

The Purpose of Parables

Matt.13:1-3, 10-17, 34-35

This winter our Sunday messages will be focused on the parables of Jesus from Matt.13. We're going to live in Matthew 13 for 5 weeks. This will take us up to the beginning of Lent.

Matthew 13 is a chapter filled with parables that Jesus told, more specifically called "parables of the kingdom." Actually, many of the other parables Jesus told are parables of the Kingdom also. They all begin with the phrase, "the Kingdom of God/heaven is like..."

Jesus was speaking to a time and a culture that was in the beginning stages of a transition: the Roman empire was at the beginning stages of its decline, even though it was at the height of its power; Jesus was speaking to a culture that was highly pluralistic, but specifically to a religion (the Jewish faith and tradition) that had become in many ways stuck, even rigid, in the midst of that pluralism. The Jewish leaders' response to culture change was to make an expanded version of the rule book. In order to maintain religious purity. And this tended to *exclude*, rather than *include*. And that was a problem, and did not reveal God's heart.

And so, in the midst of a pluralistic culture and a stuck/rigid religion, Jesus arrives on the scene—sent by God—to speak truth into that culture—both the wider culture and especially to the religious culture. He came to speak the truth about God, and the truth about people (us!). And he does so in large part by telling stories. We call them parables. Seems kind of odd, but it's actually quite brilliant. "Let me tell you about the Kingdom of heaven..." Jesus says. It's like a farmer who scatters seed. It's like a man who throws a huge wedding banquet. It's like a mustard seed. And so on.

Telling parables was—and is—a way to get peoples' attention, and wake them up, turn their minds upside down and get them to think, when their imaginations had become dull, and their religion was mostly about rule-keeping. It was also a clever way to speak to the people on the margins of society, which was a significant part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus wanted them to know that they were loved by God too. And in his stories, they hear the invitation to the celebration that is the Kingdom of heaven.

Before we actually jump into any of these parables, I want us to think a bit today about *why* Jesus spoke in parables in the first place. What's up with all the

stories? It's actually a question that Jesus addresses a couple different places in Matthew 13. So we'll start by looking at that question first.

13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow... (then he tells the parable of the sower, which we will explore next Sunday).

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹ He answered, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' ¹⁴ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

*'You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.'*

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

(then he explains the parable of the sower, tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds and a couple other short parables we will look at in subsequent weeks, and then Matthew concludes this entire section with these words...)

³⁴ *Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.* ³⁵ *This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet (Ps.78, actually):*

*“I will open my mouth to speak in parables;
I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.*

This is the word of the Lord!

As we enter into this business of exploring parables... let me tell you a story! It’s about an ancient nomadic tribe making their pilgrimage through the desert...

One day, out in the middle of nowhere, they see a great roiling cloud of dust in the distance, coming toward them. Fearing it might be a band of murderous thieves, the tribe sent out a scout to scope out the situation.

As the scout cautiously approaches the intruders, a white-bearded man emerges from their midst, and the two meet and try to communicate. But it quickly becomes apparent they can’t speak the other’s language, so they resort to a sort of sign language.

Moments later the nomadic scout returns with a look of joy on his face, exclaiming: “O my people, I have just met a holy man! When I drew a circle in the

sand to indicate we are all one in the world, he then drew a line through it to show that we are in two worlds, earthly and heavenly.

When I pointed upward with my finger to indicate that we are all one under God, he gave me an onion, indicating his appreciation for the multiple layers of understanding available to everyone.

When I offered him an egg, he was too humble to accept my gift and quietly walked away. *He is a holy man indeed – who comes in peace!*”

Meanwhile the white-bearded leader returned to his people to explain the encounter this way:

“Friends, we are in grave danger. Never have I met a more bloodthirsty man in my life. When we first came face to face, he drew a circle in the sand, which meant we were surrounded! So I took I drew a line with my finger through his circle to indicate we would cut them in half.

Next he raised his finger to the sky to say that he could take us on all by himself. So then I gave him an onion to suggest he would soon taste the bitter tears of death. But then he gave me an egg to show me how fragile our condition

is. In the end I managed to slip away – now we'd better hurry and make ready to attack!"

