



Some Parables from Taizé

By

The Reverend Andy Greenhow

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First Lesson | 1 Kings 3:5-12

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you, and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?" It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no

one like you has been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you.

Second Lesson | Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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 a man found and reburied; 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 become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”



Sermon

From July 10-20, a group of 17 young people from this congregation – nine 20-somethings and eight high school youth – went on a pilgrimage to Taizé, France. Taizé is a small hilltop village in Burgundy where, in 1940, a young man named Brother Roger started an ecumenical, monastic community. Since shortly after its founding, Taizé has been a pilgrimage destination for young people from all over the world, about 100,000 per year. I led this trip alongside

James Kealey, Director of Music and Fine Arts, and Kat La, Program Coordinator for Youth and their Families. While there, I meditated upon these parables of the reign of heaven, and I sought out some more at Taizé. Here is what I found.

The kingdom of heaven is like a low-slung, rough-hewn wooden bench. On top of it, there are 6 or 8 piles of different colored paper with makeshift paperweights. These sheets of paper all say the same thing in different languages, and over the course of the week, you will come to recognize the color of paper that matches your language: Polish, Spanish, German, French, Dutch, Lithuanian, Romanian, or English.

The stacks of paper on this particular bench greet you when you arrive at a daily Bible introduction led by a long-term volunteer or one of the brothers of Taizé who have made a vow to live there full time. The bible introductions are slow-going, not for some monastic reason, but because there is simultaneous translation. In the adult Bible introduction that I attended, the brother would speak in English, then translate himself into French, while a woman on another microphone through

the same speakers would live translate into German, while a group of people huddled in one corner would translate to each other in Spanish. In the youth Bible introduction, a long-term volunteer, whose native language was Brazilian Portuguese, would speak in English while some teenagers would live translate through two different microphones into Spanish and German, while another group huddled in one corner translated to each other in French.

One youth told me at the beginning of the week that these Bible introductions were so annoying because they take like 45 minutes to say something that could take 10 minutes. And she wasn't wrong. But her opinion changed dramatically over the course of the week. So, what happened?

Well, in addition to Bible introductions with live translations, we gathered in the church three times per day for prayer. And when you entered, you grabbed a book of the songs of Taizé, invariably bound at the spine in packing tape from overuse. Depending on your church background, you've probably heard or sung one of these songs – we'll sing one later in this service – but they're simple

verses, sung over and over again until the Holy Spirit says, "OK, that's enough." So, you enter in silence, take a seat on the floor, and then a number flashes on a digital screen like at the deli, and then you turn in your book to that page, and start singing. So last week, we sang songs together, with approximately 2,500 young people from all over the world, in Swedish, Dutch, Catalan, Latin, English, German, Polish, Slovenian, Lithuanian, Arabic, Ukrainian, Romanian, and more.

Then, after a few songs, a brother would read a scripture passage in French, then another brother would read the same passage in English, and then brothers would take turns reading verses of the same passage in all the languages of those present in the space that week: Lithuanian, Romanian, Swedish, German, Spanish, Polish, and others. And after that, we would sit in silence for 8 to 12 minutes, to let the scripture and songs work their way into us.

For some, the sound of Taizé is the songs. For others, it is the silence, or rather the sounds of 2,500 people trying to tolerate silence. But for me, the sound of Taizé is the glorious inefficiency of so many languages all being spoken, all saying

the same thing again in different ways, such that over the course of a given week, God speaks to you clearly in a way that transcends human language. It is one 15-year-old swiping the microphone from another to offer a different, more nuanced translation of what the speaker had just said. It is the delayed laughter of a joke that doesn't land in its original language but does when translated to another. I don't speak German, but the song that wormed its way into my heart more than any other was the one that we used today for our call to worship. Something about how it sounds in German gives me a better sense of the fullness of joy I find when I am being kept by God.

In the kingdom of heaven, there is a din, and in the midst of it, God speaks to us in ways we cannot imagine.

The kingdom of heaven is like an industrial-grade metal roll-up garage door that lumbers and squeaks as it opens and closes. The main church at Taizé – called the Church of Reconciliation – was built in 1962 but by 1971, it was already too small. Brother Emile, a Canadian who met with our group last week, told us the story of

how 6,000 young people had registered to come to Taizé for Easter 1971 and the founder, Brother Roger, knew that if Taizé turned them away, they might never return. So, the brothers decided to demolish the front wall of the church – the one with all the stained glass windows – and put up a giant circus tent to accommodate the crowds.

Today, there is the Church of Reconciliation itself and then, depending on how you count them, 6 or 8 additions all piled on to create this Frankenbuilding, connected to each other by these industrial metal roll-up doors. Brother Roger, in establishing the identity of Taizé, insisted on what he called “the dynamic of the provisional,” meaning that the community must stay attuned to who and what God has put in front of it, and respond faithfully to that, not to some fixed, historical, or insisted-upon strategy.

Just like with language, where it would be more efficient to just use one language or find another way for people to do live translation that doesn't drag down the pace of instruction or worship, so it is with buildings. It surely would have been much more efficient to do a strategic

plan – to track numbers year over year, model trends, and see that the church they were building in the 1960s was much too small, or that this one addition isn't going to cut it. But that's not the "dynamic of the provisional." To be faithful in a provisional way is to look at what God has put in front of us right now and find a way to be faithful to that call.

So, the end result is that in Taizé, everywhere you look, something extraordinary or beautiful or profound is happening, but it's happening against a shockingly unphotogenic backdrop. Every tableau of love or compassion, mutual sharing or cross-cultural exchange, includes a generator or bathroom; the buildings all somehow only have back sides. To photograph the iconic bell tower from a wide enough angle, one cannot avoid including the dish pit where young people in plastic aprons work around the clock, scrubbing pots, pans, dishes, and silverware.

