

Matthew 13 sermon: Hidden and Revealed

Recently I heard a news story about a disease lab in South Africa where the Omicron variant was first discovered. The next lab where it was confirmed was in Botswana. They sounded the alarm across the world that a new and dangerous variant was already spreading. This lab operates with highly trained South African scientists, who believe that their contributions to the global response to diseases, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, should be noticed and taken seriously. As the journalist and scientists continued to tell their story, my heart smiled. I felt not only gladness about what they've already offered to the world, but also hope. Hope that the world might be able to see this contribution and show proper respect and move further out of negative stereotypes about Africa.

Sometimes hope flows easily and lightly. When things look like they will go in a favorable manner for us, hope is like lifting a 3 lb. hand weight.

But sometimes, hope feels more like lifting a 15 lb. hand weight. Or a 25 lb. hand weight. Things don't look favorable. We fear our expectations won't be met. We'll be disappointed. Or hurt.

In our Matthew Scripture reading, we heard about seeds and yeast.

Seemingly small and insignificant in and of themselves. Unassuming and useless until put into the right conditions. When we put yeast or sourdough starter into flour and water and have the right temperature, maybe we don't actually need a lot of hope. We know that this will make that dough rise and we can add other tasty ingredients and bake it into yummy bread. Maybe that's a 3 lb hope.

And if that seed drops onto fertile ground and gets the right amount of moisture and sunshine at the right temperature, then we can be pretty sure it will grow into a plant. With the plant, as someone who grew up gardening and has recently taken it up again, I see the success of that seed as being a bit more precarious than the sourdough, where I can control the elements much better.

What if I plant it too shallow, or too deep? What if there is a late frost? Or an early frost? What if it's too dry and the chlorinated city water I pour on my plants doesn't do it? What if the nemesis of every gardener—weeds-- overtake my garden?

Hidden and revealed. How many of you can relate to the dilemma of wanting to do everything you can to help your plants grow and then you see that weed that is millimeters away from your precious tomato plant? You know if you leave it, it won't be good for the tomato plant. But if you pull it, you risk damaging the roots of the plant that may be entwined with the roots of the weed.

In the end, I do my part and I HOPE that the seed will grow and flourish and that a harvest will come. This feels more like a 15 lb hope.

Jesus talks about this mustard seed that grows into a bush that provide a hospitable place for birds to nest. IN the Psalm 84 passage we read about the Temple being similarly hospitable for humans and birds. And in the Temple, even the sparrow and the swallow have founds homes.

They can build nests and raise their young in safety and security. This is a place of shelter and refuge! This psalm was written as a pilgrimage song to prime the pump for praise as they anticipated perhaps the highlight of their lives—making it to the Temple of the Lord of hosts—Yhwh zebaoth. Imagine how this vision inspired pilgrims en route to Jerusalem through the hot and dusty paths and the longing they felt to get there already! Are we there yet?

However many centuries after this Psalm was first written, in your mind's eye, can't you see Jesus sitting with his disciples in the village and seeing wheat, weeds, mustard plants, and women baking bread. And he thought, Aha! Maybe if I talk about things they understand from daily life and compare them to more abstract realities about what God's hospitable home is like, they'll understand! So something hidden will be revealed.

In the first half of life, it was natural for me and I suspect many of you, to read these parables and the sayings of Jesus and imagine the

kingdom of God as some kind of utopia. Where if we all just “got it” we could live this amazing life of healing and hope. Of wholeness. Isn't that what the Gospel is after all? An invitation to wholeness in all areas of life? But then we read this pesky parable about the wheat and the weeds. You mean to tell me that the weeds can't just be yanked out so that my tomato plant can grow uninhibited? You mean I have to tolerate this thing that could cut back the fruit of the plant or worse-case scenario, actually overtake and kill my plant? What?

It's easy to blame our culture, blame our politicians, blame people close to us and even ourselves, for the weeds that Jesus was talking about.

And then to find out that your enemy is the one who came along and planted all those weeds in your garden!?! Are you kidding me?

Shouldn't we yank those things out and let that neighbor know there's retribution coming?

What to do with the weeds? So what is the invitation that Jesus offers us? What has been hidden that is yet to be revealed?

Please hear me clearly that I am not insinuating that some people are wheat and some people are weeds. No that is not what I'm saying. I'm thinking more in terms of vices and virtues. The fruit of the spirit vs the opposite. And if we're honest, we're all kind of a tangle of weeds and wheat in ourselves!

While we wait, what gives us hope in this precarious season? To my ears, it sounds like Jesus is giving us an invitation to a radical trust that in time, the weeds and the wheat will get sorted. It will become clear which is which. The dough will rise. The mustard seeds that have the right conditions will flourish. The harvest is coming.

That harvest will include new seeds—some for enjoying right now, as in ground mustard and tomato sauce. Some to be saved for the next season and planted when the time is right.

Fellowship of Hope seems to me to be in the season of harvest. The life of this community has sown seeds of faith, hope, justice that continue to bear fruit across generations and across communities. And there are

seeds that are in your hands, which you are holding and wondering what to do with. Where should they be planted? When should they be planted? Who should do the planting? Who will do the watering, the watching, the hoping and the harvesting next time around? How many seeds do we enjoy and consume now?

My role as transitional pastor is to ask questions, to listen, and to walk with you as a non-anxious presence as you discern what to do with these seeds in your hands.

May God give us all hope and the grace for the hidden and the revealed and living in the tension between the two.

Pastor Sharon