiply each bit of kingdom goodness thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. Believing this is called faith. Keeping it in mind despite setbacks is called hope. Living as if it is true is called love.