“On Putting One’s Hand to the Plow”

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As a culture, we are further and further removed from the farm land and the farm economy as each year passes. There was a time not so many decades ago when most people in America lived on a farm or had a relative who did, a time when most of us had a plow in the barn and a work horse in the stable and a harness in the leather shop. Only two generations ago, most everyone knew what it meant to put one’s hand to the plow. Certainly, Jesus took it for granted that everyone would know, instantly, what he meant when he said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” I had no idea what this meant until I had a friendly visit with a farmer!

To understand the sacred meaning of this text, come with me to the edge of a cultivated field. We are standing behind a fine ox who is harnessed to a plow. As we encourage the animal forward, our responsibility is to keep the row straight. By keeping the rows straight, there is an efficiency to the planting and a maximizing of the yield. We do this by picking out a tree or a boulder at the far end of the field and keeping our eyes glued on that landmark. That is the secret to plowing a straight row. If you have to scratch your nose or glance down at your watch or, worse, turn and look back over your shoulder to where you’ve been, you’re in big trouble because the furrow begins to look more like the S curve on Chestnut Hill Road than it does the straight away going south from Buck’s Corner toward the transfer station.

When we put our hand to the plow, and look back, we are instantly off course, and the manager of that farm will soon deem us unfit for this kind of work and turn the assignment over to another.
Jesus was naming the high expectation for discipleship. He wanted everyone to know that discipleship requires us to stay focused on what he called the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God was a vision of life lived as God intends it to be lived. To lose sight of that vision, to be distracted by some lesser focus is to end up with crooked rows, with a community in chaos. To keep one’s eye on the Kingdom and to spend one’s energy for the sake of the Kingdom is the high expectation Jesus holds for those who choose to follow him.

So, let’s spend a little time this morning catching a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, or to use a more inclusive term, the Realm of God. These glimpses of the Realm of God appear throughout the Gospels, especially in the parables. Most of the parables begin, “The Kingdom of God is like…” To look at the parables is a little like walking through a museum of art. Entering each gallery, there is something unique to discover. When I take such a tour, I play a little game with myself. I ask, ‘which of these paintings would I take home with me if I could afford to buy just one?’ The Gospel parables are like that. We read them and we ask, ‘what is the one vision of God’s Realm we are meant to take home, to take to heart?’

First, in the Realm of God greed gives way to a philosophy of sharing, a philosophy that says in a nutshell, ‘enough is enough.’ When we put our hand to the plow and look down the row, we focus on a tree where God has carved the word SHARE into the bark! Not ‘Kilroy was here,’ but ‘sharing is here.’

We have that great parable of the farmer who has such a bumper crop of grain that he doesn’t know what to do with it all. Rather than share it with those who are hungry, he tears down his average size barn and builds a bigger one. His greed kicks in. Though some modern readers think him wise, prudent, Jesus chides him for his greed.
In the Realm of God, what kicks in is the impulse to share the bounty. When we put our hand to the plow, we say YES to this preference for sharing. The temptation is to look back on all the neighbors who are building the bigger barns and stockpiling the bounty and long to be like them, finding security in the accumulation of wealth. That’s when the ox steps across the furrow and discipleship is compromised and chaos sets in.

It has often been said that America is a Christian nation. I suppose that is true if you use the statistical approach. Just by counting the number of church members across the country, you come up with a higher number than any other faith. But using the measurement of the hand to the plow and not looking back, the measurement of sharing vs. hoarding, then I wonder if this is really true. Where greed gives way to sharing, poverty becomes something we only read about in history books, not on the front page of the New York Times. Where greed gives way to sharing, there is no need to track unemployment trends because everyone is fully employed. Where greed gives way to sharing, the term ‘gated community’ disappears from the developer’s handbook because there is no longer a fear that somebody might sneak in and get my stuff. Where greed gives way to sharing, the Realm of God thrives and our Creator grins from ear to ear.

Two weeks ago we mailed the check for $140 to Heifer Project International. It will provide seven clusters of baby chicks to third world villagers. They will receive the chicks, raise the chicks, pass along future generations of chicks to their neighbors, benefit from the protein of eggs, and, occasionally, enjoy adding some meat to the stew pot. Shawn, now nine years old, could have let her friends come to her birthday party bringing expensive gifts, but she decided she has enough toys. She asked her friends to bring, instead, the money they might have spent. Instead of asking her dad to build her a bigger toy box, she asked her friends to join her in this act of sharing.
So, together, she and her friends chose that path; she and her friends put their hands to the plow and still haven’t looked back! Shawn has no regrets! Jesus said the Realm of God is revealed where individuals and churches and even nations make similar choices, committing to a philosophy of sharing our substance. If we listen in the silence, we still hear him crying out, ‘put your hand to the plow. Keep your eye on the vision of sharing. And do not look back.’

Let us visit a second parable for a second glimpse of the Kingdom, or the Realm of God. In the Realm of God, peace has a chance. Peace has more than a chance. Peace has the priority. To put one’s hand to the plow and not look back is to say YES to being a peacemaker in the world and not looking back at the other options. At the end of the row in the cultivated field, God has carved the word ‘peace’ into the bark of the tree.

Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus stepping into troubled situations, and not so much taking sides, but illuminating a more excellent way to resolve a conflict. He’s not so much interested in taking sides as he is in empowering people and nations to bridge whatever it is that separates them from each other.

He tells a simple parable that sets up a situation of violence. A traveler has been ambushed, beaten, robbed, and left for dead. We are not told who this person is, what his economic standing might be, his marital status, his ethnicity, or his Intelligence Quotient. We are left to observe two styles for peacemaking and, ultimately, we are left to decide how we will choose to be a peacemaker in the midst of violence. I believe Jesus tells this parable, now so familiar to us all, as a way of instigating a conversation on how to be a peacemaker when the world is full of violence. The first model of dealing with violence is the model of avoidance.
Two religious types come along, see the ambushed traveler and choose not to get involved. They are like the ones who hear about the genocide in Darfur and decide to ignore it. They go along their merry way cushioned from the pain of the violated one, even believing God blesses them in their indifference.

The second model for dealing with violence is the model of engagement. A foreigner happens along the road, sees the wounded man, puts his own agenda on hold, and demonstrates a laudable measure of mercy. He is like the one who hears about Darfur in her Current Issues class at Glastonbury High School, can not let it rest, can not sleep at night, feels the pain of those millions of refugees, and brings her concern to her church, and stirs up $5000 worth of mercy.

In this Parable of the Good Samaritan, there are the travelers who put their hand to the plow and then look back; and there is one who puts a hand to the plow and chooses not look back. One is a peacemaker; the others are not.

Jesus Christ came into the world to announce that God was speaking in a whole new vocabulary. He referred to this new way as the Kingdom of God. Then, he invited people of all ages and all backgrounds to listen to this new revelation and to live into this new revelation. In the parables he gives many glimpses of what life is like when such a commitment is made. When we put our hand to the plow and don’t look back: greed gives way to sharing; avoidance gives way to engagement.

It is easy to see why many were turning away from following him. I am awed by those who took up the challenge and responded to the invitation. I’m glad to be part of a church family that day by day heads over to the cultivated field, puts its hand to the plow and endeavors to not look back! This is my reflection on the text, and I share it with you all in the greatest of hope! Amen!