

The Old, Old Stories

July 16, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: Genesis 25:19-28; Matthew 13:1-17

If these texts sound familiar to you, they also sound familiar to me. This is the third time I've preached on these same texts at First Church over the past decade, or more precisely, the past nine years. The Common Lectionary is a three-year schedule of readings, so each time these stories come around on this midsummer Sunday in the season of Pentecost, it is an invitation to remember what was going on then – 3 or 6 or 9 years ago. Like other cyclical stories and events in our lives, they often tell us even more about ourselves and our world and about God each time we encounter them.

We live our lives in and among so many seasons and cycles. Next weekend, I'll be in Minneapolis for my high school reunion, where I'll see some friends and classmates that I see every five years, and others I haven't seen since we were 18. I'm excited to have dinner with a good friend's mother, and to catch up with a classmate I met when he played on the Little League that my brother played on and my dad coached. I haven't seen either of them since the late 70s. We will tell stories and catch up on the intervening years, thankful for the places we hold in each other's memories, and knowing that our relationships shaped us then, and continue to shape our lives now. So that's five years ago.

For those of us who are soccer fans, the World Cup begins this week in Australia and New Zealand. Four years ago, I remember watching the final game from our vacation in Utah, where we were celebrating our kids' graduation from high school and college, respectively. With its four-year cycles, Abby noted that the next women's World Cup would be the summer after her college graduation, and it is.

I've also been thinking about soccer because we recently binge-watched all three seasons of Ted Lasso – which I highly recommend for its entertainment and humor, but even more for the life wisdom that comes usually at unexpected moments. For those who don't know the story line (yet), when Rebecca divorced her husband, the only thing she wanted in the divorce was ownership of the English football (aka soccer) club AFC Richmond, because she said, "it was the only thing he truly loved." Her goal was to make it fail (and thereby torment her ex-husband) by hiring the most incompetent coach she could possibly find – a goofy American college football coach from Kansas, who didn't know the first thing about soccer.

The actors and writers do a phenomenal job developing the dozens of characters' personalities, both on and off the field. The story line mixes with soccer strategy that I certainly enjoyed, given my experience as a kids' soccer coach and as a player, and also invites us to look over the shoulder of a sports psychologist who works with the members of the team. Coach Lasso brings a folksy glass-is-half-full approach to his coaching, often launching into stories that appear at first to be entirely unrelated to anything that's going on, but then zero in on exactly what is needed at that moment, and which stay with you, to remember when you need to call on that wisdom.

And that's my segue back to today's gospel, because I think that Jesus does that too, just like Ted Lasso. (Or maybe the other way around!) Jesus was a teacher. And a healer. And a leader. At the heart of it all are the memorable stories he tells. Stories are the way he taught, and the way he healed, and the way he led and continues to lead, reaching out to many different types of people in ways that each could relate. For some, he offered the healing touch that they needed. Others benefitted from a direct word of guidance. But for the multitudes, Jesus says, some see but do not perceive and hear but do not listen or understand. And so, Jesus tells a short vignette, about a mustard seed, or the harvest, or a lost sheep. Or in this case, a sower who was sowing seed. That's the genius of his parables. They tell an everyday story that people can relate to and can

remember, such that they can take it with them. So that even if they don't understand now, the story remains, and the understanding dawns unexpectedly when they need it.

Three years ago, when we last shared these texts together in worship, we were four months into the pandemic. We had more or less come to terms with the shock of isolation, and learned many new ways to connect with each other, and were even beginning to venture out, but not to be together indoors quite yet. As a staff, we were still working week to week, learning things we they didn't teach us in seminary, including video editing and livestreaming. And so, we led worship, three or four or five of us here reading and preaching and playing music in this sanctuary, trusting that you were all out there on the other side of the livestream.

Three years ago, when these texts came up, since the Genesis story mentioned Paddan-Aram, for which the village where I live in Dartmouth is named, I chose to read the Genesis story against the backdrop of a 17th century stone foundation a couple of blocks from my own home. It was where the native Wampanoag and the English had negotiated a peace treaty in the summer of 1675. However, after it was signed, the delegates from Plymouth betrayed the agreement and sold many of the natives into slavery. The clash of two cultures – indigenous and immigrant -- becomes more vivid when you realize that a significant piece of it happened right in your neighborhood. And also, when you realize that the story may not have happened exactly how you learned it when you were growing up.

