

Hic Sunt Dracones! **(“Here be dragons!”)**

*The disciples came up and asked, “Why do you tell stories?”
He replied . . . “Whenever someone has a ready heart . . .
The insights and understandings flow freely . . .
That’s why I tell stories: to create readiness,
To nudge people toward receptive insight.
(Matthew 13:10-11, *The Message*)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, **August 13, 2017**
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In Matthew 13 our gospel writer treats us to a copious sample of Jesus’ teaching, a cluster of seven parables. Matthew’s intent isn’t merely to share these stories, but to offer an explanation, in Jesus’ own words, as to why he used this method of teaching.

The Parable of the Sower is the first of these seven story-based lessons. I intentionally haven’t read that or any of the other parables because I want our focus to be not on any one parable, nor certainly on any specific detail of a parable, but rather to back off, to lose focus on the details so that we might consider a broader topic -- the parabolic method of teaching itself.

“*Why do you speak to them in parables?*” the disciples ask. Jesus’ answer is, “*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.*” The telling of stories -- carefully and deliberately with didactic purpose -- Jesus suggests are uniquely equipped to go far beyond the story itself, to unlock insights hidden within the details.

To be sure, we all know the word *Parable*. I want to introduce you to a lesser-known word, an etymological cousin, *Parabola*, which is a mathematical and geometric term describing one of the most elegant forms in nature. Every path made by a thrown ball (an apt image as we are now at the threshold of football season now), every arc of a beautiful nine iron shot into a manicured green in the Village, and every spout of water from a fountain in one of the nearby water hazards, forms a *parabola*.





While football and golf offer images we know, Jesus' disciples would have recognized the *parabola* of every net thrown by the fisherman of the Galilee, arching up and settling gently upon and into the water of the Galilee.

Both *Parabola* and *Parable* derive from the Greek word, *parabolais* (the word Matthew uses here in chapter 13) meaning literally, "to throw alongside." The point is that there is a certain *Alongside-ness* in story-telling, when done with didactic purpose. The story itself is not the point, but hidden within one discovers

another, not so quickly observable truth tucked away as in 3D within the layers of details. The skilled teller of parables seeks to bring into focus and clarity that which is hidden within.

As *parables* are much more than beautiful stories, *parabolas* are much more than elegant forms, likewise useful in bringing clarity and focus. Every satellite dish, another everyday example of a *parabola*, is a scooping arc intended to bring focus and clarity. The dish gathers beams of energy in the form of light or radio waves, clustering them at one point so that reception is clarified and channeled to the viewer.



Through this modern day *parabola* we are able to see in ways our ancestors could never have imagined.

What science through *parabolas* has done for technological receptivity, the *parables* of Jesus did for spiritual receptivity. Jesus' *parables* act as *parabolas* to focus our seeing on another, spiritual realm existing *Alongside* the mundane details of any story of sower and seed, shepherd and sheep, or vine and grape.

Such clarity can come only when one is ready to hear the story at its deeper levels. I shared last Sunday a proverb which is even more apropos today, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." This is an element of Matthew's narrative highlighted in *The Message*. When the disciples ask Jesus why he told stories, he replied, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. **Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight.**"

Some twenty-five years ago you might have found me standing in the concourse of the mall in Ann Arbor, hypnotically staring at books of strange art with repetitive patterns of seemingly non-sensical squiggles. I was adjusting my eyes to a new way of seeing, in 3D. *Magic Eye* images were first published in the United States in 1993, and caused quite a phenomenon, spending 73 weeks on *the New York Times* best-seller list. The images appear at first glance to be but blobs of contrasting shadow and color, but hidden within were wonderful images. Do you have eyes to see what is hidden in this Magic Eye image?



Perhaps the image I've placed here remains, for you, tantalizingly hidden. If so, it's because your eyes are trained to view traditional focus. Using a few simple principles, perhaps I can lead you to discover the 3D image within this block of seemingly meaningless squiggles. The first principle is entirely counter-intuitive. Our eyes are trained to focus on a two dimensional image – ink on paper. To see another dimension one must intentionally lose focus. The paradox is, if you try too hard to see it, you may not. Loosen up. Let things get fuzzy, even though it goes against everything you've ever been taught about seeing clearly. In order to see crystal clear – and believe me, the image here is crystal clear -- you must allow yourself to lose focus.

Try not to blink. Don't stare at the picture, but through the picture, as if a kaleidoscope. Lose focus on the details of ink on paper. Look beyond the paper as if trying to stretch the image away from you. You may be amazed when that which is hidden emerges.

Do you see that which is hidden, the knight slaying a dragon? The knight, with sword in right hand and shield in left, is bracing himself for battle as the winged dragon turns away his body, his head rotating back to stare menacingly at the knight. How many of you see it?

