

Beyond the Parable
Philippians 4.1-13
October 12, 2014
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Early Thursday evening, Nathan and I snuck away for a couple of days together. We hid amidst the tourists in the French Quarter. We ate and ate, we walked, we gawked, we talked about architecture, we listened to each other, we slept in, we did a little work on our laptops, and we did a little reading beside a rooftop pool. It was brief but beautiful. The sort of rest and break from routine that so many of us crave and long to work into our weekly routines.

I sat in that place of rest and tried to hear another of Jesus' parables speak to me, speak to us, but the words fell flat when held against what my soul craved in those days of quiet. As a result, I'm stepping away from Matthew this morning. We've spent three weeks in vineyard parables, and today's Gospel text is of the banquet no one seems to want to attend. It's a dense, dark parable that requires a good bit of unpacking, and I found myself rejecting it with each reading. It is not that you and I are incapable of doing the smart wrestling that a complex text requires, but there are days when the word we need is one of holy pause. Sometimes the parables help us to understand a concept in a new way, but strung together in a long row they can become too much. They can be so packed with nuance and history that they are too far removed from today's life. Our eyes glaze over and we stop hearing what they have to tell us because our minds are already so full when we take our seat in this room. More often we crave a word that grabs us in the here and now.

I know this when I look at what people are reading right now. The New York Times Bestseller list is currently topped by the usual novels and autobiographies, books on success and how to cook. But some of the most popular titles people are purchasing and downloading have to do with living well: *The Best Yes: Making Wise Decisions in the Midst of Endless Demands*; *The Conscious Parent: Transforming Ourselves, Empowering our Children*; *The Way of Serenity: Finding Peace and Happiness in the Serenity Prayer*, and Gary Chapman's *5 Love Languages* is still going strong after all these years with over 4,300 reviews on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) as he promises *The Secret to Love that Lasts*.

We want to know how to make this life work. We want to get it right. We want to make better choices, love more fully, live more simply. We want to make sense of our schedules, our fears, our heavy hearts.

Thinking and processing and sitting with questions is good work, particularly for a congregation that values intellectual curiosity in the way St. Charles does. But we do not *think* our lives, we *live* our lives. Our days are spent doing and being. All of these lessons from the parables that teach us something about who God is and who we are invited to be ultimately have everything to do with how we live. So we're stepping beyond the parable today and into Paul's letter to the Philippians.

In the vineyard parables of the last three weeks we looked at some foundational truths. If the kingdom of God is like these stories, as Jesus teaches in Matthew, then we understand the vineyard is God's, we're all invited to participate in God's work, and God will be extravagantly generous with us. God is the source of all things. God is at work in this world and wants us to be partners in that work—it's a gardening, growing, cultivating kind of work. And in God's mysterious way, there is reward enough for all of us.

What does that mean in real terms, though? God is mystery, God is the source of all things, God invites us into God's work. How does that impact how we live and act? What happens next? What do we do with this information?

Paul's answer is in the living. As Paul writes to the church at Philippi, he is describing ordinary ways of doing God's work by instructing them in living out the faith as a people. He knew that all members of those early faith communities must work from a shared foundation. Speaking first to the church leaders: continue to focus on what you hold in common. Some interpreters have assumed these church leaders were not getting along and needed to be reminded to put aside their differences, but other letters of that same era would have used this phrasing to highlight what is already being done well and should continue. Continue to be of the same mind, agree, work in harmony, and put aside your differences. And he urges others to support the women leading the church. What does it look like to do work that honors God? Find ways to partner, collaborate, move forward as one. Focus on the essential things you hold in common and not the minor details that might divide you.

To everyone listening, Paul reminds us that the work God calls us to is rooted in joy. Living into God's way will have an impact on the way we live as people. According to John's Gospel, Jesus said, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (John 15:16). The pervasive gardening and farming images in scripture help us get at the idea that God is cultivating something in us. Living in God's way bears fruit—there is some kind of transformational result in real time.

