

“What We Learned in the Pandemic (So Far)”
May 8, 2022

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15
Matthew 13:51-52

A little over two years into this pandemic, what have we learned?

The scriptures this morning give us both encouragement and warning as we consider that question.

I'll get to the encouragement quickly, but first the warning.

It comes from the Book of Ecclesiastes, that puzzling and often, well, *discouraging* look at life that begins by telling us: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” Another version drives home the point, crying: “Futility, utter futility! Everything is futile.”

Vanity, futility are translations of a Hebrew word that literally means “breath” or “vapor.” This, then, is a good place to start, as so much of our concern in these years has been about breathing. The notes in my Bible tell me that the word “vanity” is used repeatedly in this book as a metaphor for things that cannot be grasped either physically or intellectually, things that are...enigmatic.”

We heard this morning that God has put a sense of past and future into our minds. It is human to look back and look ahead. But, Ecclesiastes warns us, we “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” We grasp at understanding—and find our hands empty. When we try to gain a sense of what God is doing in us and among us and through us in these days, our answers will always be provisional.

That's the warning.

The encouragement comes from those words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Gospels are clear that when Jesus taught people—whether the crowds that pushed in on him or that small, inner circle of disciples—he often used parables, usually brief stories that grew from everyday experiences: the well-known process of sowing seed, a wedding part, a father's fraught relationship with his son, the growth of a small mustard seed into a large bush. Parables often seem to have more than one meaning. When we hear the same parable in different times, we might find a new way of understanding it—and perhaps a new way of understanding our lives as well.

As much as parables bring new insight, perhaps more importantly, they lead us to think in fresh ways.

Chapter 13 of Matthew presents seven parables of Jesus. Read through them sometime this week. Some might be familiar. Some might be confusing. Linger with them awhile and I think you'll begin to see what I mean about the way in which parables bring fresh thinking to our lives.

At the end of all of this, Jesus asks his disciples: “Have you understood all of this?”

And they are quick to reply: “Yes!”

Now, you probably remember the way the disciples are depicted in Mark's Gospel—generally not understanding the meaning of anything Jesus says or does. Or maybe you recall the words of the risen Christ to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus that we heard last Sunday: “How dull you are!”

But this is Matthew—and here the disciples' claim to understanding is taken on face value by Jesus. They are, he says, “trained for the realm of heaven.” Remembers that when Jesus speaks of the realm of heaven he is not primarily talking about *what happens to us* when we die. He is much more concerned with *what we do* while we are living. Yes, the realm of heaven is God's place; and it is the place where the Creator God is at work redeeming the creation that God loves. That is, the realm of heaven is here in our midst if we will just open our eyes and our hearts and *look*—and we are given parables such to improve our sight.

Is it too much to suggest that for two years we have been living in a parable—a real life situation that has had different meanings at different times, that has yielded new ways of thinking and acting?

Two years ago life was shut down in ways that we never imagined possible.

A year ago we were loosening up in those vaccinated, pre-Delta days when it seemed that we could once again safely go anywhere, do anything—even get a haircut.

Now, here we are, having come through the Omicron surge of the winter, resuming in-person worship, then pausing, then resuming again, finding that we need more people to help with coffee hour, even as we watch with some trepidation as cases and hospitalizations also resume an upward trend.

So, what *have* we learned in this time—as a congregation, as individuals? I want to explore this directly today and next Sunday. And the question will be in the background in our worship and our life together in the weeks and months ahead.

I asked our Church Council about this at our meeting last month.

One member of the Council suggested that *how* we learned was as significant as *what* we learned. We've been learning on the go. That old image of building an airplane while it is in mid-air came to mind. The virus and the variants changed quickly, the conditions shifted abruptly—and that's how we've learned: quickly. We have become a more agile congregation, able to change, able to shelf old plans and make new plans, and able to bear with one another through all the gaffs and letdowns and disappointments. We've become more agile, able to take advantage of new opportunities when they present themselves without a lot of lead time.

The use of technology was on the minds of many. A lot of us have learned to Zoom—for church meetings and Bible studies and also for school and family dinners. What was barely on our radar two years ago has become, as one person put it, “as comfortable as a phone call.” While it is good to meet with each other around the fireplace in Rockwood Hall, many are thankful when a Zoom meeting means *not* having to come out on a cold winter night or a rainy spring evening and search for a parking place several blocks away.

But gathering together! We learned *very quickly* how much we need one another. Everyone is so grateful for the skilled work that goes into making online worship possible each week. And we are committed to continuing this way of connecting. But someone said that the difference

between worshipping online and in person is like the difference between listening to music on CD and attending a concert. We are *Congregationalists* after all—and we like to *congregate*: to worship together, to work together, to study together, to eat together, to enjoy what one person called “that Rockwood Hall smell.” (You know what she means.)

We’ve also learned and accepted that not everyone is ready to come back to this church building yet—not for meetings, not for worship, not even for doughnut holes. And that’s O.K. We have learned again that we are a congregation of *individuals*—and each one of us weighs the risks and benefits of opportunities in different ways. We have learned a new acceptance of one another as we have learned the old truth of how much we need each other.

We learned that as much as *we* need each other, the wider community and the greater world needs us. In a time of great need, we responded with great—and greatly needed—generosity. Your giving—our giving—has meant that during two challenging years people had food to eat and homes in which to live. Immigrants were supported. Youth were encouraged. We began important conversations about race and justice in our community. And in a time of great isolation, people across our nation and around the world have found welcome and belonging through our online presence.

This is, as I said, just an initial, provisional look at what we have learned. I encourage you to We can’t as Ecclesiastes reminds us, figure out all of it. There is wisdom in the author’s advice that we should, then, simply be happy and live the best life we can while we are alive. There is much more and I encourage you once more to think about what you have learned and what you see we have learned together from this parable of the pandemic. Talk about this with others and, if you want, send me your thoughts.

After Jesus asked if the disciples had understood his parables, after they said “Yes,” he tells one more parable: “When a teacher of the law has become a learner in the realm of heaven, that person is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and old.”

The order is unexpected—what is new helps us to interpret and to use what is old.

The followers of Jesus will continue to be disciples—a word that means “those who are taught”—throughout their lives. They—and we—have become “learners” in the realm of heaven.

In this final parable, Jesus points us to the task ahead: to look at our treasure and from it to take the new and the old into the future as we become a congregation for these times.

What are some new treasures that we have found that we will bring with us?

What is old but still of value?

And what is old that, well, we don’t really need to bring with us? What have we been, what have we been doing that the new treasure tells us we need to leave behind?

It would be great if this were a post-pandemic sermon, wouldn’t it?

It would be great if these were post-pandemic times, with all of this behind us.

But that is not our situation.

Cases are rising again.

Vaccines tend to lose some effectiveness.

And a couple of days ago the administration warned of 100 million new cases this coming winter.

We're still in this.

The good news is that we are in this together.

The good news is that we have learned a great deal and that there is more that we will learn.

We need each other as we move forward.

We need each other with all of our gifts and all of our foibles, faults, fears, failings, and flaws.
We need each other in person and online.

We have been trained for the realm of heaven.

Let us take with us the new and the old as we continue to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ,
known and to be made known to us.