Some don't? I know of only one exercise to see the 3D image. Now, even if you already see the image, many of our congregation don't, so please join others so as not to make anyone feel silly (plus, it will make a great picture for our church archives to have everyone staring into their

bulletins as if hypnotized!). Let me see if I can nudge you further toward seeing. First, put the image to your face, placing the tip of your nose squarely in the middle of the image. Gradually draw the image away from your face, not blinding and not focusing. Lose focus and look through the paper. Slowly there may emerge the image of the knight slaying the dragon.

I chose this image purposefully (of course!). Medieval mapmakers, with limited knowledge of distant lands and uncharted seas, would often depict dragons at the far edges of their maps, with a warning in Latin, *Hic Sunt Dracones*, “Here be dragons!” The phrase was meant to instill fear of the unknown, that which could not be seen, could not be mapped.

To be sure, Rand/McNally doesn’t put dragons at the edges of our maps today, and our smart phone maps don’t have dragons on the edges. Perhaps not, but we still (don’t we, just a little bit?) feel dragons lurking when we are driving through terra incognita and wonder, “Where in the world is my GPS taking me!”

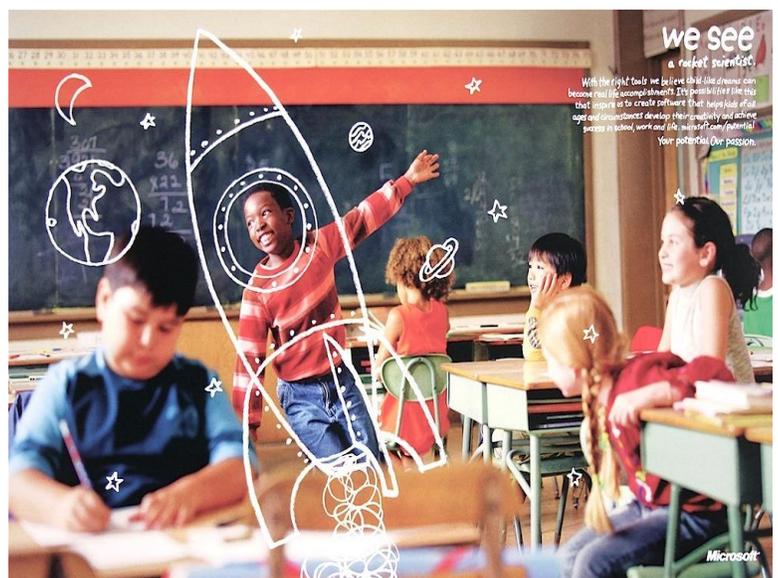


In truth, though, science and technology has given us confidence that we can slay any dragon stalking at the edges of chaos. More than at any time in human history, the unknown doesn’t instill fear, but beckons us. *We See* not dragons at the edge of our knowing, but rather *We See* Possibility.

We See is the slogan of a series of Microsoft ads launched ten years ago, in 2007. The ads are intended to help us vision our potential. Click on this link and watch a brief “We See” ad:

<http://youtu.be/zyE1KbTuJqk>

This print example from the “We See” ad series shows children playing in a classroom (I thought that uniquely appropriate for this week as school begins). Children are laughing and one seems about to take wing and soar. Microsoft has possibility sketched all around him -- a rocket and he explores the planets and the stars. We don’t know what this young boy was imagining in that moment, but we do know what Microsoft saw: *We See – A rocket scientist.*



Potential is sketched in that classroom, unseen to all eyes but those of the heart, vision, faith, and imagination. That potential is alive in every classroom of our community and our world.

The ad goes says, “*Your potential is our passion.*” What a wonderful message for the church! After all, imagining what is not there shouldn’t be a challenge for the church. Seeing things that aren’t there? It’s in our spiritual DNA! *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* May God give us eyes to see the Beyond-of-What-Is!

Seeing in this way, with the imagination, is no radical concept. Biologically, parents see things from the moment of a child’s birth. “*We See. Your Potential. Our Passion.*” I can’t think of a better description of parenting, envisioning their children’s potential and then making that potential their own passion.

Your potential is our passion. What a great vision statement. In staff retreat this week I offered a devotional sketched out along the lines of our vision statement: *Bring in. Build up. Reach out.* My earlier example of the *parabola* of a satellite dish is a wonderful illustration. (1) As the dish gathers in parallel beams of energy, we **Bring In** people, their gifts and their dreams. (2) As the dish brings energy to a focus point, we **Build Up** by enhancing those gifts through worship and spiritual development. (3) As the dish then channels the energy outward the church is then ready to **Reach Out** to the world in mission.

I am uniquely blessed and profoundly thankful for the privilege of being appointed to Christ of the Hills, cherishing the opportunity to serve with so many in our church – staff and laity -- whose vision is alive, whose commitment is unquestioned and proven through giving of themselves, imagining things that as yet are not.

Christ of the Hills stands in a tradition of bold vision. We wouldn’t be here today had not many of you, and others who went before, faced the dragons of challenge, conquered their fears, and moved forward in faith. I believe this is our calling still, not merely to celebrate our past, but to hear the *Invitation to the Imagination*, to dream of our future.

*O God, give us an imagination
adequate to the possibilities. Amen.*