The Genesis story of Isaac and Rebekah and their twins is similarly a story of the clash of two cultures: Isaac the Canaanite whose ancestors farmed the land and followed the tradition of passing property on to the oldest son, and Rebekah whose nomadic Mesopotamian ancestors tended their flocks, and passed on their inheritances to their youngest child. Two cultures coming together in the midst of much change. Two cultures wrestling for dominance. Which tradition would prevail? Does it have to be one or the other? Or is there a third way that honors both?

Also, three years ago, when the lectionary brought us this story, it was just a few weeks after George Floyd was murdered. Our outrage propelled many of us out of our isolation and into the streets to march together and demand change, yet again. As we have learned more about the issues of community and policing, of the economic elements that underpin both the extreme poverty and extreme wealth of our present day, of education and opportunity, environment health and safety, it has been overwhelming and difficult to know where to focus. Like Isaiah says, our hearts have indeed grown dull, our ears hard of hearing, and we have shut our eyes.

So now that these stories of the sower and of Esau and Jacob and their parents have come around again, it gives us an opportunity to wonder if we've made any progress at all in the last three years. Some days it feels like the world is falling apart even more rapidly. Other days, we realize how much we've learned and grown. At the risk of being dismissed as ever the optimist, what have we gained since 2020? I thought of a few things, and I'm sure you can add others.

- In our government, we have our first indigenous cabinet member, Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, in charge of overseeing indigenous priorities, natural resources, and upholding the obligations of the many treaties that we have agreed to over the centuries.
- There is more and more renewable energy being produced, and more awareness of the importance of mitigating the climate change that is more and more obvious every year.
- We have learned together about the legacy of Harriet Jacobs and the importance of Bob Moses' Algebra Project for educational equity.
- The General Synod of the United Church of Christ met in Indianapolis at the beginning of July for our biennial national meeting. In addition to the election of the Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson as our General Minister and President, there was the long overdue recognition of the Afro-Christian tradition

within our UCC. Not as a recent addition, but as a part of our tradition from its very beginning in 1957. Those of us who learned what we call “UCC Polity” over the past 60+ years, learned about four denominations that came together: Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed. There were five. It will take some effort on all of our parts to re-learn and re-write the parts of our denominational history that were erased and hidden, quite literally white-washed. It’s exciting to think about what that process will teach us, and where we’ll be able to go from there.

- In economic news, those at the bottom of the economic pay scale have seen the largest wage increases over the past year, a welcome shift.

I’m sure you can look at your own lives, and the things that you care deeply about and think about what has changed in the last few years. We have a long way to go, but we know that we each can find ways to do our part.

If these are a few things that have changed in the last three years, where will we be when these texts come around again in three years? The summer of ’26. Between now and then, what excites you? What do you want to explore, to learn about, to do? How will you be a part of the change you want to see?

Jesus shared his parable of the sower at a time when there were so many people clamoring to hear him that he couldn’t get enough distance, either just to have some elbow room, or to be heard by the crowd. Sound carries a lot more efficiently over the water, so he got into a boat and spoke from there.

And while they stood on the beach, and he floated on the water, he told them a story not about boats or fish, but about seeds and soil. As they felt the ground underneath their feet, he talked about that ground, about how most of it was not conducive to growing healthy productive plants. Some soil was too rocky, some was too dry, some was endangered by birds who ate the seed or human feet that trampled it, or even other prickly plants. But at the end of Jesus’ list of all that could possibly go wrong, he reminds us of the good soil. And that soil is just right, so that the plants can take root and grow and produce grain to feed the multitudes, and equally important, produce more seed for the next generation.

Stories are a vital part of our culture and our lives. Whether written or oral, biblical or theatrical, they carry the potential for new insights as our lives and our world changes from year to year and decade to decade. Sometimes the stories will land in places where they are smothered, or trampled on, or otherwise not able to be heard or shared. But other times, they will find the audience that desperately needs to hear them. And those people will cherish the story and nurture its growth and then tell it over again for those who need to hear it next.

When we re-discover an old story, or learn a new way to tell it, we open up the possibility that we will find ourselves in the good soil, telling the story for someone who needs its good news, and inching toward the world that God gives to us. May it be so. Amen!