This kind of thing happens all the time, doesn't it? Even between people who speak the same language! When what we mean and how we are understood are worlds apart. Ever have conversations like that? Days like that? Ever watch that played out on the news?

This is what happened to Jesus. When Jesus arrived on the scene of human history, when he spoke about who he was, and what the Kingdom of God was like, not everyone understood. In fact, some people heard the good news as bad news.

Yes, God's people of old expected a Messiah, God's Anointed One. But for them this triumphant heavenly Messiah King would descend upon the occupied territory of Palestine with guns blazing, to wipe out Roman rule, to bring the tyranny and the oppression to an end. The Messiah would re-establish God's chosen people to rightful dominion, expand Israel's borders, and return them to prosperity, just like King David did centuries before.

But what Jesus keeps trying to make clear is that God's kingdom reign comes in small, quiet, sometimes hidden, and humble ways. That's what so many of the parables are about: mustard seeds, yeast, hidden treasure, and so forth.

So what Jesus meant, and what they understood him to mean, were worlds apart. Again, they had become rigid in their thinking and practice.

So then, in Matthew 13, for the first time we find Jesus using this unique literary form called parables to express what the kingdom of God is really like, to try to open their minds... through stories.

And yet, sometimes we have to wonder if these parables were really helpful... or if they just caused more confusion.

Parables are not just simple illustrations. Jesus did not tell stories to entertain or simply illustrate or dumb down the gospel, but to challenge some, and invite others, to enter the kingdom of heaven more deeply. To get people to think for themselves and reflect at a deeper level. And it caused people to scratch their heads in wonder, as to why Jesus used parables to get his message across.

Even apparently the disciples, who had been following him for a while, wondered what Jesus had in mind by using parables. As it says in our reading from

Matthew 13, after Jesus told just one of these parables, they asked him, “Why do you speak in parables? We don’t understand what you’re doing.” And even then, his answer is a bit confusing! He quotes Isaiah 6, “*so listening they may not understand, and seeing they may not perceive...*” Okay, now I’m really confused!

What do parables do? Jesus indicates that parables do 2 things:

1. Parables reveal. The word parable comes from two words in Greek: *para*, meaning “beside” (like *parallel*), plus the word *ballein*, meaning “to throw.” So literally a parable means “to throw alongside.”

A parable is a comparison of two things, side by side: this thing is like that thing. This thing you don’t understand is like this thing you do understand.

The kingdom of God is like... a farmer who went out to sow seed. The kingdom of God is like... wheat and weeds growing together. The kingdom of heaven is like... a treasure hidden in a field; or like finding a pearl; or like a net thrown into the sea. This thing you don’t understand is like this thing you do understand.

And while using illustrations from life that people do understand, Jesus uses larger than life images, ridiculous situations, exaggerated content, and

characters who do strange things. We'll talk about this a lot as we go along. He's trying to wake people up out of their religious slumber to tell the truth about God, and about us.

Here's a little bit about how parables work in **revealing** truth.

There is a New Testament scholar who gained some renown years ago, the late southern farmer-preacher named Clarence Jordan (author of the *Cottonpatch Gospels*, and *Koinonia Farms* fame).

Jordan recalls years ago speeding along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, upwards of 75 to 80 mph, blowing by signs that posted the maximum speed limit at 65 mph. But it wasn't like Jordan didn't know there were speed limit signs. Like most of us, he just stopped *seeing* the signs. He stopped paying attention and just put the pedal to the metal.

But all of a sudden while speeding down the turnpike a large billboard came into view – and the billboard showed a huge hand, with a larger-than-life forefinger pointing squarely at him. And the caption in letters that were several feet high all but shouted at him: YOU SLOW DOWN!

Well, that got his attention! Jordan's right foot instinctively reached for the brake – for fear that this hand was going to reach out and literally grab him!

The Pennsylvania State Patrol had drawn for him a convincing picture that had startled him awake! (Unfortunately, for some of us the convincing picture comes a little too late – in the form of bright red & blue blinking lights in the rear-view mirror...)

But you see what the Pennsylvania State Patrol is doing? They are telling a parable, in a way. Sometimes that billboard is how it is with Jesus' parables – they're like a huge billboard sign (in Jordan's words) "trying to shock us awake with the reality of our situation...with the crucial nature of the opportunity confronting us about Jesus and the Kingdom."

