

Engage Bible Study: *Luke 8:4-25: Teaching in Parables*
November 21-23, 2011

Today we're moving into that section of Luke in which parables become a central form of Jesus' teaching. While the previous section focused on what Jesus did we're going to see more focus now on what Jesus taught, and parables are one of Jesus' favorite teaching tools. But before we move into this section we need to talk about parables in general. What are they? Why did Jesus use them? How do we understand them? The answers to these questions will help us to better understand the parables that follow.

The word "parable" comes from the Greek word "parabole" which literally means "that which is tossed alongside," implying a comparison, analogy or illustration. The great bible scholar C.H. Dodd provides this helpful definition: "At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." So, notice what this definition teaches us:

The source of the parables is both nature...like a mustard seed...and common experience...like a prodigal son.

Their function may be a simile (The Kingdom of God is like a man who owned a vineyard...) or a stronger kind of comparison called a metaphor (You are the light of the world).

Parables are designed to grab the hearer's attention and make it more difficult to access its meaning. Yes, you heard me correctly...they are designed to make the meaning MORE difficult to access. These are not stories written to make Jesus' teaching so simple that a child can understand. That, of course, raises the question as to why Jesus then taught in parables. Wouldn't he want all people to easily grasp his meaning?

Rather than make his meaning obvious – which Jesus could have done by simple teaching with plain facts – parables are designed to put a burden on the hearer, to tease the mind of the hearer into active thought. Despite the fact that parables speak of familiar things parables also throw the hearer into a kind of strange disequilibrium. The hearer becomes an active participant in the communication, not just a passive recipient. In other words the hearer must take some level of responsibility for the meaning. And that's what makes the literary form of a parable so useful to Jesus. Remember last week how John the Baptist asked Jesus the question, "Are you the messiah or should we wait for another?" And remember how Jesus didn't directly answer John's question because ultimately that's a question that only John could answer for himself by faith? That's not unlike what a parable does. It puts the burden upon the hearer to tease out the meaning.

Most communicators don't teach in parables because they want to control the hearer, telling them directly what to think, to believe, to do. Parables surrender control to the hearer. They disarm and engage the hearer, and yet they still need to be interpreted. So, how do we interpret parables? The answer to that question has changed throughout the history of the Church.

Initially parables were interpreted as allegories. In an allegory each significant item or character in the story is assigned meaning. For example, in the story of the prodigal son the father represents God, the prodigal son represents the gentiles and the older brother represents the Jews. The servant represents something, as does the party, the ring, the sandals, etc. In the last century, however, the dominant way of understanding parables changed and most scholars assumed that a parable had only one core point. The details of the parable were insignificant. What mattered was the "one thing" that the parable was seeking to communicate.

More recently bible scholars have expanded beyond the idea that parables only teach one thing. Instead we're also invited to consider what a parable does as well as what it says. What does it do in our hearts and minds? What does it evoke? In a sense parables are like a poem or a piece of art. They are meant to communicate meaning but also to evoke something in us. Do they convict us? Comfort us? Frustrate us?

So, does this mean that parables are like ink blots? That we can assign any meaning that comes to our minds? No! There are some helpful boundaries to consider when we encounter parables.

- They need to be interpreted against the character of Jesus' life and ministry. In other words we would not assign meaning to a parable that went contrary to what we know about Jesus.
- We also need to take into consideration the context of the parable...both the context of the original hearers of the parable in the early Church and the context of the parable within the gospel itself...what comes before and after it. While these will be helpful guidelines there is still a lot of room for interpretation as we chew on these parables.

The Parable of the Sower (8:4-18)

With that introduction let's get into the first parable in Luke. Verses 4-18 can be broken down into different sections but they really form a single connected unit and so we're going to read it that way. Let's read 8:4-18 **[READ]**. This is commonly called the parable of the sower, but notice that even giving it a title predisposes us to what meaning we might apply to it. Only Matthew actually gives it this name. Is this parable primarily about the sower, the seed or the soil?

Jesus describes a scene that would have been very common, almost mundane. Sowing took place between late October and early December. A sower would have a sack of seed slung over his shoulder and would have liberally tossed it through the field. Usually

the fields were plowed after they were sown. Every single hearer of this parable would have witnessed this scene over and over again. But at the end of the parable Jesus says to the crowds, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen." This was a signal that there is meaning beyond the words to be probed. Again, the scene that Jesus describes is so common people might have listened and merely responded, "Yeah, so what? We see this happen all the time." But Jesus invites them to think more deeply.

