

Look for God in Odd Things -- Third in a summer series on parables

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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This morning in Matthew's gospel we've heard five more of Jesus' parables

As we wonder about these together we need to remember:

Parables are not morality stories like Aesop's Fables
with defined, instructive meanings.

They do not have verdicts –

no one is good or bad, right or wrong. (Bultmann)

Instead, they are designed to surprise us
and up-end our usual ways of thinking.

They're designed to work on us . . .

And they leave us with some kind of challenge that requires us to make a response –

A response that is specific to our own personal life here and now.

They do not allow us to be neutral. (Osborne 339)

Today we hear about:

A tiny mustard seed

that becomes a large, life-giving tree

In Jesus' time, the image of the tree

was a symbol of the Torah, of God's Word.

Each person was to become a living Torah/God's Word.

Just like we say we are becoming Christ-like, like the Word of God.

Even the smallest can live into transformation.

Leaven

it's not neat like yeast – leaven is like sourdough starter

in the Jewish community it was considered rather vile

and necessary

(used as a symbol for evil –

that gets us off neutral and pushes us to good)

messy and smelly,

leaven creates the bread (lechem) that supports life (l'chaim)

And, notice: the woman does not use a lot of leaven.

There is lots of flour -- enough to make bread for 150 people!

She hides the leaven.

[The Greek does not say "mixed" or "kneaded,"

it says "hid." Period.]

There's no mixing or kneading.

and yet just a little of this messy leaven

changes lifeless flour into something life-giving.

Hidden treasure in a field

so wonderful the finder re-hides it
and then sells everything else for it
A pearl
the one that's been sought for a lifetime—
and worth selling everything else for
And then, in case we've forgotten the parables of the last two Sundays,
the last one today is about the reign of God as a great net
a net that catches everything
it's all equal
what's evil, what's righteous
what's new, what's old
it isn't sorted out until later, at the very end.
In the meantime,
how are we choosing to invest ourselves in this kingdom-living?

So I was thinking about the small, messy, hidden, valuable things
that do not look valuable at all
but are signs of the kingdom of God . . .

When I was listening to the BBC and I heard a story that surprised me
about something small, messy, hidden
that a small group of people valued
and invested their lives in
and, as a result, it turned out to be valuable to the whole world.

The story was about punk rock bands in the former East Germany.

Now I knew about Greenwich Village in NYC
and the emergence of Patti Smith, the Ramones, Blondie, Lou Reed, the Clash
My children expanded my music education with the post-punk bands
U2, the Cure, Smashing Pumpkins
But I did not know that the punk bands of East Germany
were instrumental in the fall of Communism in that country
and the 1990 reunification with West Germany.

Punk rock began in the late 1960s and appeared in earnest in 1974.
Musically, punk rock is stripped down rock and roll.

It's fast and hard-edged, with distinctive rhythms.
The lyrics are often political and full of social critique
Concerts are typically held in schools, garages, or warehouses,
Because the punk ethic is one of do-it-yourself
concert advertisements are done by simple flyers
There's less focus on being successful
And more on keeping creative and financial autonomy

You might recognize punks because they wore
ripped clothing held together by safety pins or wrapped with tape

or clothing customized with paint or marker, studs, and spikes
Some punks wore their hair cropped and ragged
or cut their hair into Mohawks
or styled it to stand out in spikes
or dyed it in vibrant colors
Other punks who were anti-fashion dressed in plain T-shirts and jeans

The worst thing you could be was a “poser” [poseur],
“a person who habitually pretends to be something he [or she] is not.”
Meaning: anyone who adopts the dress, speech, and/or mannerisms of a punk
in order to be accepted by the group,
but who does not share or understand the values or philosophy of punk

This week, Michael Boehlke,
who was a punk rock pioneer in the former communist East Germany (GDR)
opened the world's first archive about the underground youth punk culture
that survived oppression and infiltration by that country's repressive regime.
Although punk music was often dismissed as nihilistic in the West,
in East Germany, the music was hopeful – it was about changing society.
Boehlke says, “I had a vision; I was full of hope that things could improve.
We didn't do drugs and we didn't drink”

In the late 1970s there were only about 2 dozen punks in East Germany
They were inspired by listening to punk music broadcasts from the US and the UK
at two o'clock in the morning on their transistor radios
This small group of musicians played a key role
in fomenting and steeling opposition in the country throughout the 1980s.

Boehlke says, it was “a cross-cultural phenomenon” that “unleashed a huge creative potential,
and the minute you were on the margins of society
you tapped into a network of other artistic activity.”

By 1981, an East German government report
pegged the number of punks nationwide at 1,000 with 10,000 more “sympathizers”
Authorities began to worry, and the state soon took action:
Punks experienced arbitrary imprisonment,
brutal police beatings,
and invasive searches of their apartments and the places where they congregated.
Many punk rockers were denounced as enemies of the state.

By the end of that year (1981),
the “punk problem” was eventually referred to the dreaded Stasi, the secret police,
and taken up by the Stasi division charged with ending political opposition.