On the cover of your bulletin, you can see one of these garage doors that I came to love, this one affixing the original church building to one of the additions. You can see the chains, just in case the mechanism to raise and lower the doors

doesn't work. You can see the tape on the floor indicating where you can sit and where must be kept clear. You can see a crash bar door that will open during worship to get some airflow. Just out of frame to the left, the choir is practicing, and just out of frame to the right, a garage door is 2/3rds of the way down, and you can see the lower legs of a small group meeting for Bible introduction.

These garage doors are ugly, but they make it possible to create endlessly customizable spaces where 2,500 people can gather for worship, where sharing groups can study the bible together, where 2s and 3s can peel off for private conversations, and families can play with little ones. Last Sunday, I left the church at about 1:30 a.m., leaving about 150 people in the space, singing and praying together. Sometime between 9:30 p.m., when most people had gone out into the night, and now, the garage doors had been lowered. We had been in a cavernous garage at the beginning of worship, but now we were in a cozy, village church. Somehow, both places were almost unbearably holy, held together by ugly, utilitarian doors that keep the community attentive to the present needs of the people it is serving.

The kingdom of heaven meets us here, wherever we are, in whatever configuration we are in – and the community of Taizé, with its dynamic of the provisional, has found a way to give lots of space for God to meet us.

The kingdom of heaven is like three plastic trays pilfered from the cafeteria. One tray is piled high with sheep's milk cheese, the next with slices of dense bread, and the third with chunks of onions and tomatoes, planks of smoked pig feet, and morsels of pork still slick from the fat that has preserved it in plastic jars. It is about 11:30 p.m., and so the low-slung, rough-hewn bench holding these trays is illuminated by cell phone flashlights held by two teenage sous chefs. They defer to our host, Alin, not because he is wielding a large, curved knife, although he is, but because he has clearly done this before and knows exactly what he is doing. He brought this cheese, this bread, these vegetables, and this meat all the way from Alba, Romania, where his bus of 52 youth left 5 days prior for the 30-hour drive to Taizé. He is prevailing upon us to dine with him – a traditional Romanian late-night snack, he says – and while there are some mental calculations being made

about when the last time any of this was refrigerated, we are not in a position to decline this invitation. It's too powerful, it's too highly, and the food we eat is so bland otherwise.

And so, we grabbed pieces of food with our hands, and we licked our fingers clean. As we ate together, a girl from Poland smelled the pork and wandered over and stayed for conversation. The food was, of course, delicious, and Alin was pleased that we were pleased. Alin remembered partway through that he had forgotten homemade eggplant relish to go with everything, and so a spoon appeared from somewhere, and we all passed the spoon around to dip it into the jar. James told me later in the week that this meal, late on Wednesday night, was when Taizé clicked for him.

Alin, our host, first came to Taizé in 2007 and has been back more than 30 times. In his native Romania, Alin is an Orthodox priest, a hospital chaplain, an advocate for people with mental illness, and a doting father. He is an ultra – one of those guys who holds flares and flies huge banners at scary-looking soccer games – for the team Rapid Bucuresti. All of this, Alin shared freely with us,

people brand new to Taizé. He taught us disparaging chants of Rapid's bitter rival Steaua, offered pastoral counsel, offered us Taizé hacks, and more. But Alin, in providing us a traditional Romanian midnight snack, showed us how Taizé can function like the kingdom of heaven: Alin's humble meal created a place of real encounter across difference. It literalized all the ways that in Taizé, our young people were stripped of the identities that get in the way of their encounters with God, with others, and with who they really are. It was in Alin's trustworthiness – his sturdy, Eastern bloc-inflected, “no problem” – that made us know we really were going to eat this food and we really were going to be fine, and we really were going to encounter something new and different and edifying within this holy container.

It was in this provisional representation of the reign of heaven that elite sports, the specter of college, family challenges, quarter-life crises, aimlessness, the feeling that you just can't catch a break, the sense that God isn't listening anymore: it all faded to the background. None of it went away, but it all became “provisional.”

And in Alin's meal, the periods of silence, the patience of waiting for live translation, the songs in languages you didn't know, the not-so-appealing but serviceable structures, the simple, bland food at mealtimes, all of that became means by which we see ourselves the way God sees us. Who you were back home, where you were from, how smart you were, how talented, how successful: all of that was way less important in this context than how things were in your spirit, in how generous you were in encountering others in their spirit.

Here was the kingdom of God: the din of people speaking their own language but encountering God in somebody else's. A space that has enough room for me and everybody else. A place that can shelter us however we wish to gather. A humble meal with enough for all. A place of encounter across difference.

As we gather at this table, we are speaking only in English, and we are in a photogenic and permanent building – we will not install metal doors to wall off the transepts – but nevertheless we will gather around a meal that is a provisional representation of the kingdom of God, a place of encounter across difference.

Here, you will encounter Alin, our Romanian friend, and Anna, a Catalan epidemiologist haunted by the 20,000 lives lost in Barcelona during the pandemic that she thinks could have been saved, who still dreams of living a life with care at the center. You will encounter Emilia, a young woman from Germany burnt out on caring for vulnerable people and at the end of her rope, coming to Taizé to be rejuvenated. Sam, a university student from Liverpool trudging through unhappy years, coming to Taizé for a change of scenery. You will encounter Bram, a young man from the Netherlands, whose parents died when he was young and who first came to Taizé as a teenager when his foster parents kicked him out. He doesn't believe in any of this stuff, but when times are hard, he likes being around people who think of God as a parent. At this table, you will encounter the young people from this church that you sent to Taizé and returned not as we see them but as God sees them. And here, at this table, you can even encounter yourself just as God sees you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

