

PREACHING THE PARABLES

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Jesus' favorite form of teaching was through parables. Why? Well, who doesn't like a good story? The stories Jesus told are so simple that they capture the interest even of children. Yet scholars are still writing about them. Our problem in preaching the parables is that they have become so familiar that they have lost their sharp cutting edge. In preaching them we need constantly to ask ourselves: 'How would those hearing this story for the first time have reacted to it?'

Jesus also chose parables for greater impact on the hearers. Examples of heroically good and holy people move us far more than abstract descriptions of holiness. The Bible is always concrete, seldom abstract. When it talks about faith, it does so by describing *people* of faith. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews explains faith through sketches of faith-filled people. It speaks of Abraham, who **A**obeyed when he was called, and went forth ... not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents [temporary dwellings, not solid houses] ... for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose designer and maker is God[©] (Heb. 11:8ff). The writer goes on to mention Moses, **A**who endured as seeing him who is invisible.[©]

Finally, Jesus used parables as his favorite form of teaching because a story can stir consciences far better than moral exhortation. Take, for example, the parable which the prophet Nathan told to King David, following the king's adultery with Bathsheba. While her husband, Uriah, is off fighting for the king, David has an affair with Bathsheba. Upon learning that she is pregnant, David summons her husband from the front. After asking for news of the war the king plies Uriah with food and drink, hoping he will spend the night with his wife. Had David's stratagem succeeded, his adultery could have remained secret. Uriah would have assumed that the child born nine months later was his. Uriah refuses to visit his wife, however, telling the king that he cannot do so as long as his comrades are

daily risking their lives for the king in battle. Frustrated by the failure of his scheme, David then sends Uriah back into battle with secret orders to his commander which seal Uriah's fate. To the original sin of adultery, a sin of weakness and passion, David has added a far graver sin: cold, calculated murder.

At this point God sends the prophet Nathan to King David with a parable about a rich man who is unwilling to sacrifice a lamb from his vast flocks to fulfill the Oriental duty of hospitality to a visitor. Instead he steals the lamb of a poor man, who is keeping it as a pet. David grows so angry at this rank injustice that he tells Nathan: **As the Lord lives, the man who has done this merits death!** (2 Sam. 12) With his reaction to the parable, David stands self-convicted. **You are the man!** Nathan tells him. Jesus's parables capture people's interest, then pose the challenging question: **How does this apply to me?**

I experienced a reaction like that some years ago when I gave a conference to the Sisters I was then living with about the laborers in the vineyard who all receive a full day's pay, though some of them have worked only an hour. I had no sooner finished reading the parable than an elderly German Sister in the first row protested angrily: "They all get the same." She was pretty burned up about it. We *should* be burned up about it. If we're not, it is either because we weren't listening; or because the parable is so familiar that it has lost its sharp cutting edge – the difficulty I mentioned at the start of this talk. Let me speak, therefore, about this parable and then about a number of others which pose difficulties for us or which require explanation to bring out their full significance.

The parable about the laborers in the vineyard who, at the end of the day, are all paid the same is of course *not* about distributive justice: a fair day's pay for a day's work. It is about our relationship with God. I explain this to people by re-telling the story in modern modern terms. The central figure could be a rancher in one of the "salad factories" of California's San Fernando Valley, so-called because produce is harvested from the artificially irrigated fields all year round. Eager to harvest as much of his crop as possible

before a threatened change in the weather, the rancher goes to the hiring hall at dawn. The men he finds there are able-bodied and eager to work. They also know their rights. They *bargain* with the rancher about the conditions of work, and about their wages. When they strike a deal, they feel good about it. The work will be hard, but they know they will be well paid.

At intervals during the day, the foreman tells the rancher that more workers will be needed if they want to get in the whole harvest in time. The rancher makes repeated trips to town to hire additional help. Each time he encounters workers who are less promising. The men he finds lounging around in mid-afternoon are the dregs of the local labor market: drifters, panhandlers, winos. While those hired at dawn have been working in the hot sun, these men have spent another day idle, reflecting glumly on the hopelessness of their lot. There is no bargaining with men like that. As much out of pity as for any real help this sorry lot can offer, the rancher tells them:

“Get into the truck, fellas. There’s work for you out at my place.”

At quitting time, those hired last are first in the pay line. These are the men whom life has passed over. They have learned through bitter experience that every man’s hand is against them. They wish now that something had been said about wages before they got into the rancher’s truck a couple of hours earlier.

The first man in line receives his pay envelope. He rips it open — and can’t believe his eyes. It contains a whole day’s pay! He stands there dazed, tears of joy welling up in his eyes. He expected to be swindled, as so often before. Instead, he has been treated generously — far more generously, he knows, than he deserves.

Meanwhile, news of what the first men in line are receiving is being passed back to those in the rear. These are the men who have worked hard all day. They calculate how much *they* will receive at the same hourly rate. Imagine their indignation when they receive exactly what they had bargained for in the early morning. They protest angrily to the rancher.

“It’s my money, isn’t it?” he answers them. “If I want to be generous to someone else, what’s that to you?”

We are left with the injustice. The story begins to make sense only when we ask: who was happy? who was disappointed? and why? Those who were happy were the men hired last and paid first. They had not bargained. They had nothing to bargain with. They were little better than beggars. It was these beggars, however, who went away happy, while the bargainers were unhappy.

Why? Not because they had struck a bad bargain. No, at the beginning of the day they knew it was a *good* bargain. Nor were they unhappy because the bargain was not kept. On the contrary, it was kept to the letter. At the end of the day, however, they thought of something that had never occurred to them when they were hired. They thought they deserved more.