By 1983, the punk scene was infiltrated with informants
Who had been forced under pressure by the Stasi
to choose between cooperation, a jail sentence, expulsion,
or forced military service.

Although some informants gave the Stasi wrong information,

others spied on their friends for years and turned them in to the secret police.
There was no public place where the punk rockers could play their music,
so they would play in their apartments or hang out on the streets.

Clearly punk wasn't just a musical choice.

Choosing to be a punk rocker affected every aspect of their lives.

It involved risking their lives for something that mattered

Boehlke says, "Punk inevitably became political very fast.

If you were in a band, you had to apply for permission to perform in public
and audition before a committee that would assess your musical competence,
the way you looked –

and above all, whether you were politically acceptable."

The choice to be a punk rocker meant job offers and education could be denied by the state.

The state refused to give Boehlke permission to study theater directing
and, instead, forced him to train as a mechanic

Eventually they forced him into the army for "rehabilitation."

After he wore a homemade t-shirt with the slogan,

"When justice becomes injustice, resistance becomes duty,"

he was threatened with three years in jail

The threats only stopped when his girlfriend, Jana,
agreed to act as an informant for the Stasi.

Although she did not tell the police anything significant
about the punk rock community,

she was sent to jail for her punk activities

and she is psychologically traumatized
by that imprisonment to this day.

Reacting to the violence and harassment inflicted on local punks,

some of the Protestant churches in East Germany offered shelter and legal aid.

They opened their buildings to the punks so they could meet and play music.

The churches felt it was their moral duty to protect

and encourage these young musicians

who were being discriminated against and targeted for speaking up.

Churches were the one place where the Stasi had no power

Once they began meeting and playing in the churches,

punks began to connect with the political groups that were also harbored by the churches.

These activists and organizations were devoted to

environmental issues, peace and demilitarization, and human rights.

In April and June of 1983, punk bands and their fans from all over the country

gathered for festivals held on the grounds of churches in Halle and Berlin.

Thousands came, even though the publicity was only by word of mouth.

Soon hundreds, and even thousands, of people

were coming to punk rock concerts at churches all over Germany.

Of course, the secret police took notice of these gatherings.

The Stasi applied steady pressure on the churches and the young punk rockers.

But the Stasi never succeeded in silencing either the church or the musicians.
Not that they didn't try.

The Stasi jailed members of one band and interrogated them for six months.

Ultimately, the Stasi sentenced them to 18 months in prison

because the band's music had politically charged lyrics.

Another band's musicians spray-painted graffiti protesting that sentence

They were tried and sentenced to seven to 10 months in prison.

Yet another band's leaders were arrested and held in solitary confinement for weeks;

then, after they were released, they were regularly arrested

and held in prison for several months every year for 7 years.

Other bands, like Boehlke's, were forced into the army,

serving in a special regiment for citizens in need of ideological rehabilitation.

However, even though they were incarcerated or sent off to the army,

these early punk rockers had already inspired

many other musicians across the country

who kept playing punk music.

When they were released from prison,

the early punk bands went back to the churches.

One band started a church-based group that met on Mondays

and published an underground newsletter.

Another wrote a song with the chorus "We are the people,"

the very same phrase that would become the rallying cry

of the street protests in 1989 that led to the fall of the Wall.

In most of the countries of the former Soviet Union,

change came from the top down.

Only in East Germany did change come from outside and below,

and it was catalyzed by grassroots protests.

Finally, the head of state, Erich Honecker, was ousted.

Travel restrictions on East German citizens were rescinded.

And, according to some historians,

the importance of the youth-oriented church-based underground

in causing these changes can be seen in recently disclosed evidence

showing the East German government was feeling the pressure

and planned to open the wall

even before the massive, million-person demonstration

on Alexanderplatz on November 4, 1989.

Like small mustard seeds and messy leaven,

punk rockers were transformational.

Like a valuable treasure or pearl,

punk rock and the democratic movement

was worth everything they had, including, for some, their lives.

You just never know how you will be surprised by unlikely ways of the reign of God!

According to a recent description of punk rock,

“Like all cultural watersheds, [punk rock] was embraced by a discerning few and slagged off as a bad joke by the uncomprehending majority.”

(Isler, Scott; Robbins, Ira. "[Ramones](http://trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=ramones)". *Trouser Press*. <http://trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=ramones>.)

Today I can hear Jesus saying this about the kingdom of God:

“Like all cultural watersheds, the kingdom of God is embraced by a discerning few and slagged off as a bad joke by the uncomprehending majority.”

Can we see the kingdom in the small and odd things and persons around us?

AMEN.

Sources:

<http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/wnij/news.newsmain/article/0/0/1829944/Arts..and..Culture/Archive.immortalizes.East.German.Punk.rock.scene>

<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,1694126,00.html>

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/11/08/did-punk-rock-tear-down-the-wall.html>

TEXT:

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He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven 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 shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. . . . The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."