

Rebranding Reality

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (July 16) 2023

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Ordination is the church putting its hands on your head saying, "Tell us what's real."

-Walter Brueggemann

This morning I want us to talk about our imagination. Ultimately, when all is said and done, that's what the church is about: imagination. It's what the gospel is about. It is what we do here every Sunday morning in worship – being reminded that the reality of God, the kingdom, the Way in Christ is all about how things might be different from how they are.

As the homeless man told me in the basement of a church shelter in Atlanta years ago, "The good news is that it doesn't have to be like this."

That means there are no givens, no nonnegotiable facts about our lives and our world that we must accept other than the gospel of Christ (see Sam Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, p. 15).

So, when someone says, "You Austin Heights' people need to get real." Or "The real world says that there is a cost to doing business and some people will lose." Or "In Washington and Austin we're dealing with the real world," our response might be, "Who says? Who says that's what's real?"

I once heard the great biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann tell a group of clergy, “Ordination is the church putting its hands on your head saying, ‘Tell us what’s real.’”

For those of us in the community of Christ, what’s real is the gospel of Christ. Everything else is up for grabs. Everything else can be imagined to be different because of the resurrection of Jesus.

The parables of Jesus are all about helping us see differently. Nurturing in us an alternative imagination shaped by the gospel so we can see the reality of God instead of the “reality” given to us by Washington, Austin, Wall Street, or Madison Avenue.

In our world right now, it seems what’s real is hatred and bigotry and fear and this so-called realism says that the only way to get things done in such a world is by violence and power. Yet we gather on Sunday mornings saying otherwise. We gather to hear God to say to us, let’s imagine differently.

In therapy we might say, “Let’s re-narrate this story that has been given to us – no matter if it is the story given to us by our parents, by genetics or health, by our job, or by our society, or by our culture and history. The grace and mercy of Christ enables us to learn to tell the story differently – re-narrate. Let’s imagine how it could be different and then we live into that different story.

In marketing we might say, “Let’s rebrand.” You know what rebranding is. It’s the act of repackaging and renaming a product to make it more appealing.

For example, I’ve read about the renaming of prunes to “dried plums.” And because we’re learning more about our racism, the Washington Redskins professional football team was rebranded the Washington Commanders. Did you

know that several years ago there was a new search engine company called Backrub? Someone said they needed to rebrand, and they came up with a new name, Google. FreeDiskSpace.com became MySpace.com, Diet Deluxe was rebranded Healthy Choice, Radar ovens became known as Microwave ovens. Facebook has famously been changed to Meta. Tinder was originally Matchbox, and get this, Amazon was first called Cadabra.

We all know that much of rebranding is a marketing ploy to get us to buy their product. But go deeper with me this morning. Rebranding is a way for us to see and imagine differently, and sometimes, like re-narrating, and reimagining – we see something we’ve never seen before. Or perhaps even, we say, “Ah! Now, I’m seeing what’s real!”

This morning’s Gospel reading is from Matthew 13 and is the beginning of a series of parables Jesus tells with agrarian themes. Let’s use our imagination this morning and see how rebranding or re-narrating might help us to see differently through this parable.

In chapter 12 Matthew tells us that Jesus has been busy. He has been healing people, growing crowds are following him, he heals a person possessed by a demon, but the Religious/Political Authorities are quick to discredit what Jesus does and accuse him of being the instrument of Evil. Many people are looking to Jesus but then they also turn to listen to the Religious/Political Authorities. People are confused, they don’t know who to listen to, some walk away, some stay. Jesus climbs up in a nearby boat along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and uses the boat as his pulpit while the crowd gathers to listen.

Engaging the imagination of the listeners, he says that farmer goes out to plant and scatters seed. Some seed falls on the road and birds eat it. Some fell on

gravel and among rocks, and though it sprouted quickly it could not put down roots and therefore under the blistering sun it all dries up and withers. Some fell among weeds and Bahia grass and was choked out. Yet, some seed fell on good soil and produced a harvest beyond the farmer's wildest dreams (Matthew 13:1-9).

A bit later, when Jesus is off with just his disciples, they ask him what all this means, and Jesus explains to them.

Sometimes people hear news of the kingdom but it's as if it falls on hardpan, it just remains superficial, so the Evil One comes along and easily snatches the seed away or convinces them that the Way of God is not real. Or perhaps the seed of the kingdom of God falls on gravelly, rocky soil and the tender plants shoot up with enthusiasm but when the emotions wear off, they wither away. Sometimes the seed falls among Bahia grass and gets choked out with old habits, busy-ness with other things like wanting more stuff and getting caught up in the rat-race. But every once in a while, seed falls on good ground and man, oh man, the seed just shoots up everywhere and the farmer ends up getting a greater harvest than he ever dreamed of (Matt. 13:18-23).

