

“Myth Proposes, Parable Disposes”

Luke 16.1–13

The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 19 Sep 2004

Last week, Jean found a piece of fundamentalist advertising wedged in our front door. The tagline on the inside was “real answers to real questions.” (It’s more like *facile* answers to questions we all ought to grapple with and ponder.) The flyer continues with five questions:

- Is there hope for our troubled world?
- Will suffering ever come to an end?
- Will there ever be lasting world peace?
- Can we really live without crippling fear?
- Do ancient prophecies point to our day?

I don’t think these are bad questions, in and of themselves, and I wouldn’t have been surprised to see some version of them in the dialogue sermon Dick and I did with the congregation in August. But fundamentalist Christianity wants binary answers: Everything needs to be black-and-white, yes-or-no. (So, the answers to the questions posed on the flyer are Yes. No. No. Yes. No.)

The flyer promises “real help real [sic] fast,” and says that “the Bible provides practical answers to these and many other questions.” I don’t know if the copywriter who penned this flyer has ever read the parable of the unjust manager in Luke’s gospel, but if they were hoping for “real help real fast,” they probably need to slow down. The Bible is a better dialogue partner and poser of questions than it is a dispenser of easy answers.

We Americans want it **now**, whether “it” is a hamburger or tight abs or even if it’s faith. But, faith is not a “just add water” proposition. It takes time – years, in fact – to develop a mature faith. It’s not what Frederick Buechner calls “arithmetic Christianity”: $a+b=c$ or saying, “I believe that Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior” = I’m saved. There is no magical incantation in those words or any others..

We need to give our faith journeys time to unfold before us: it’s a matter of *kairos* (everything coming in good season at the right time), rather than of *chronos* (the time that my watch says it should come). Faith and salvation do not operate on a time table like a train or a plane. Bruce MacKenzie, the minister emeritus at First Congregational UCC in Boulder, once recounted a story of spending a month at a monastery in New Mexico, and asking one of the monks how often he had an experience of the sacred. And the elderly monk replied, “it happened to me once long ago, and I hope that it will again before I die.” And this is someone who spends their life in prayer. God’s grace doesn’t happen on human terms, and if it did, it wouldn’t be God’s grace. We need to *show up*, not try to *run the show*.

You might be wondering what this has to do with parables or this morning’s sermon text. So, let’s start with some background on what parables are and how they function.

John Dominic Crossan identifies five types of stories: myth, apologue, action, satire, and parable. And he also associates a “relationship to the world” and a comic strip (!) with each type. *Myth* establishes the world, and is like Rick O’Shay. *Apologue* defends the world, and is typified by Dick Tracy. *Action* investigates the world like Brenda Starr. *Satire* attacks the world, like Doonesbury. And *parable* subverts the world, like Basil. (I don’t know that one!) Crossan puts it in shorthand: “Myth proposes, parable disposes.”¹

¹ John Dominic Crossan. *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*. (Niles, IL: Argus, 1975), pp. 62-63.

The parables of Jesus almost always challenge our assumptions about the way life is or the way life should be. Samaritans aren't supposed to be good, clergy are (but that's not how the story plays out). An effective shepherd would never leave 99 sheep unguarded in order to go off and look for the one lost sheep (but that's not how the story is plays out). Workers in a vineyard who work for eight hours should be paid eight times as much as those who only work for an hour (but that's not how the story plays out). A grain of mustard seed grows into a noxious weed that should be pulled out of the garden while it's still a tender sprout (but that's not how the story plays out).

Now, a parable is not quite the same as an allegory. An allegory is a story in which each element has an exact match in the real world that is described by a symbol in the story. In Plato's allegory of the cave, the cave represents ignorance and the daylight represents knowledge. Not so in a parable. You may think that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, but what do make of the birds nesting in its tree? You may say those are faithful people, or perhaps it's the natural world, or perhaps it's the Gentiles, or maybe it's just a bird. (As Freud said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.")



"Parable" comes from the Greek word, *parabole*, which means "to throw beside." It sets us a comparative term, indicating similarity or parallelism. When you hear a parable, you're hearing Jesus chucking down an *unexpected outcome*, right next to something that sounds like a simple story about leaven in flour or a lost coin or an unjust judge. Remember: "Myth proposes, parable disposes."

Jesus' parables fall into the Hebrew tradition of the *mashal*: a riddle, proverb, or wise saying, often containing an elusive truth. Bernard Brandon Scott defines parables as "a *mashal* that employs a short narrative fiction to reference a transcendent symbol."²

In his excellent commentary on the parables of Jesus, Scott recalls a student saying, "If Jesus knew what the kingdom of God was, why didn't he just say so?" Scott answers by saying that "Exposition seeks to *explain*, to *contain*, and in that effort risks substituting what is not parable for parable."³ In other words, if someone else unpacks and interprets a parable for you – if you yourself do not grapple with the parable – then you are not *engaged* in the parable.

