

Imagination Is a Battleground, Not a Hobby

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[0 : 00] A prodigy is at its essence adaptability and persistent positive obsession.

! Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment.! Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism.

! Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all. So writes the protagonist of Octavia's speculative fiction novel, *The Parable of the Sower*. These words are part of a new religion that she founds that is called Earthseed.

Earthseed is founded by the protagonist of Butler's novel, and she's a black teenager named Lauren Olamina. And she uses those words as she's trying to describe the world that she sees around her. A *New Yorker* article aptly described the world created in Butler's novel and observed by the main character, Lauren. The article talks about the similarities between the world in the world and our own. Global warming in the world of Lauren explains the article has brought drought and rising seawater. The middle class and working poor live in gated neighborhoods where they fend off the homeless with guns and walls. Fresh water is scarce as valuable as money. Pharmaceutical companies have created smart drugs which boost mental performance. And pyro, a pill that gives those who take it sexual pleasure from arson. Fires are common in this world. Police services are expensive though few people trust the police. Public schools are being privatized as our whole towns. In this atmosphere, a presidential candidate named Christopher Donner is elected based on his promises to dismantle the government and bring back jobs.

And what the *New Yorker* article points out, and which is eerily hard to miss in this current political moment, is that in Lauren's world, there is a potential successor to Donner named Andrew Jarrett Still, who promises, quote, to make America great again. Lauren observes in her journal that Jarrett supporters are more than a little seduced by Jarrett's talk of making America great again.

[2 : 53] He seems to be unhappy with certain other countries. We could wind up in a war, she writes. Nothing like a war to rally people around flag and country and great leader.

Amazingly, a parable of the sower was published in 1993. And yet the world that Butler creates that she imagines is set in the mid-2020s.

I recently had a conversation with a congregant about this upcoming sermon, and she said that she usually enjoys dystopian novels, but struggles with Octavia Butler's world because it just feels too real.

It feels too close. Yet in response to the grimness of the world she encounters, the protagonist, Lauren, founds this new belief system, Earthsea, which tenets are things like this.

The destiny of Earthsea is to take root among the stars. And all that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting thing is change.

[4 : 05] God is change. Now, before you throw me out of this pulpit, this stage on charges of heresy because of that last line, that's that butler wrote that, you know, I mean, we can talk about theology and things later.

The parable of the sower offers these lessons about adaptability and persistence in a world that feels like it is burning down. About the ways that empathy can feel like a liability in such a world. It's about our need for interdependence if we are to make it forward into a livable future. But maybe more than anything, the novel, in terms of its own content as being representative of this new genre, is founded on the idea of imagination as a spiritual act.

Octavia Butler is considered the mother of Afrofuturism, a particular kind of art that narrates black identity and black liberation by creatively depicting black futures.

It takes seriously Audrey Lord's poetic perception that black people were never meant to survive in this country. And it marries it with this kind of celebratory impulse inscribed in the ending lines of

one of Lucille Clifton's poems.

[5 : 29] Come celebrate with me that every day something has tried to kill me and has failed. Afrofuturism riffs too on poet June Jordan's proclamation to the women of South Africa that we are the ones we have been waiting for.

Afrofuturism insists on writing black people along with all marginalized people into the future, insists that black people along with all marginalized people should be active creators of the future.

And this is not merely interesting. For the entire summer as a church, we're going to be turning our attention to the parables of Jesus, these short stories which place one thing beside another thing to reveal something true about the kingdom of God and formation in the way of Jesus.

As I said last week, after you've survived the disorienting Saturdays of your life, you've allowed your heart of stone to become a heart of flesh and experienced the resurrection of Sunday morning. Then you've opened your hands to faithfully steward what God has put in them. The question becomes, what can you dare to imagine?

[7 : 02] And it's been the summer being guided by the ones who were never meant to survive and yet still dare to imagine. They may be the ones most equipped to help us understand the world of the parables and the world that Jesus dares us to imagine.

So this morning, we're going to start with what likely was Jesus' very first parable. It's found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And it's considered to hold the interpretive key, many scholars think, to how to understand the other parables.

We're going to read Mark's version, starting in Mark 4, chapter 4. This is a good time to go into table.center to look at the sermon text and also there's a bunch of other stuff around the sermon in there that you can use for the rest of the week.

Or if you just have a Bible, you can open it to Mark 4. Mark 4, chapter 4.

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on a path and the birds came and ate it up. Other fell on rocky ground where it did not have much soil and it sprang up quickly since it had no depth of soil.

[8 : 47] And when the sun rose, it was scorched and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns. And the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no grain.

Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding 30 and 60 and 100 fold. And he said, if you have ears to hear, then hear.

When he was alone, those who were around him, along with the 12, asked about the parables. And then skipping down to Jesus' response in verse 13, And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable?

Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground. When they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But have no root. And endure only for a little while.

[10 : 00] Then when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are sown among the thorns. These are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the age.

And the lure of wealth. And the desire for other things comes in and chokes the word and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil.

They hear the word and accept it. And bear fruit. 30 and 60 and 100 fold. Okay, so this parable basically begins with Jesus deciding to teach from a boat.

