

Psalm 105:1-11, 45b
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
The Church of the Pilgrimage
July 27 2014

The Gospel Is

I thank God for being here today,
for being reunited with you, my faith community,
and for having this opportunity to share about my trip
with Heifer International
in light of Jesus teachings today,
his parables about the Kingdom of God.

A commentator for our scripture today helped me
in saying this about the many parables,
delivered
from Jesus to the disciples in such quick fashion:
“it is as though Jesus held it (the notion of the Kingdom of God)
up to the light, turned it as one turns a prism in the sun, and in these
stories told us what he saw. We listen, enjoy, and ponder.”

It was for that reason – the desire to listen, enjoy and ponder
that I did not check out scripture readings for today
before I left for Honduras.

I didn't want to be writing a sermon in my head
the minute we got off the plane.
I wanted to justexperience the trip....
See what I would see.....feel it, taste it, savor it....
be, as we say, fully present to the moments.

So it was with curiosity that early this week
I opened my bible to see the four prescribed texts,
to see what might be there to work with.
You know, sometimes the set texts of our common lectionary
the bible readings for each Sunday of the year leave you saying Huh?
You think about life around you, life in our world
and it's hard to find a connection.
Other times they are like BINGO
Exactly lively, exactly fruitful, exactly right –
Which was the case this week.

The psalm begins with words of praise to God,
Thanksgiving for all God has done.
With thanksgiving comes the underlying conviction that life is more
than random occurrences, or than the things

we are able to do or accomplish on our own.
The psalmist rejoices: God is active in our lives.

Which made an immediate connection to my recent experience
For as we toured the many Heifer supported projects
many people spoke with us.
Outside of homes, out in the fields,
at businesses – coffee and honey and cashew cooperatives,
at celebrations
over and over again people shared their stories,
their enthusiasm for Heifer and its work in their lives
and always, always they began what they had to say
with thanks
thanks to God for being here,
and for what we've been able to accomplish together.

And then....

He put before them another parable:
“the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone
took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds,
but when it has grown it is the greatest of all the shrubs
and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come
and make nests in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-33)

Could there be a better parable, a better word from Jesus mouth
For sharing with you today the things we saw, the things we
experienced?

On our first full day in Honduras we awoke early and traveled to the south
of Honduras, to Choluteca, an area that is south, close to the pacific ocean,
an area that is not as mountainous as the rest of Honduras,
a part of the country where there is salt production,
shrimp farms and, as with much of rural Honduras, sugar cane and coffee.
We went to a Passing on the Gift Ceremony,
something I will no doubt want to talk more about this fall
when there's time to do a presentation with photographs.
It was incredibly moving to see all these people who have
been participants in Heifer projects
passing along chickens and, in one case, a cow
to others who are new to the Heifer family –
and there were many speeches and a lunch that were part of it all.
After this midday event we walked to a farmer's project to see his land
and learn about his biodigester.
If you've never heard of such a thing a biodigester is a contraption that
costs about four hundred dollars to make, and is
essentially a long plastic sleeve that bakes in the sun,

baking a mixture of water and manure, that in turn produces methane which is then piped into the farmer's home for cooking gas.

This particular farmer (who was also a school teacher) had a lot happening at his farm – there were fruit trees, and sugar cane a mill for grinding sugar cane and making molasses a small nursery full of plants in various stages to feed his family and his livestock. This was a farm with some diversification, and by rural Honduran standards, this family was doing pretty well.

Later that same day we went to a cashew cooperative, where the business from nut in the shell to releasing the nut to roasting to packaging was done entirely by women, the women who owned the business, a business that was begun with Heifer funding and now runs entirely on its own.

And at the end of this long day, when we had already traveled so far, done so much visiting, seen so much when we were really sweaty and tired we were taken to yet another project, a very small project something that at the time felt like “really, one more thing?” It was a very small house down a long bumpy dirt road, a couple who lived with their two children. We stood by their family garden, no bigger than some backyard gardens you might see around here. We saw another biodigester, and had another demonstration of gas for cooking. I wondered if we did this visit because it had already been set up and it was best to honor the plan. It was hard not to picture the farm we had been at earlier, and see this one as so much less than.