Jesus gives us these pictures to try and grab our attention! Because Jesus knows (again, to quote Clarence Jordan): "We all have a tendency to look without seeing, and listen without hearing or catching on." So it takes these outrageous and sometimes over the top stories to wake us up.

One of my favorite short story authors is Flannery O'Conner—died very young, but with a deep Christian faith. She was a brilliant writer who had these larger than life, grotesque characters who often had grotesque things happen to

them, or perpetrated grotesque acts. And she was asked why she painted these sorts of pictures in her stories. She said, “To the hard of hearing we shout; to the hard of seeing, we draw large startling images.”

Like Jesus, like the billboard, her goal in her stories was to wake people up to the truth: about God, about themselves. Because she believed, like Clarence Jordan, and like Jesus, that many people are sleepwalking through life, or have become hardened in their beliefs, about God and about themselves. And she, like them, wanted to reveal the wideness of God’s mercy and grace, in this reality called the Kingdom of God.

So, parables *reveal* the truth, they *reveal* the kingdom, they *reveal* Jesus, they *reveal* God’s heart. And parables *reveal* what’s in our hearts too. And that’s an important part of Jesus’s story-telling. We are invited into the story to find ourselves and reflect on our attitudes, our motivations, and beliefs. We will talk about that, also, as we go along.

So, the first thing that parables do is, parables reveal. Second, Jesus indicates that parables also *conceal*. This is the paradox of parables.

2. Parables Conceal Parables *reveal* the truth. But Jesus also seems to be saying here that sometimes parables *conceal* the truth.

I mean, when Jesus' disciples ask him here why he's speaking in parables, it almost sounds like Jesus is saying he doesn't want some people to get it: "You have been given the mysteries of the kingdom," Jesus says to the disciples. "But to them it has not been given."

I have to confess that when I read this it makes me a little unsettled. Like there's an "us" who get it, and a "them" who don't. That doesn't sound very Jesus-y to me.

In fact, Jesus goes on to quote a chunk of Scripture from Isaiah 6. Isaiah is the "Here am I, send me" Old Testament prophet, whose call we just heard (which in itself is like a parable come to life. God sure got his attention!)

Isaiah's response to God's call is a model and inspiration to us, right? "Here I am, send me!" But the next thing you know, God is sending Isaiah to go to the people and let them have it! His job is to give them the business, and it's not all light and sweet. Isaiah's first words, right out of the gate, are: "You people listen, but don't hear. You look, but don't see. Wake up, people!" Some starter sermon, huh?

But the people had grown hard of hearing, and had become blind and dull to God's mercy and gracious love for the world. Yet even so, it's not like God is

giving up on anybody. And yet God won't *force feed* anyone either. We have to want to get it. We have to *want* to get it.

Jesus *wants* people to be open to understanding God in new ways; to seeing the Kingdom afresh; to *want* healing and refreshment in their lives (and in the lives of others!) and not continue in lifeless religion. Jesus *wants* us to be open to interpreting the parables, but *he also wants us to be open to having the parables interpret us.*

One commentator speaks of the paradox of parables. On the one hand there is the assurance: parables can draw you in. So stay with them. Work at understanding them. There is a treasure for you in them.

On the other hand there is a warning: parables can confound you. If you close the door. When you have already decided you know all there is to know, this is the way the world is, and this is how God is and this is how I am.

Parables present a deliberately subversive paradox aimed at turning our usual mind upside down. Their job is not to confirm for us what we already believe to be true, but to meddle, and to cause us to ask good questions.

Throughout the gospels we hear people saying again and again, "*What is this he's*

*teaching? No one has ever said anything like this before. Where did he get this?
Where did he come from?"*

Jesus concluded many of his parables with these words: "Let anyone who has ears to hear, listen!"

So, parables invite us, maybe even tantalize us a bit, to be open to new ways of thinking and seeing—about God, about God's Kingdom, and about ourselves. Parables are dialogical: you ask questions, and you let the parables question you! So that truth is revealed—about God, and about us. And we then live more deeply in this reality that is called the Kingdom of Heaven.

So here we go – hopefully we set the hook today... Next week we will begin by looking at the parable of the sower.

Open My Eyes, That I May See