I was watching a DVD last week of my favorite Celtic rock band, Great Big Sea, and in an interview, one of the members said that a concert should not be something that one goes to, but rather something that one participates in. (And people do tend to get really into dancing and singing along at Great Big Sea concerts.) Parables are the same way: they aren't meant to be rigidly explained, but rather engaged. (Otherwise, why *wouldn't* Jesus have simply defined the kingdom of God?) Parables are open-ended, not contained. Crossan adds that "A true metaphor is one whose power *creates the participation* whereby its truth is experienced."⁴ You and I may hear the parable through different ears and bring vastly different experiences to it, and we might derive different meanings, and that's fine: we're participants. Certainly, the women and men who first heard the parables have a different historical, religious, and social setting than we do. But, even if our interpretations of a parable vary, it is the process of engagement and searching that makes the parable work.

Crossan says that "It is clear that parable is really a *story event* and not just a story. One can tell oneself stories but not parables. One cannot really do so just as one cannot

² Bernard Brandon Scott. *Hear Then the Parable*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 42

³ *ibid.*, p. xi.

⁴ Crossan, *In Parables*. (NY: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 18.

really beat oneself at chess or fool oneself completely with a riddle one has just invented. ***It takes two to parable.***⁵

Parables, when they are nailed down into dead certainties, lose their vitality, their energy, and their function. So, I'd like to invite you into the process of the parable. Luke's gospel is full of them, and many of them contain the original words of Jesus. So, open your minds and your hearts and hear then the parable.



What you heard in the lectionary passage this morning has three components: one parable from Jesus, an addition from a later editor (perhaps the gospel writer), and a proverb.

The parable describes “a rich man who had a manager” and that this manager is accused of squandering the rich man's property. So, the manager goes out to the clients of the rich man and offers them a cut-rate settlement if they pay what they owe. That's the parable.

Then a later editor or collector of Jesus' sayings likely added the bit about “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” and “whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.” It forms a rejoinder to the parable, and not part of what Jesus would typically have included in a parable. It's an attempt at explaining what the parable means, which excludes us from the process of grappling with the parable. Remember: “It takes two to parable.”

And the third piece is a proverbial wisdom saying: “No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth.” Jesus may have said that, but it's not a part of the parable.

So, let's return to the parable itself. Is the manager really a bad manager, or is he unjustly accused by the rich man? Was the master being arbitrary in his judgment? Why, after reducing the potential income of his master, is the manager praised by him? Sometimes this parable is referred to as the “Unjust Steward.” What about the behavior of the manager is unjust? Is the manager just getting away with lowering the debt of people to be in their good graces after the manager fires him? Or is the manager enacting justice by reducing the debt-burden of people who are less financially secure than the rich man? What exactly is the master praising? Why does the rich man think the manager is so shrewd: were these potentially bad debts that weren't able to be collected, and the manager got what he could out of people. Or is the shrewdness that the rich man sees the sly operation of the manager in trying to set up a scenario for himself in which the blow of unemployment is softened?

Who do you identify with in the story: the man who controls the wealth (who thinks he's being cheated), the steward trying to compensate by cutting clients a better deal, or perhaps the debtor who has been given a break? Do you take sides in the story?

It's not an obvious parable for us to interpret; in fact, it's one of the most difficult to disentangle. And the questions seem just to spawn more questions, rather than to arrive in a neat, didactic package with an easy lesson for us all to learn. But there are scholarly commentaries that do make an attempt at sewing the parable up into a tidy, palatable form – which I resist! It is not unlike a Zen *koan* – a riddle that cannot be solved in a discursive or rational manner, but the act of puzzling leads to enlightenment.

One writer, Richard Ford, a clinical psychologist with a Master of Divinity degree writes, “It may be that this parable (along with...others...) offers no conclusive definitions of how to be or what to do. It may resist providing meanings by which one may measure

⁵ Crossan, *The Dark Interval*. p. 87.

oneself. This restraint, this refusal to define, may be the result of presenting two disparate but balanced versions of reality.”⁶

One of my favorite quotations from Rilke is in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, and they are words that Liz McGrew gave to our confirmation class last Spring: “Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves...Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

May you live the parable, and along the way of your pilgrimage, may you live into the answer. Amen.

⁶ Richard Q. Ford, *The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 29.