

Sermon for July 26 (Proper 12)
St. Paul and the Redeemer
Roger Ferlo

“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.”

The other day I looked for the oldest thing in the house. I think it’s this old book, dated 1681. It dropped to the floor and broke its cover sometime during our move to Hyde Park. I think though I can get it fixed. It’s a collection of early Christian attempts to wrench Christian meanings out of old Greek and Roman myths. *Mythographorum Latinorum Tomus Alter*, published in Amsterdam in 1682. It roughly translates “Yet another modern guide to crusty old stories.” I know, hard to get excited. But I once liked this sort of thing. I found this old book when I was a graduate student in 16th century English literature. Interpreting old poems in new and clever ways was what I thought I would spend my life doing. The urge to retell old stories in enlightened ways has always had its appeal. Sixteenth and seventeenth readers loved old books like this, and so do I.

Then I decided to look for something new to show you. I bought this rosemary plant at Trader Joe’s last week. I savor the pungent smell of rosemary. Old Italian that I am, I tend to cook with it. I’ve always wanted to live in a climate where rosemary could grow as big as a hedge, the way it does in Italy, or in my daughter’s front yard in Portland. But I retired to Chicago, and live on the 26th floor. I have to content myself with growing rosemary in small pots. This is my

fourth or fifth try. In my experience my rosemary plant grows happily for several months on the window sill, after which it sort of gives up, getting all wooden and scrawny and dwarfed. Then it's back to Trader Joe's, where hope springs eternal.

Which brings me finally to Jesus' parables, old stories that chime well with our current anxieties. Let's be rational for a moment. These stories are as absurd as the old Latin myths in my seventeenth-century book. Mustard plants do not grow into trees. There's no such thing as a mustard tree. Even birds know that. Then there's that crazy story about the flour. Three measures of flour in biblical times were an immense amount of flour. Leavening three measures of flour with just a pinch of yeast would produce enough dough to fill up an entire room. What's that about? And then there's that pearl. Only a fool would sell everything they had to buy one single pearl. What's left for food? You can't eat pearls.

Taking Jesus at his word is a tricky business. "Have you understood all this?", he asks his friends. I like to think he asked that question with a sly smile. To hear these stories new, you have to let yourself share Jesus's peasant sense of humor. You can't let yourself be tripped up by your own sophisticated sense of what's reasonable or rational. Jesus is a master at leading you to the wrong places, tempting you to rest too easily in what you think should be the case, only to blast you out of your rational complacency.

Birds singing in mustard trees.

Enough bread dough to fill a room.

A precious pearl that bankrupts you.

These are not stories about what the world looks like. These are stories about what the reign of God looks like, stories about God's sheer and unexpected abundance, even in the midst of scarcity, even in spite of our knowing cynicism, or better, in spite of what our cynicism tries to hide--our fear of unending loss.

Sell everything to possess the pearl of great price. Do something foolish so you can do what is right. Like wearing a mask to protect the health of other people. Like working yet another hospital shift in a pandemic to save yet another life.

Take just a pinch of yeast to fill a room with bread. Deliver some Trader Joe bags, or a can of beans, to the church on Wednesday afternoon, so Shirley and her colleagues at the Food Pantry can leverage them to feed the multitudes.

Plant a mustard seed. Share one kind word. Correct one racist remark. There's no predicting how far it will go, how great a difference it will make. But with enough faith in yourself and enough faith in your neighbor your little seed of charity can put out many branches, most of which are so high or so broad that you will likely never be able to see them. But birds will flock to make their nests in that tree of life, just like the two white egrets I saw last week in Jackson Park.

“Have you understood all this?” Jesus asked his friends. Take the risk of looking foolish.

Answer “Yes.”