

Title: The Finger Pointing at the Moon  
Date: 7/16/2023 (Proper 10, Year A)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Genesis 25:19-34](#); [Psalm 119:105-112](#); [Romans 8:1-11](#); [Matthew 13:1-9,18-23](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/eLhQgBAAsGQ?t=1232>

O God

Your word is a lantern to my feet  
and a light upon my path.<sup>1</sup>

Your decrees are my inheritance for ever;  
truly, they are the joy of my heart. (Ps 119:105,111)  
Amen.

Two weeks ago, I quoted an old professor of mine, Andrew McGowan. Writing about the Binding of Isaac, he argued, “[That] story is about sacrifice in the sense that the Noah story is about navigation, or the Parable of the Sower is about agriculture. In none of these cases is the named element the point of the story.”<sup>2</sup>

He’s speaking with tongue firmly planted in cheek. Does anyone really think the story of Noah is about navigation? If we were experiencing torrential rain as India and Vermont and New York did this week, it might feel like it’s time to build an ark. Given the heat dome over Texas, it might feel like God is circumventing his promise not to destroy us with water by destroying us with heat, with fire. But McGowan does have a point.

As we’ve discussed, the Sunday lectionary runs on a three-year cycle; this means we usually hear the same readings every three years. Whether we are listening to them for the first time or the twenty-first, as we listen, certain themes will surface because of the way these stories resonate with our own lives and with the world as we are experiencing it in this moment.

For example, you might connect to this Old Testament story as the oldest child or the youngest, the one assumed to be the hard worker or the one treated as the trickster. You might identify with parents that admit to having a favorite, or as with Rebekah, you might feel a kinship with the parent that feels caught between the desires and expectations of your co-parent and that of God. That can get pretty tricky.

When it comes to the gospel, this passage might function like a BuzzFeed quiz, one of those quizzes that tells you which Harry Potter character you are based on your coffee and pastry preferences. For the record, Voldemort.

“There are four kinds of soil in the parable; which one are YOU?  
Read the rest of this parable to find out!”

The answer you get may encourage you to start thinking about all the things you still need to do in order to be good soil. It may inspire you to create the conditions for the seeds of God, the words of God, to take root in you and produce fruit. That’s how I’ve always thought about this parable.

Over time, these stories and the themes we associate with them can become so familiar they take on their own shorthand. The story of Jacob and Esau reminds you not to base your self-worth on the standards of society or your parents' expectations. The Parable of the Sower triggers a spiritual self-assessment, prompting you to identify tangible, concrete results from the time and effort you invest in church and your spiritual practices.

The shorthand we come up with centers on the memorable element, the theme we connect with the most. The shorthand reflects our understanding and the lesson that's stayed with us. Then every time we hear that phrase, it triggers a specific response, encourages certain reactions and reflections. Eventually, these become well-worn grooves, deeply ingrained habits of thought, word and deed.

What's the problem with that?

For one, it may or may not turn out to be a life-giving spiritual practice in the long run. That depends on the foundation our understanding is based on.

Is our starting point that we were made in the image of God,  
or that we were made with some kind of fatal flaw?

Do we think the body is bad,  
or do we understand that when Paul talks about the problem of flesh,  
he's talking about relying on our own power and  
being limited by our capacities and understanding  
instead of dwelling in the Spirit of God?

Is our belief that our pain and suffering is part of God's plan,  
or do we believe that God's plan is simply to walk with us,  
to be with us and love us, no matter what's going on?

The understanding we have, the shorthand we came up with, might have shown us our next step on the path. It served us in that moment, but as conditions change down the road, we might need something different.

For another, we may outgrow that understanding as our faith grows. Every time we encounter any story or teaching, especially a parable, it's always good to examine it more deeply or look at it through a wider lens. Pick it up, turn it around, shake it and see what falls out.

Don't make that understanding into an idol that we worship. Something that we can't question at all. That rigidity, that lack of flexibility, will not serve us well in growing our faith or in life.

I grew up with a saying, “Look at the moon, not the finger pointing at the moon.” It reminds me to ask myself, “Am I still looking toward God, following Jesus? Have I made an idol of the law or my own understanding? Am I holding on to the right thing, the most important thing?”

That’s the saying I remember. To avoid leading you astray, I consulted the internet, and I found several variations.