My friend Jason Byassee, who teaches at the Vancouver School of Theology at the University of British Columbia, remembers being in his youth group on a mission trip to inner city Boston. A tough, urban church pastor who worked with gang members, asked these suburban youth group kids after reading this parable, "What kind of soil are you?"

A great question. It has stayed with Jason all these years, and it's a question that I want you to ask yourself this morning. What kind of soil are you?

And no matter what kind of soil you think you are, let's remember that the farmer we have does not let that be the only word. Good farmers are always working on building good soil.

Wendell Berry said that he once had a particularly eroded hillside. All the good soil had been washed away over the years, but he went to work repairing it, renewing it. He said it took him 17 years to get it back to where it needed to be, to have good soil that produced good grass. After 17 years it was not as good as it once had been, but it was better than it had been for a long time.

So, I want you to remember this morning, no matter what kind of ground you think you are: rocky, infested with weeds, washed out and eroded, sunbaked and hard packed – that the farmer we have is working in you and among us.

Using our imagination this morning, perhaps we can see farm laborers working alongside the farmer. Besides sowing the seed, laborers are bent over pulling up weeds, getting their hands down in the rocky soil digging up rocks to make the soil better. Maybe they're tilling and breaking up the hardpan, pulling up vines and weeds. Their hands are dirty, scarred, raw, and cut, but they're working at making bad soil into good soil, doing the back breaking labor of getting whatever obstacles that inhibit the growth of grace and mercy, the love and joy God in our lives, out of the way. Part of the work of the church, part of your work in and through the church is showing up and helping create and nourish good topsoil in and for each other, and sometimes you have to work and get your hands dirty and raw. Sometimes your back aches, but you're not doing the hard work of church simply for yourself. You're working to help make good soil for your neighbors.

Gregory the Great, of the late sixth century, said that the good we do has no value if we fail to be patient with the evildoing of our neighbor.

In other words, God expects us to bear fruit but also God expects us to bear fruit surrounded by rocks and thorns and weeds. It takes backbreaking, hand injuring work.

I've told many times of my first congregation of the three elderly women who sat together on the second row for over 40 years. They quilted together at least once a week for all those years, as well. They were in Sunday School together and they showed up for everything, every week, and every Sunday for over 40 years. But they were also three completely different women with totally different personalities and characteristics. They were best friends who also got on each other's nerves, and did not always get along, and sometimes were mad at one another. Ms. Templeman was a big woman, outgoing, talkative with a laugh you could hear down the road. When she showed up at church potlucks, she brought big pans of food that would feed multitudes. Ms. Blair was quiet, delicate, and reticent, rarely laughed out loud, and would bring a simple jello salad for potlucks. Ms. Calhoun's personality was somewhere between the other two, and she tended to do her own thing. No matter the occasion and no matter how many people were expected at potlucks, she always brought a frozen pie from the grocery store. She didn't care much for cooking, reserving her attention for quilting. She was a meticulous organizer, was single-minded, and would grow impatient with Ms. Templeman who would rather stand and talk after church instead of getting to work on the quilts.

But Ms. Templeman told me once talking about Ms. Calhoun, partly with aggravation in her voice and partly with the love of working together for 40 years,

“You know what? That woman is going to make a Christian out of me.” I knew by experience, that all three women shared the same sentiment.

The church is the place where we bear fruit surrounded by rocks and thorns, our sisters and brothers in Christ, and where we’re rocks to other people. And we hope that God not only uses us to make Christians out of others but uses others to make Christians out of us, people who forgive as Jesus commands. For Wendell Berry it took 17 years of work to restore the soil on that hillside. For Dude Templeton, it was taking over 40 years of working and serving together with those two other ladies.

Church has all kinds of soil and conditions within one congregation. Forgiveness and patience produce the harvest.

Look, these last few years have taken its toll on us. The isolation of the pandemic was hard, and we are still learning that it hurt us more than we have realized. It hurt us as individual persons and hurt our particular families. And it hurt us as a church. We’ve lost church members and staff members, financial giving is way down, and we’ve been hurt by one another. So maybe it is time, we gave each other a break and decide to start fresh. Maybe it’s time for forgiveness and patience. We’re full of rocks and thorns and weeds yet there is also plenty of good seed and good soil. Let’s get to work clearing the rocks, making good soil together, and raise some good crops.