But in a way, that was the point. Later that night, it was explained to us why we had fit in that last visit so late in the day. It had to do with how much Heifer can help a family over time. The first farm we had been to, the one that had so much going on, had been involved with Heifer for three years and was no longer receiving Heifer money or technical assistance. They had started new things, and they had already passed on the gift. The last family we visited was only six months into their time with Heifer. They had not yet moved from food scarcity to being able to feed themselves, or to overall sustainability.

They were just beginning, so not yet there.

By showing us two different projects at two different places in time
we were able to better see
what a difference Heifer is making in people's lives.

"The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed..."

You may know this already, but there are varieties of Mustard seed that produce
bushes that are eye height of a rider on horseback – pretty tall.
Amazingly huge when you think of how tiny the seed,
how miniscule the beginning.

On one of the first days I sat on the bus with a man named Bob.
Bob was the oldest of our group, a retired businessman who was,
as he said to me, "checking Heifer out."
He'd been a donor before, he and his wife
gave each other a Heifer goat at Christmas time,
but he was wondering if Heifer was really something he wanted
to commit himself to volunteer wise, now that he was
retired and looking for meaningful ways to use his time and energy.
Perhaps a skeptic by nature, perhaps just wanting to be sure it
was worth his while, he was here to find out.

But then we heard the stories.

We saw with our own eyes.

One young man began with 22 chickens.

In several years (he told us, proudly pointing to pictures
of his chickens and his eggs) he had two hundred chickens.

He took us to show us his flock.

He was able to Pass on the Gift, giving ten chickens to another
person eager to move toward greater food security.

Another woman went from being a woman in an abusive marriage
to a community leader, as well as a woman with a considerable
number of livestock and a fish farm from which to support her family.

I want to tell you today that Bob came home convinced.

Heifer is really changing lives.

Bob is sold. I am sold.

Heifer is bringing hope and encouragement in many places,
and most certainly in Honduras, the second poorest country in Central America.

Two things strike me about Jesus teachings today.

First, he uses such every day ordinary pictures to get a message across.

Look, he says, The kingdom of God is all around us.

It is not in some far off place, some place up there, in heaven.

It is all around us, available, something we can catch a glimpse of

here and now.

The second thing is that at the end of the word pictures
there are images of choice – and judgment.
Other pearls will be sold in order
to have the one pearl of great price.
Fish are going to be sorted from a drag net,
the good ones kept, the bad ones thrown out.
It's a view of the kingdom of God,
and there's something important at stake.

What is at stake is our souls.
Or it could also be other people's capacity to survive,
to provide a hopeful future for their children.

For those of you who weren't here in June, Jenny Healy,
our Director of Christian Education,
gave the kids a plastic sleeved picture of Jesus – "Flat Jesus".
The idea was that Jesus goes with us wherever we go.
We were to take Jesus with us on vacation,
when we went strawberry picking, or to the beach.
The idea was to take flat Jesus along,
take a photo and post it on the church website.

So on day three I took flat Jesus out from my suitcase.
I wasn't sure how much I'd have to explain the idea to our group
some of whom I'd already figured out were decidedly
avoiders of organized religion.
But they immediately got it.
And they were enthusiastic about it!
When the picture was taken with Heifer workers on a motorcycle,
they told me I should have hopped on the back so Flat Jesus and I
were hitching a ride.
Every day thereafter they asked me where flat Jesus was,
and did we want our picture
taken in the corn fields,
or by coffee plants, and later, at the Mayan Ruins.
I got to feeling like they, this group of skeptics,
wanted to see flat Jesus out and about as much
maybe more
than I did!

When you think about it they are right.
Surely if Jesus were walking about Honduras,
He'd be eating corn tortillas cooked by women from the countryside.
He'd be at community celebrations, cheering on efforts to work together,

to move into a new future together.

So I want to thank you for encouraging me to go on this journey.
The trip helped me understand our commitment to Heifer,
and made me ever so much more enthusiastic about it.
More than that, it taught me volumes about the Christian gospel.

For isn't Jesus himself a mustard seed, a hidden gem
a pearl of great price?
One life, a life without distinguished lineage or riches or political power
yet a life that changed so much.
And isn't the life Jesus calls us to about sorting out what matters,
and letting go of the rest?
And isn't kingdom life about discovering how much more we can do
working together than working alone?
Over and over again, after people had thanked God
for this day
they thanked God
for "what we've been able to accomplish together".

Thank you for these, such simple
but important learnings.

And thank you for listening to my sharing today.

Amen.