

“Fear Not: Fear of God”
Matthew 13:1-9

During this pandemic, I have heard many times people saying that the pandemic is God’s punishment for our sins or infidelity. I have also heard people question how God could let such suffering take place in the world. On the one hand, people are fearful of God. On the other hand, people are questioning the goodness or existence of God. This boils down to this question: Is the universe friendly or not? As human beings we struggle with our fears and our limited knowledge of the mysteries of life. I recently struggled with watching the Netflix series, “When They See Us,” which tells of the five teenage Black boys who were falsely accused of assault and rape in Central Park. They were imprisoned and tortured for years for a crime they did not commit. They only got released when the real perpetrator came forward. It is hard to come to terms with such suffering without projecting our fear or anger on God or others. The problem with this kind of projection of fear on God is that it is usually grounded in our sense of spiritual scarcity and fear instead of God’s abundance and love. Instead of embracing the giftedness of life, we find ourselves stuck in our human patterns of punishment and reward based on one’s behavior.

Jesus struggled to help people let go of this kind of spiritual scarcity and fear of God. The religious leaders of his time had developed elaborate rules and regulations for people’s behavior to keep them on the straight and narrow. Many of them promoted the belief that faith was about rules and laws that were based on the fear of punishment from God. That is why many people reject religion. It seems judgmental, hypocritical, and based on a scary understanding of God or an understanding that conflicts with logic.

The parables of Jesus played an essential role in dispelling the myth of spiritual scarcity and fear. The parable we are looking at today is from Matthew 13 where we have a sower who seemed to discard the common sense of farming by scattering seeds where there is little potential for growth. The people who first heard this must have thought that the farmer was foolish because he chose to sow the seeds on the wrong kind of soil.

Farmers in those days were not rich. Their livelihood depended on the success of their crops. Good seed was hard to come by; the wise farmer makes sure to entrust the precious grain he has to the best of soil. But this one tosses seed wherever he can find ground. The farmer behaved as though that which was most precious was available in unlimited supply. What a great metaphor for God’s abundant love!

So, this parable must have been shocking to the people who listened to Jesus. He used a common event from their daily lives to turn their understanding of God upside down. That is the way Jesus used his parables to help people understand that the kingdom of God was so different from what they thought it to be.

Now most of us when we hear this parable, we start thinking about the types of soil that we are whether we are good or bad. This is our orientation. This is part of our preconceived notion about God. We tend to focus on ourselves as we make or break the deal! Our condition is what really matters to God’s grace. Yet, the deeper wisdom of this lesson that shatters all of our conventional wisdom is that the kingdom of God is not entirely dependent on our actions. The kingdom of God is dependent on God’s generosity.

In our conventional wisdom, we may see that God is a reckless and foolish farmer, but through the wisdom of the kingdom of God, we see that God's love is lavish, generous and even abundant. God's grace is available to all. This is not to say that anything goes because these things will take care of themselves once our relationship with God is at the center of our lives.

Apparently, in God's kingdom there is much that might at least appear to be wasted. This is actually a theme running through many of the parables of Jesus. Think about the father who threw a lavish, expensive party after welcoming back his wayward prodigal son; the shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep in order to search for the one that was lost; and the person who invited his friends to a great banquet and, when they refused, told his servants to go out into the streets and invite the poor people into his feast.

The wide broadcasting of seed is indicative of the abundant nature of God. This is hard for us to accept. How could God be generous to all people, even those who don't deserve it? How could God be so accepting of us even though we are often a major disappointment to ourselves and to those who love us?

Our obsession with fixing the world and making sure that things are being done in the right fashion can sometimes work against our desire to live in the presence of God. Yet, Jesus' invitation to us to live in the kingdom of God is to live a life of focus on the generosity and love of God. Our calculating minds want to know if we are doing things right and well. We even worry about others doing things "right." But the radical message of the gospel is to pay attention to the work of love of the Spirit in our world.

We will end with a simple guided prayer exercise from Pastor Eileen Klaassen. It is about talking to God about our hopes, dreams and fears. I'll lead us through four stages, following an expanding spiral. First we'll focus inward on ourselves, then our local community, then our region, and then on the whole world. At each level, I'll ask you to pray about three things, your hopes, your dreams, and your fears.

Feel free to get your body into a relaxed and comfortable position, and perhaps close your eyes or soften your gaze, and let's talk with God.

Let's begin by introducing ourselves to God, however you understand God in this moment. Whatever words feel most comfortable to you, friendly or formal, even if that's just acknowledging that maybe this feels a bit strange to you. Now let's talk to God about ourselves. First, our hopes: what do you wish would happen in your life?

How do you want today to go for you, or what are you hoping for in this week or this month? What is your hope for your relationship with God?

Now share with God your dreams for yourself. What do you long for, what do you desire for yourself?

What is your vision for your life, perhaps big or perhaps small? What do you imagine could happen if things went just right?

And now share with God your fears for yourself. What are you afraid of? What terrifies you about your relationships, your vocation, your well-being? What worries are you carrying with you today?

Now let's expand the spiral. Think about your community, your loved ones, your various circles of relationship.

Again, talk with God about your hopes for your community. How would you like things to be for those people that you are thinking of, for your relationship with them, for their well-being?

And now your dreams for your community. What best-case scenarios can you imagine for those people, what could happen if everything went just right? What would you long for them to know and experience?

Now your fears for your community. What kinds of things are you afraid of on their behalf? What fears might they be carrying?

Let's expand the spiral again, now talking to God about our region, maybe that's the city and towns that we live in, maybe that is our state or country, maybe all of North America.

What hopes do you have for this region? What projects are we working on, what would you like people to experience?

What dreams do you carry for this area? What direction would you like to see us move in? What is the best possible future you can imagine for the region?

And fears, what frightens you about this region? What dangers are we facing? What worries do we share?

And finally, let's expand the spiral again to the whole world, all of humanity, the entire planet.

What are your hopes for the world? In the immediate future, what gifts would you give to the world if you could?

And what are your dreams for the world? Big or small, what goodness can you imagine growing among us? What possibilities can you see?

And finally, share your fears for the world with God. What dangers are we facing? What worries you about the future of our planet?

Creator God, you are as close as our breath and as far as dimensions unknown. You are intimate and inaccessible, you are personal and mysterious. We are grateful for the pieces of your presence that are known and felt, and we are in awe of the wonders that we can only imagine. Open our eyes that we might see, open our minds that we might know, and open our hearts that we might live in your Love. Amen.