A short way offshore. Because the crowd gathering around him is just so large. It's likely that the disciples were also in the boat with him. And maybe a few other kind of insiders.

But not the large crowds. There's a tension that the gospel writer is expressing here between those on the boat and those on the shore.

[11 : 05] Those in on what Jesus is doing and those who hear but always seem to be just a little ways off from Jesus himself. Like the religious leaders.

Like even Jesus' family in the previous chapter. They are outside even though the teaching is available to them. And what Jesus teaches about is simple.

A farmer sowing seed in Palestine. A farmer who might have cast seed throughout a field by hand. Just kind of scattering it. Or perhaps would have taken a sack and cut a hole in it.

Attached the bag. Would have cut a hole in a bag. Attached the bag to an animal. And kind of led the animal through the field. And let the seed fall through the sack. No matter what the ordinary. No matter what. This is this kind of ordinary image. It's almost boring in nature. And it's striking that Jesus even uses it.

[12:09] Yet Jesus brackets the parable with exhortations to listen at the very top. And then to hear at its conclusion. And he's riffing on Deuteronomy 6.4.

The Shema. Which says, hear O Israel. The Lord. The Lord our God is one. That connection makes clear that this is something that is to be central to faith.

That everyone who is listening hear. This shockingly mundane story. A farmer goes out and just casts seed into the ground.

Some falls on the path. That farmers would have probably made through a field. So they themselves could walk on it. Some falls on rocky soil. Some falls among thorns.

That probably had been previously cut. But. And so you couldn't see where they were. And then when the thorns grow. The seed is choked. The first three seeds bear no fruit.

[13:09] Because they either have no roots. Shallow roots. Or roots but no fruit. That's the whole story. But then a few verses later.

We see that the disciples felt the need to ask Jesus. Like. What does this very simple parable mean? Maybe they were stunned by the parable.

Because it didn't contain any religious language. It's drawn from the ordinary life of peasants. This is parable that makes really clear that.

The earth and the processes of nature are also our instructors. With what seems to be some frustration. Jesus says that this parable is key.

You've got to understand it. If you want to be in on what God is doing. Jesus explains that the seed is the word. The logos. The teaching about the very structure of reality in God.

[14:09] The proclamation of the kingdom of God. Sometimes the teaching remains beside the path. Instead of on the path. Making it vulnerable to these death dealing and accusatory powers of what is known as the Satan.

Or Satan. Sometimes the teaching is received with enthusiasm. But then suffering and the notions of what prosperity looks like or should look like.

They come. And they subvert a person's ability to follow. Sometimes the sense that a person will be perceived as a fool or a threat.

Also damages the seed. And sometimes a person is simply distracted by what might feel more pressing. They might be deluded by alternate desire or deceived into the belief that getting and having more is essential to what it means to be human.

Of the four areas in which the seed is cast. Only one bears a crop. Now often when this parable gets talked about.

[15:29] We call it the parable of the sower or we center the possibility of the seeds. But this parable is really a story about the soil that the seed falls on.

Much of Palestine is rocky. It's rocky with this kind of shallow layer of soil above it. A typical harvest would have produced on average maybe 10 seeds for every one seed planted.

Or 10, you know. How do I say that? Lord Jesus. Would have produced a crop of 10 to 1. There you go. Let me get my math going. So to say that the harvest bears one seed for one seed 60 or 30 or even 100 times is pretty astounding.

In light of the previous story, Jesus seems to want to make clear why the disciples face opposition. Because there are different kinds of soil in the world.

But he also asks his disciples to examine themselves. To ask what kind of soil am I? Particularly when it comes to facing hostility or when I suffer.

[16:46] What kind of soil am I really? Am I persistent and adaptable as Lauren Olamina would put it? Am I settled in my fundamental positive obsession with Jesus and his kingdom?

To what extent are we oriented to the new world coming? Some scholars when they write about this parable, they see the soil as the mind or the will of a person.

But the language of Matthew and Mark and Luke can also be understood as connecting the soil to the heart. So then we ask ourselves, how have our hearts been compressed and constrained?

The part of us that intuits our way forward. See, Jesus asked us to envision a world that was unthinkable.

To live in that world and to talk to others about that world. That requires these soft, intact hearts in a world that feels dystopian.

[18 : 02] And it requires imagination to receive the teaching of Jesus and to receive the kingdom. On this weekend of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, there are many imaginings on offer.

The one parading through the streets this weekend emerged from an elite white Christian imagination, which suppressed and attempted to erase difference along with any threat to its own domination.

Especially from black and indigenous people. This past week, I was tempted to visit the freedom truck. Did anybody go?

Oh, I saw some faces. Okay. So I was tempted to go visit the freedom truck that's currently stationed in D.C. Or maybe it left yesterday. I don't know. Because I had heard about the ways that it presents American slavery as being kind of one small bug in an otherwise smooth operating system of the United States.

And I really just, sometimes you just want to see something with your own eyes. I just want to see it with my own eyes, this kind of bold claim. But in the end, wisdom got the better of me.