In *Enter the Dragon*,<sup>3</sup> Bruce Lee’s version adds this detail, “Don’t concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that heavenly glory.”

Thich Nhat Hanh, a well known Vietnamese Buddhist monk, compares the finger pointing at the moon, the teaching that guides us to the truth, to a raft that carries us to the other shore.

“The raft is needed, but the raft is not the other shore. An intelligent person would not carry the raft around on his head after making it across to the other shore... Do not become caught in the teaching. You must be able to let it go.”<sup>4</sup>

In a Buddhist text called the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, a nun asks a Dharma Master to explain a text she doesn’t understand. The Dharma Master tells her, “I can’t read, so if you read the teaching out loud to me, I can answer your questions.” The nun laughed, “If you can’t even read, how can you explain these teachings to me?” He responds, “The truth has nothing to do with those words...The finger can point us toward the location of the moon, but it is not the moon, nor do we necessarily need the finger to see the moon.”<sup>5</sup>

Each variation highlights a different aspect of this saying. Lee doesn’t want us to be so focused on the specifics that we miss the big picture; he reminds us to check to make sure we’re focused on the right thing. For Thich Nhat Hanh, it’s about making sure that the understanding we developed in the past isn’t weighing us down or holding us back. The Dharma Master reminds us that we can see the moon without the finger; there are other ways to the truth.

All three serve as a reminder that our understanding might not be the whole picture; there might be errors in our understanding, as well-intentioned and hard-working as we are.

When we dig deeper, we find another layer. When we pull back or zoom out, we find that we were only taught part of the history, that we only remembered part of the story.

As I admitted earlier, whenever I hear the Parable of the Sower, I think about the soil. I know, I know, it’s right there in the name! Yet I think of the soil and all the work I need to do on myself, that I need to work hard to get it right. I’ve focused on the finger so much I’ve lost sight of the moon.

When I shift my focus to the sower, I realize that the sower is sowing seeds **everywhere**.<sup>6</sup> The difference between good soil and pavement and a field covered in

weeds is plain to see, but the sower doesn't seem to care. The sower isn't afraid of running out of seeds. The sower isn't concerned about the return on this investment.

Shouldn't the sower have a better strategy? A more productive plan?

Yet this is the generosity of God. God isn't choosing whether to send the Spirit of God to us based on whether or not we are a good investment of God's love and time.

This is the boundless grace of God. Jesus doesn't judge whether we are ready, or worthy, before preaching the gospel. He didn't just share his teachings with a small subset of people who passed a test of knowledge or righteousness; he shared the good news with crowds so big that he had to get in a boat to teach them.

So, maybe we don't need to read **all** the books before we act on the big problems in society- climate change, race relations, poverty, labor, just to name a few. There are so many, and they are all complicated...and interrelated. It's tempting to wait for more research, more committees, more...something.

Perhaps this parable is telling us that we don't need to establish the perfect conditions before we do something about issues of race and class and gender and sexuality and the environment. God asks that we try right here, right where we are, with the people around us. God asks that we pray and follow Jesus not just in our hearts, but with our words and hands and feet, however imperfectly. God asks that we don't judge who is worthy or unworthy of our efforts, just as the sower didn't judge the soil.

To be clear, this doesn't mean what we should take action without learning anything about the issues or people affected by them. This doesn't mean we should blindly jump in without making any preparations.

So, what might this parable be saying to us?

That we shouldn't make something all about us when it's about other people, make it about our guilt and insecurities when it's about outcomes that are loving, liberating and lifegiving for people who haven't experienced much of that.

That this is less about our timeline and our sense of comfort and more about showing other people that they are fully known and loved and valued, just as they are.

That we should focus less on the harvest we're getting in return and more about the seeds we're sowing. Try out all of the boxes in growing faith bingo; approach them not as something to add to your to-do list, but as a source of delight and discovery.

Such is the decree we have inherited. This is the way to joy in our hearts.

Amen.

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/a6LC8cu03Ig>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/sacrifice-slavery-and-the-promise>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxA6qJLan-w>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/843488-bhikkhus-the-teaching-is-merely-a-vehicle-to-describe-the>
- <sup>5</sup> [https://www.sohu.com/a/365495220\\_120073397](https://www.sohu.com/a/365495220_120073397) (translation is mine)
- <sup>6</sup> [Lectionary column for July 16, 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time | The Christian Century](#)