

Pentecost 20 – Proper 25C – October 26, 2025

Joel 2:23-32

Psalm 65

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Luke 18:9-14

The Strange Beauty of Parables

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*



There is a traditional Jewish saying that goes, “God created human beings because God loves stories.” Engaging stories contain colorful characters and surprising plot twists. We know, well, that much of Jesus’ teaching was in the form of stories that we know as parables. Can we name some of our favorite parables?



As we are winding up this year of Luke, we are in the heart of a string of Jesus’ parables. Your burning curiosity about parables may prompt you ask: “...and how many parables did Jesus actually teach?” The exact number varies depending upon how one defines a parable. A parable can be a metaphor, an allegory, a taunt, or a riddle. In the first three gospels... in the parallel story lines found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke... there are 30 plus identified sayings of Jesus that are designated as parables. In the Gospel according to Mark, there are two parables. In the Gospel according to Matthew, you will find about 21. In Luke, about 15. Many parables may be found in more than one gospel... such as the parable of the Mustard Seed that is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The number of parables is higher if the definition of a parable is broadened to include every simile... such as “the kingdom of God is like...,” or piece of wisdom offered in the form of a proverb, or and aphorism such as “the truth will set you free.” With this broadened definition, you will find some parables in John’s gospel also.

Thinking about parables that stick with us, we recognize their power... and that power does not rest in a simple, distilled interpretation of the parable story. Quite the contrary. I particularly like this reflection about mining parables for meaning, offered by the biblical scholar Walter Wink from his book, *Transforming Bible Study*¹:

¹ Pg. 159

Parables are tiny bits of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch the ray of something ultimate and glint it at our lives. Parables are not illustrations; they do not support, elaborate, or simplify a more basic idea. They are not ideas at all, nor can they ever be reduced to theological statements. They are the jeweled portals of another world; we cannot see through them like windows, but lights are refracted through their surfaces that would otherwise blind us – or pass unseen.

Parables... are the jeweled doorways into another world where we are invited to examine a faith story by peering into it from different perspectives, and even by turning the story inside out... and upside down. Parables, “tease the mind into ever new perceptions of reality; they startle the imagination; they function like symbols in that they give rise to thought.”² One approach we can use when encountering any biblical story is putting ourselves in the place of one of the characters. We can then continue our exploration of the parable by *trying on* the experience of a *different* character. When we explore the parable of the Good Samaritan, we may be prone to focus on the man who was beaten, and lying naked at the side of the road, or on the Samaritan, the despised foreigner, who picks up the wounded man, and tends to him, and finds him a bed for the night. Too often, we skip putting ourselves in the place of the Levite, the priest, or even the innkeeper. In examining this rich parable, it is important to remember that Jesus is telling the story in response to a question posed by a law expert who was out to test Jesus, hoping to trip him up. The question asked by the law expert was: “How do I inherit eternal life?”... to which Jesus lobs back with another question... “What is written in the law... How do you read it?” The Law expert responds by quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The law says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”³; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴ Jesus replied, “You have answered correctly, do this and you will live.” Wanting to justify himself, the law expert then asks: “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus doesn’t simply say, “everyone is your neighbor, of course!” Instead, Jesus answers the question “And who is my neighbor”... by telling a story.

The parable we have been offered today... about a pharisee and a tax collector... may seem simple on the surface... I mean, who wants to be like the pompous Pharisee who prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Who wants to be like the Pharisee who reminds God “how fortunate God is to have such a wonderful guy like him on the team”⁵??? But the fact that we don’t want to be like the Pharisee... and would prefer to be seen as being like the humble tax collector who is vulnerable before God, as one who confesses, weeps, and surrenders... If we slip into a comfortable self-righteous understanding of this parable, we are stepping into the very trap the parable has set for us. The paradox is... that if we think we are more faithful and pious because we are like the tax collector, we are actually behaving like the Pharisee! Debbie Thomas puts it well. In her response to this parable about the praying Pharisee and tax collector, Thomas writes that she is sorely tempted to pray, “Lord, I thank you that I am nothing like the obnoxious caricature of a human being who is the Pharisee in your story. Thank you that I have arrived at a point in my faith journey where I am much

² Perrin quotation, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, pg. 106.

³ Deut. 6:5

⁴ Lev. 19:18

⁵ Ian MacDonald, “Immeasurable Love, a Sermon,” October 26, 2013, <https://www.jesusnotjesus.org/be-kind/immeasurable-love-a-sermon>

more like the tax collector: self-aware, emotionally intelligent, mindful, cognizant, teachable, humble..."⁶ awake! This is the point where the trap snaps shut, the mirror is held up, and the parable's probing paradox revealed.

In thinking about the takeaways from this parable in which we encounter two men praying in the temple, I would be tempted to look into my own practices of prayer and the tendency for my pesky ego to get involved. The "aha!" in today's parable deals with... at least through one lens... the ongoing invitation to grow into the paradoxes regarding self-awareness... to be open to growing in that knowledge... for the sake of our prayer, for the sake of our well-being, for the sake of our service in the world. Might the gleaning from this one parable, on this one Sunday, change my life or alter my approach to working and serving in the world? Most likely... very little, if any. But if we step back, and take a broader look at what Jesus was trying to convey in the totality of his story telling, what do we learn? If we agree that "*Parables are not illustrations; they do not support, elaborate, or simplify a more basic idea...*"⁷, we are invited to let them do their work in us... to stir us up inside, tease our brains, lead us to a new place of understanding that may even fly under our radar of awareness... at least for a time. As "bejeweled portals of another world," parables invite us to go deeper and encounter Jesus' message that is the heart of The Gospel. I think that it is safe to say that... if we believe that we have a total grasp on what God is trying to tell us through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus... if we think that we totally understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus... we may be fooling ourselves. The work is to continue the journey towards ever-greater understanding of the Gospel message by engaging with the biblical stories and letting them speak to us without imposing our preferred... our desired interpretations. We hear the stories over and over again, that we may continue to glean new meaning and be strengthened in their truth.

I love the fact that Jesus is forever wrangling his rag-tag band of followers as he seeks to teach them what God's "BIG story" is about. And so it is with us... as Jesus' messages meet us in our time and place... as we continue to be offered teachings that seek to grow us from the inside. In all this good work, I pray that we may be blessed with gifts of curiosity, humility, and tenacity... that we may be strengthened for our continuing growth and ongoing journey with Jesus.

Amen...

⁶ Debbie Thomas, "On Confession," *Journey with Jesus*, October 20, 2019, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2412-on-confession>

⁷ Wink, op.cit.