While the crowds wonder what Jesus means it is the disciples who ask about the meaning, and that's an important detail. Parables require response, a kind of give and take. Jesus' response in verse 10 is challenging to say the least, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.'" What does Jesus mean? Jesus says that to the disciples, to those who desire to understand, the mysteries of the Kingdom of God will be revealed. The Greek word for mysteries or secrets refers to something that isn't yet clear but will be revealed as a gift from God.

The second half of this verse can be confusing. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9, saying that he teaches in parables "so that looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand." In English the sentence seems to imply that Jesus teaches in parable to intentionally hide something from people, but that's not what the verse means. The fact that some don't see or understand isn't the purpose of speaking in parables but it is the result. In other words the parable is inviting us to wrestle with the question, "Why is it that in the same audience some hear and understand and some do not? What's the difference between these two groups? Is it intelligence? Sin? Predestination? God's grace? Here's the one thing we do know from the parable: in a crowd that is merely auditing Jesus' class some students ask for help, for clarification, and Jesus will not allow them to leave empty.

In verses 11-15 Jesus interprets the parable, and in doing so makes it an allegory – that is, a story in which each item is said to represent something else. Here's how most people understand the parable. The seed is the Word, the gospel, and Jesus is the sower. People are the soil, and we're all different kinds of soil. Some of us are open to receive the word, respond with faith and bear fruit. Others of us hear the word but for various reasons never bear fruit. From this perspective the purpose of this parable is either to describe the reality that we are different kinds of soil or perhaps even to urge us to be good soil, as if that is something we can control. I've heard all sorts of sermons on this parable and every single one has been about how we need to be good soil.

But I want you to notice something in Jesus' words. If you read Jesus' explanation of the parable carefully you discover that people are not the soil. Reading carefully we discover that people are also sown. Jesus doesn't say, "The ones who are the path." He says, "The ones on the path." So, are we seed or are we soil? Perhaps the answer is "yes"! We are both recipients of the good news of the Kingdom AND as disciples we are sowers of that good news. From that perspective the bottom line of the parable is that not all

teaching and preaching in the early Church...and in the Church today...will be fruitful. And so this parable isn't telling us what kind of soil to be; it's an encouragement to those who experience failure in their ministries, reminding them that some seed will yield abundantly, so keep sowing that seed. The parable says to everyone that it is in the honest, good and patient heart that the word of God comes to full fruition.

Luke closes this section with verses 16-18 which include three sayings that further illuminate the purpose of the parables. Jesus reminds the reader that while the parables require initiative and responsibility from the listener it is Jesus' purpose to illuminate and reveal, not to conceal. Jesus didn't come to keep secrets but to bring the mysteries of God to light...and that mystery is the reality of the Kingdom, God's rule and reign in the world. But Jesus also says that these parables don't bless everyone who hears them. Those who lean into them, those who seek the truth, to them more will be given. I like this commentator's quote, *"Those who think they already know, who acknowledge no blindness, who listen with ears that register only likes and dislikes, who fold the arms across the chest waiting to be convinced or entertained – these are the ones who discover painfully that even what they thought they had has been taken away."*

Jesus' Real Family (8:19-21)

As I mentioned last week, the gospel writers frequently illustrate Jesus meaning by putting specific stories or teachings next to one another. That's the case with this next little section, Luke 8:19-21 [READ]. One of the things I want to accomplish in this Engage Bible Study is to give you tools to help you to get into the bible on your own, and one of the perspectives that I've tried to install is the importance of context...and this little passage is a great example. Mark locates this story in the midst of growing tension between Jesus and his critics, implying that this criticism even extends to Jesus' family. But that's not where Luke places the story. Luke intentionally places the story after the parable of the sower. There is no implication in Luke that Jesus' family is critical of him. In fact, we've seen in the early chapters of this gospel that Luke bends over backwards to show that Jesus' family is faithful – they hear God's word and they do it.

So, exactly what is the purpose of this story in Luke? To reveal who is a part of the family of God. Not only are Jesus' blood relatives members of his family, but all who hear his words and do what he says are members of his family. The family of God is comprised of all who hear and do. Later in Luke's gospel we'll learn that such loyalty to Jesus will create tension in many biological families, but that's later. For now disciples are greeted with the good news of being one with Jesus through hearing and obeying.

