

“Karen, Viola and John”

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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The Parable of the Mustard Seed: *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.”*

The Parable of the Yeast: *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.”*

Three Parables: *“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.*

Treasures New and Old: *“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.”*

Last week (you’re welcome to search it on Youtube “Wall Street United Church, July 19th, 2020”) we talked about the presence of evil in the world through the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. We also talked about the Christian response to that evil and injustice and pain that is in the world. This week we’re going to dive into that response a little more deeply with these parables.

I’ve been thinking about the “Karen ”phenomenon lately. I don’t know if you’ve heard of people being labelled a ‘Karen ’or not. (I need to say that every person I know who is actually named Karen is really lovely. I can think of several.) So, I don’t mean to offend real people named Karen, but as they are likely more aware than most, the name ‘Karen ’has become an archetype.

‘Karen ’is a name that represents people with certain characteristics. A ‘Karen ’is usually a white middle-class, middle-aged woman. She is a

woman who is not afraid to speak her mind and stand up for what she thinks is right or speak out against what is wrong.

That doesn't sound bad, does it? In fact, so far it sounds good. Except that the term is very much a negative term and for good reason — it has been coined by African Americans who have repeatedly had women like this calling the police on them for no other crime than being black. These 'Karen's' are self-entitled, self-assured and very confident that they are in the right.

Amy Cooper, who called the police on a black man in Central Park, NY because he asked her to put her dog on a leash, was a classic 'Karen'. There are examples of 'Karen's' kicking a black family out of an outdoor hotel pool and calling the police on them, not realizing that they are guests of the hotel. Even when they do realize their mistake, instead of apologizing these women tend to dig into their 'justified' reasons for their actions.

These incidents that are on video and shared over and over make me uncomfortable. I really don't like social media shaming of any kind, even the shaming of people who don't wear masks. I don't like that people are being judged for one small slice of life that was perhaps out of character. If I'm honest I probably worry that I could be a 'Karen'. What if I risk speaking out and it turns out I'm acting out of a fear and racial prejudice? I sure hope that would never happen, but it makes me worried about speaking out at all. So maybe I should always keep my head down and my mouth shut when I see something wrong. *Fight or flight*.

I don't think you'll be surprised if I tell you that neither *fight* nor *flight* is how we are called as Christians to act or respond when something is not right. We follow Jesus who walked *towards* persecution and pain. He didn't avoid or run away, but neither did he lead a rebellion against what he saw was horribly wrong. There was no knee-jerk, damage-creating reaction from Jesus. Jesus called us to empty ourselves.

In Philippians 2:7-8 we read that Jesus:

"...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross."

People who respond like those 'Karens' are full — full of themselves, and full of fear. They are full of what they think is right and what they think is wrong, and they are happy to be the judge and jury — knowing authorities will almost certainly be on their side. I need to say "God forgive me for the parts of me that are like the 'Karen'."

The danger when we look at self-entitled men and women like the 'Karen' is that we can pendulum-swing from the self-righteous fight to the

flight, where we don't speak up or do anything at all when there is true injustice. Sometimes people even think that the job of the Christian is to be sweet, meek and mild. But as Christians and as the Church, we are called to "seek justice and resist evil", as our New Creed puts it.

Jesus spoke in parables about what the kingdom of heaven is like, and in every case, it is clear that the kingdom of heaven does not show up on the scene loud and proud, demanding that everyone do what it thinks is right. (The church has sometimes been that way, but the kingdom of heaven, never.)

But in a world filled with injustice and evil and pain, neither does the kingdom of heaven run away. The kingdom of God is at work bringing life, healing and renewal in small and even subversive ways. "*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.* (Matthew 13:32-33)"

When the kingdom moves, it is so small it is almost imperceptible. The story of the woman adding yeast to the flour is wonderful. First, it's pretty amazing that the kingdom of heaven is compared to a woman at all, because women in that day and age were really powerless. And that might be the point. The other thing is that while yeast is valuable to us today, Jewish people had a love-hate relationship to it in Jesus' time; leaning more towards hate.

Yeast (or leaven) wasn't something that came in tidy little packets that you keep in your refrigerator. It was a living thing that could be a corrupting agent. Remember that during Passover and on the Sabbath you would never think of using yeast. And the woman doesn't openly mix it in, she "hides" it in the flour. But we know her labour won't be hidden for long as she mixes it into 3 measures, about 50 lbs. of flour; enough for a feast!

As Christ followers, we are called to action. As I said last week, we are called to partner with God to bring that life, healing and reconciliation to the world. But our action should come out of a center of humility (not to be confused with weakness) and love. Our action should come from having been on our knees in prayer and from being empty of self but full of the Spirit.



This past week I learned a lot about Congressman John Lewis who died recently and who has fought for Civil Rights in the United States his entire life. John Robert Lewis **was** the son of sharecroppers who survived a brutal beating by police during a landmark 1965 march in Selma, Alabama.



But I want to bring us closer to home and remind you of one of our own civil rights heroes who I hope you know something about — Viola Desmond. She is on the \$10 bill here in Canada, and she is often compared with Rosa Parks.

In Nova Scotia in 1946, racial segregation was not as obvious and overt as it was in the southern U.S., but it was here all the same. In New Glasgow, where Desmond lived and worked, a black person was always sold a ticket to the balcony at the local movie theatre. Desmond purchased the only ticket she was allowed to purchase and then sat down in a seat on the main floor. She was asked to move and she refused because she had a better view from there. She was forcibly removed from the theatre, which caused an injury to her hip. And she was arrested, charged and even put in jail. She ended up being convicted of not having paid enough tax. You see the tax on the main floor of the theatre was 3 cents, and the tax on the balcony was only 1 cent. So she was convicted of not having paid 2 cents in tax to the government. That is systemic racism – it's often hidden and not obvious.

God was at work in Viola Desmond. The kingdom of heaven was moving through her to bring justice. One of the things about her story that I didn't know until recently is that part of the reason she was willing to fight the charge and conviction is that her church, Cornwallis Street Baptist Church, encouraged her to take action. It was her church who helped her to hire a lawyer to fight the case. They lost the case, but gained publicity just through fighting it. That church recognized the kingdom of God at work and decided to be part of what God was already up to. Wouldn't it be wonderful if churches started discerning where God was at work in the world and taking action to *do* something about it again?

Now remember that the kingdom of God usually starts in small and hidden ways, and it takes time to grow into something large and obvious. Sometimes it takes longer than a lifetime. Viola Desmond received a posthumous pardon for her offence 45 years after her death. John Lewis in the U.S. fought for something his whole life and died at a time when racial tensions are so high and terrible.

Why do it at all? Why bother? Because there is nothing like catching sight of that hidden kingdom of God and working to make it grow. It will fill you with a life beyond your understanding, and is worth more than the most precious pearl or treasure in the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.