According to today's epistle, God's work in us looks like joy. It looks like peace. When we are living into God's hopes for us, our lives are marked by gratitude. Instead of giving into worry and fear, we release our anxiety (alone and together) in prayer. God desires to replace our anxiety with an abiding sense of peace that is beyond circumstance and beyond human understanding.

To get to this place of joy, to welcome the peace of God, Paul reminds his friends to look around and see what is already good. In our individual stories and in the life of any community, there is always something falling apart, breaking down, giving us pain or making us afraid. Do not let that be what fills your mind, writes Paul. Instead, fill your minds with beauty and truth.

Meditate on whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is good, whatever is virtuous and praiseworthy. Keep to the script: whatever you learned and received and heard and saw in me—do it—and the God of peace will walk with you.

Cultivating joy, gratitude, mutuality, and peace are practices rooted in daily routines. God walks this way alongside us just as we walk it together.

As a congregation in a season of discernment in renewal, we run the risk of having too many conversations with an undercurrent of anxiety. We must make future plans and discuss where we feel God is leading us. However, if our planning is not rooted, if our dreaming does not come from a shared understanding of who God is and who God has called us to be, then it may be that far too often we aren't talking about things that really matter to any of us. Is that harsh? Sit with it for a minute. What do we think about and talk about and crave in our private lives? What do we think about and talk about and crave as a community of faith here? Is there overlap? or disconnect?

When we spend significant time talking about the future (how will we pay for it? who else will join us? what's our strategy to get there?), the danger is that we become so focused on what has not yet happened that we are no longer present to what is already before us. We risk missing what God is presently doing. We risk forgetting the beauty of this place and of this moment. And if it goes too far, and we are living entirely in the future, then our minds become filled with algorithms and strategies to secure that certain future. And when we are anxiously running after our *own* dreams or someone *else's* dream, then we start to look at each other as commodities to help us get what we want. Who among us can help us secure that future and who are those who may be a liability? See the danger? If we don't move from a shared place of joy, gratitude, and partnership in God's work, then we are on a failing mission. Before tomorrow comes,

we must first be concerned with starting from a place of mutuality and community that reflects the ways of God's kingdom, rejoicing together in what is good and naming what makes us deeply grateful.

And ultimately, both for today and for tomorrow, we gather here because we are seeking a way of sharing our lives with each other. We don't want to be commodities, we want to be known. We don't want to be more worried about even more things we don't have and can't control, we want to feel God's presence and peace. We want to know that someone sees us and hears us and loves us in this present moment. The things we are about, the things we cultivate in this garden, should be intimately connected to our every day lives and concerns, not altogether removed.¹

We're at the place in our church year when we start talking about budgets and committees and planning for the year ahead, but we absolutely must do so with the understanding that we move from a shared foundation. We start with joy. We start with gratitude. We honor our partnership here as workers in a common field. We understand that God is the source of all things, and we challenge each other to return to that source as it works its way into our lives.

Continue to stand firm. Continue to agree and work together. Continue to rejoice in what is good. Continue to name all of the people and activities and surprises around you that are pure gift. Continue to thank God for being present yet mysterious, drawing us together and walking with us, the source of peace and the source of thoughtful challenge. Continue to return to prayer when your mind tries to speed through to a certain future. Continue to cultivate practices of meditative reflection so that you remain delightfully aware of the beauty in this present moment.

Then the things that we do, the future plans we make, come out of that rooted place. And as Paul's letter continues, we may find that the end results of that future do not matter quite as much as the benefits of cultivating these practices along the way. He writes:

Since you have not had the opportunity to show how much you cared until now, *I want you to know how it touched me.* **11** I am not saying this because I am in need. I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances. **12** I know how to survive in tight situations, and I know how to enjoy having plenty. In fact, I have learned how to face any circumstances: fed or hungry, with or without. **13** I can be content in any and every situation through the One who is my power and strength.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/10/what-do-we-talk-about-at-church/>