And more than anything else, remember who our farmer is! No matter what else you hear, what other narrations of this parable make sense to you, there’s one narration, one rebranding that I think is the most important. Who is the farmer and what kind of farmer is he?

I'm no expert on farming or gardening but I do think I'm safe by saying that most farmers or gardeners do not go out and throw seed everywhere. This farmer in the parable does just this very thing. He's slinging seed out on the road, on the sidewalk, over in the Bahia grass, on the hillside, and on and on. He's not meticulous, not scrupulous. He does not build fences and carefully outline the boundaries of his garden. He just flings seed everywhere, indiscriminately, extravagantly. He has volunteer squash growing out of the cracks in the sidewalk because that's where some seed landed. Over there next to the porch are some odd watermelons and there's some tomatoes sprouting up out under the porch swing. When you throw seed everywhere who knows where it'll land and what and where it will sprout?

We're tend to be different from this farmer. When we look at our farmland, perhaps we see rocks and weeds and hardpan. Years ago, I knew a pastor who complained about his own church saying, "Some congregations just are not good bottomland."

Sometimes we define the reality of our lives by what it's not. Or we define the reality of our lives by threat and fear. Lots of folks around us are scared and feel the need to build fences or walls, hunker down and bunker up. There are so many threats and changes, so much confusion and it is scary. So, many people fold their arms, get their guns, and get ready to fight or protect or defend.

Jesus tells us that God is like this farmer who does not stand on his front porch looking at his farm with his arms folded in defense. This farmer stands on the front porch and opens his arms wide at the wonderful opportunity to fling grace everywhere. Rather than allowing the problems or fears define his farming techniques, this farmer defines his farming by his grace and generosity. The real

world of this farmer is the gospel, not the bad soil or the hostile environment or the depressing circumstances. This farmer does not get up in the morning anxious. He gets up with joy and love, and a profound sense of grace.

So, part of what Jesus is inviting us to imagine is that God redefines, reimagines what's real. God and the gospel of Jesus is what's real and we are to learn to trust God more than we trust our fears.

Austin Heights, we have always been at our best when we remember who our farmer is and seek follow his example. This summer is hot, and people are anxious. Instead of reflecting anxiety back, let's remember our farmer and fling wide the joy and grace of the living Jesus.

Our farmer's hands are calloused and raw from working in difficult soil. Our farmer's hands have scars in them from nail prints and from never giving up on transforming bad soil to good, and never giving up on us.

So, we do the same. Spread some joy this morning and this week. Share hope and patience. Practice the life-transforming, generous grace of forgiveness. Pray for one another. And encourage each other. Write notes, pat on the shoulder, give a hug, shake a hand, and say something like, "You know, I never say anything, but I want you to know that you're doing a good job." Or "I'm grateful to God that you're in this church. You help me more than you know." You get the idea.

One of the founding, charter members of Austin Heights was Florence Decker. Wife of physicist Jack Decker, Florence was our church pianist and/organist for the first 25 years of this church's existence. Tall and beautiful, she was the very epitome of graciousness and quiet elegance. I remember the church

meeting and conversation we had in the early 1990's. Though we only had about 40 people in the church, we nonetheless were preparing to host a special service we were calling, "A Service of Prayer for Those Whose Lives Have Been Touched by AIDS," which would follow with a pot-luck supper. We didn't know for sure what to expect but we expected gay men and I.V. drug users with HIV/AIDS, and we had so many questions: What do I do if someone with HIV/AIDS sits next to me? Do we need to wear gloves and masks? Do we spray our chairs with Lysol? What can a person with AIDS eat? How do we help someone who has active AIDS? What if no one comes? What if a whole bunch comes? We were scared. Our church was barely surviving as it was, and to have a bunch of gay men or I.V. drug users in church in 1991 was not considered the best way to grow a church.

But God had called Barbara Cordell among us. An expert in HIV/AIDS, she and Joe had recently moved to Nacogdoches and come to Austin Heights and Barbara was able to answer all our questions and teach us how to care and what to cook and how to cook so we could serve people with AIDS.

Back and forth it went. The fear and nervousness were palpable. But toward the end, Florence Decker spoke. She was usually so quiet and gentle, so for her to speak was a rarity in a meeting. Everyone listened. "Well, I'll bring a chicken casserole and a pie. And I'll be here early to help greet everyone." Everyone looked at one another and nodded.

You know why she said that? She knew who our farmer was.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one True God, Mother of us all. Amen.