[19 : 21] And I instead went to the, I instead went to the Museum of African History and ended up on a bench reading sociologist Ruha Benjamin's book, *Imagination, A Manifesto*.

And Benjamin, with this exquisite perception, highlights not the desire to imagine marginalized people out of the American past, which is what had been on my mind, but instead the impulse to imagine them out of the future.

Benjamin explores the underside of the long-termism movement, which is a new movement to me. This movement among the tech elite in our country. And she sees it as this poisonous cocktail of utopianism mixed with the belief that the ends justify the means.

She quotes long-termist Nick Beckstead, who writes, saving lives in poor countries may have significantly smaller ripple effects than saving lives and improving lives in rich countries.

Why? Richer countries have substantially more innovation and their workers are much more economically productive. Just below the surface of such talk is the idea that some people deserve to be in the future while others do not.

[20 : 39] But on this 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we have an offer of imagination of America's founding and an imagination of America's future that are both compacted and compressed soils.

Yet the followers of the Jesus of Galilee are called to a radical dream of liberation, her call to receive the kingdom as if it were present now, to embrace what we cannot see, and to make it real. Adrienne Marie Brown emphasizes how important whose imagination we choose to enter and to center really is when she writes that imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography.

Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as black people is a revolutionary decolonizing activity.

Brown goes on to add, we are in an imagination battle. Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because in some white imagination they were dangerous.

[22 : 09] And that imagination is so respected that those who kill based on an imagined, racialized fear of black people are rarely held accountable. Imagination has people thinking they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream.

Imagination turns brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims.

Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of ability.

To envision something outside the dominant imagination is a radical act. To believe that vision with your actions just might be to receive the kingdom.

See, what I haven't said yet is what makes this parable so extraordinary. The parable isn't just some feel-good hope that people will become better because their hearts are somehow better.

No, the parable is set in a world of average poor Palestinian farmers, in the world of debt and subsistence farming, day labor and extreme taxes. It's set in a world of disaster in which most people live just below the level of slaves.

[23 : 33] To have a harvest of grain that so far exceeded expectations would turn the whole system of extractive domination on its head.

The parable's harvest, writes Chad Myers, symbolically represents a dramatic shattering of the vassal relationship between peasant and landlord.

With such surplus, the farmer could not only eat and pay his rent, tithes and debts, but indeed even purchase the land and thus end his servitude forever.

The kingdom is like this, says Jesus. It envisions the abolition of the oppressive relationships of production that determine the horizons of the Palestinian farmer's social world.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine that? Can you imagine that? Now the real reason that I went to the Museum of African American History this week, it wasn't wisdom.

[24 : 39] I just like to think it was. It wasn't wisdom. It was because I really just wanted to see if anything was left of the exhibit the museum once had on Afrofuturism.

And specifically I wanted to see this. This is Trayvon Martin's flight suit, which in the end I was only able to see a photo of. This is a flight suit Trayvon Martin wore as a kid who dreamed of being in the sky and among the stars in his own imagination, but whose life was cut short by somebody else's. Lauren Olamina wrote that the destiny of Earth's seed is to take root among the stars. And Trayvon Martin wore that destiny on his body. The small flight suit, this child who was already reaching for orbit before somebody else's imagination, thin soiled, thorn choked, decided that the stars weren't his to reach for.

And unfortunately, Trayvon Martin is just one of so many. This is what a compacted imagination does. It doesn't just fail to dream a future for someone.

It actively narrows the ground they're allowed to grow in. But here is the good news buried in the dirt of this parable.

[26 : 13] Soil is not destiny. Soil can change. Jesus seemed to ask his disciples to examine themselves in a world where they would face only increasing hostility, to consider in a world that often feels so dystopian, what kind of soil are you?

All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. So change your soil if that's what is needed. You can receive prayer today or take some time this week to carve out real solitude because a heart can't soften on the run.

Imagination doesn't arrive on command. It arrives in a quiet room that you intentionally create. And then I would also ask you to look for the good soil already producing fruit around you.

A person, a practice, a stubborn seed of the kingdom pushing up through concrete. And when you find it, capture it somehow. Wow. And yet there is one more piece of good news.

Yes, soil can change. But the parable also reminds us that the harvest from the seed sown in one plot of good soil doesn't just produce enough to pay the landlord and keep things grinding forward for another year.

[27 : 41] No, the seed sown in good soil ends the whole arrangement. It pays the debts. It satisfies the landlord. It buys back the land.

It takes an entire system built to keep peasants poor and it puts it out of business. The good soil doesn't just produce a better crop. By the power of God, the good soil produces freedom.

That, that is the gospel hiding inside this ordinary farming story. The kingdom of God is not an additional blessing sprinkled on top of an unjust system.

It's the end of the system. It's the end of the system. Not decoration, not escape, but a whole different arrangement of who owns the land and who owns the future.

So when I ask you to make space this week for solitude and imagination, understand what's really at stake. You're not just indulging yourself.

[28 : 48] You are tending the kind of ground that ends servitude. When I ask you to document every place you see good soil, understand that you are keeping record of where the old system is passing away.

So, whose imagination will you live inside? And what will be your positive obsession? Amen.