Jesus Calms a Storm (8:22-25)

Luke now returns to a story that reveals the power and authority of Jesus' word and challenges the disciples to deeper faith. Let's finish up with 8:22-25 [READ]. Jesus and the disciples get into a boat and head across the Sea of Galilee. This body of water is 700 feet below sea level and is surrounded by hills, some of them quite steep. It was not uncommon for a cold wind to sweep down those hills and collide with warmer air,

making for some very volatile weather. That seems to be the case here. The boat is caught up in a wind storm. As Jesus sleeps peacefully the boat begins to fill with water. Ironically seasoned fishermen cry out to a Rabbi for help!

What Jesus does in response to the disciple's cry for help sounds very much like an exorcism. Jesus rebukes the wind and the waves and they immediately calm down. You may remember a few chapters ago when we were talking about demons we learned that this ancient culture believed that demons dwelled in large bodies of water. Have you ever notice in Revelation 21 it says that when Jesus returns the sea will be no more? Ever wonder why? This is the reason. The dwelling place of demons will cease to exist.

But the real purpose of this story in Luke's gospel lies in the two questions that are raised. The first is Jesus' question to his disciples, **"Where is your faith?"** Exactly what is Jesus asking here? Surely he doesn't mean to imply that if they had faith there would not have been a storm. Nor is he probably saying that the disciples should be able to calm the storm themselves by their faith. Jesus had not yet given them power and authority to heal and exorcise demons. Instead Jesus seems to be addressing their fear. In the gospels doubt is not the opposite of faith, fear is. The disciples have been around Jesus long enough to trust in his power and his care for them. Jesus seems to be expecting more of his disciples now. He has never asked for this kind of faith before. As we look ahead we'll see that he will soon send them out to do what he himself has been doing. It's time they grew in faith.

The second question is the one asked by the disciples, **"Who is this?"** If the storm frightened the disciples Jesus' actions have only heightened their awe and amazement. Who is this that can exorcise the storm and the sea? Luke is clearly assuming that we, the reader, will be asking the same question right about now. Who is this Jesus? It will not be long before Jesus asks this question of the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

Conclusion

So, what do we learn from this section of Luke's gospel? Here are a few things to continue:

- How do you engage with God's word? Do you, like the crowds, merely hear without really listening and doing? Or are you like the disciples who seek to engage this word, ask questions of it and allow it to ask questions of you? And are you doing what it says? Are you putting it into practice...or evaluating whether it suits you or not? I want to urge you to use the reading plan we developed through the holidays, listen for God to speak and then do what it says.
- How are you sowing the seed of God's word into the lives of others, leaving the results to God? You've heard lots of talk about planting seeds here at Prince of Peace. We are all called to plant seeds of God's love and good news into our friends, neighbors and coworkers.

- How does fear have a grip on your life? What does your fear say about your faith?
- Who do you say that Jesus is? And how does your life align with your answer?

Happy Thanksgiving! Most of us have celebrated more than a few Thanksgivings. We've eaten enough turkey and pumpkin pie to qualify us as Thanksgiving experts. But how much do you really know about this holiday? Let's find out with a little trivia quiz:

1. How long did the first Thanksgiving celebration last?
 - a. one day
 - b. two days
 - c. three days**
 - d. five days
 - e. seven days
2. Which of these dishes was not served at the first Thanksgiving feast?
 - a. lobster
 - b. goose
 - c. turkey
 - d. cod
 - e. popping corn – Orval Redenbacher hadn't been born yet.**
3. The first Thanksgiving was celebrated in Plymouth colony, which is now part of what state?
 - a. Rhode Island
 - b. Maine
 - c. New Hampshire
 - d. Virginia
 - e. Massachusetts**
4. Which state produces nearly half of the annual U.S. cranberry crop?
 - a. Rhode Island
 - b. Maine
 - c. New Hampshire
 - d. Virginia
 - e. Massachusetts**
5. Which U.S. president officially proclaimed Thanksgiving to be a national holiday?
 - a. John Adams
 - b. John Quincy Adams
 - c. Abraham Lincoln – his proclamation in 1863, unity**

- d. Andres Johnson
 - e. Millard Fillmore
6. Which country first adopted Thanksgiving as a national holiday?
- a. Canada – Celebrated in October, started in 1578**
 - b. Mexico
 - c. England
 - d. United States
 - e. Spain
7. When was the first Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade?
- a. 1888
 - b. 1924 – the first big balloon in 1927 was Felix the Cat**
 - c. 1939
 - d. 1947
 - e. 1954