The men who went away happy did not appeal to what they deserved. They knew they deserved very little. The only thing they could appeal to was the rancher’s generosity. *That* is the key to a right relationship with God, Jesus says. Appeal to God’s generosity and you will be flooded with joy. Appeal to what you *deserve*, and God will give it to you. God is always just. He never short-changes us. When we discover, however, how little we actually deserve, we’ll probably be disappointed – maybe shocked.

We know the story as the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. A better title would be the parable of the bargainers and the beggars. The story is important for us. It flies in the face of everything we’ve been taught. Society says we should *not* be beggars. We should *work* for what we get, not depend on handouts. With God, however, different standards apply. He loves to give handouts! To receive them, however, we need to stand before him empty-handed, appealing (if we must appeal at all) not to God’s justice but to his mercy. More, we must forget about keeping track of what we think we “deserve” and stop worrying that others whom we consider “less deserving” (or not deserving at all!) share the Lord’s overflowing bounty with us. We need to learn the attitude portrayed in the evangelical hymn”

“Nothing in my hand I bring – simply to your cross I cling.”

The complaining full-time workers in this story resemble the elder son in what we call the parable of the prodigal son, angry at the undeserved welcome extended to his shiftless younger brother. Like those who had worked all day in the vineyard, the elder brother thinks he has been short-changed. He is mistaken. “Everything I have is yours,” his father tells him (Luke 15:31). What more could he have received than that? The elder brother needs to stop keeping score and join in welcoming the family member who, despite his folly and sin, is still his brother.

A better name for that story is the Parable of the Merciful Father and the two lost sons. The elder brother’s anger at this unmerited welcome for his shiftless brother is fully understandable. The dialogue with his father which follows would have shocked Jesus’ hearers, however. No self-respecting father in that patriarchal society would have left a celebration at which he was host to plead with his recalcitrant elder son. As head of the household, the father had the right to demand his son’s presence, under pain of the severest sanctions if he refused. The original hearers would have been no less shocked at the father running to welcome his younger son. That was as unthinkable for them as a bishop entering his cathedral on a skateboard would be for us.

Spurning his father’s plea that he join the party, the elder son pours out a litany of bitter resentment, contrasting his own years of faithful service at home with his brother’s scandalous rebellion. Though prevented by the father from doing so, the younger brother had resolved to ask for a place amongst his father’s slaves. Now his elder brother’s words claim that, in reality, that has been his own place all along: “For years I have slaved for you.” Could one really speak, however, of “slaving” for a father as loving and generous as this one? With his words, “everything I have is yours,” the father shows how mistaken his first-born is about their relationship.

We have heard nothing about loose women until now: the older bother is only too

happy to supply this lurid detail. Most significant of all is his reference to “this son of yours” — as if to say: “your son, perhaps, but no brother of mine!” Is it not clear that the elder brother too is in a distant country, as far removed in his heart from his father’s attitude of love as his younger brother has been physically distant?

This elder son had always resented his brother. When the latter left home, the elder brother’s only regret was at his father’s folly in entrusting this wastrel with money which he was clearly unfit to handle. Apart from that, his only thought was: ‘Good riddance!’ The elder brother never noticed, and could not share, his father’s grief at the younger son’s absence. Now that he has reappeared, the elder brother is unable to share his father’s joy and join in the celebration.

The two brothers have their counterparts today: in families, and in every parish. The elder brother stands for all those who are threatened by change of any kind. They fail to grasp the truth of Newman’s words: “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” Believing themselves to be the embattled defenders of the faith, they spend their efforts too often defending not tradition in its fullness, but only what have themselves have experienced or what they find reported from the recent past. The critics who chided Jesus for “receiving sinners and eating with them” were of this type. Jesus portrays the hard-heartedness of the elder brother to show them what they have become.

The younger brother, on the other hand, stands for all those whose desire for change, renewal, and reform is irresponsible; who out of a mistaken concept of freedom ride roughshod over people with different temperaments or ideas; who delight in shocking those with whom they disagree; who do not realize that there can be good in tradition as well as in novelty.

Both brothers in the story end by losing joy — and losing touch too with their father: the younger one in the distant country, the elder while staying at home. This brings us to the story’s conclusion. In fact, it has no conclusion. The story ends not with a reproach to the

elder son but with the father's loving plea: "My son, you are with me always, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice! This brother of yours [a gentle reminder that he *is* still a brother] was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost, and is found."

How did the elder brother respond? Jesus does not tell us. He leaves the story without an ending, so that we can supply the conclusion ourselves. The parable challenges us with two insistent questions: Have I heard the good news of our heavenly Father's freely given love? Am I joining in its celebration?

Let me turn now to the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, at his gate. Like many of the parables, this one is a story of contrasts. These are stark, both in this life and in the hereafter. The rich man has every comfort that money can buy. The beggar at his gate has only his name: Lazarus, a word which means "may God help," or "the one whom God helps." This name is significant, as we shall see.

The rich man's clothing ("purple and linen") and lifestyle (he "feasted splendidly every day") proclaim abundance and luxury. He is far above the social-economic level of Jesus' ordinary hearers. According to the conventional morality of the day, however, which viewed wealth as a sign of God's blessing, the hearers would have admired the rich man as an upright pillar of society. Moreover, it is unlikely that they sympathized with Lazarus. They saw beggars like him every day. Such people, they assumed, were receiving their just deserts from God.

The description of Lazarus' plight is remarkably similar to that of the younger son in the far country in the parable of the merciful father and the two lost sons. The young man in that story "longed to fill his belly with the husks that were fodder for the pigs" (Luke 15:16). Lazarus "longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table." The animals which lick Lazarus' open sores are not pets, however, but stray dogs such as one still sees in Third World countries, cared for and fed by no one and feeding on offal and garbage.

The contrast between the two men in the story extends to the smallest details. The rich

man is “clothed in purple and fine linen.” Lazarus is “covered with sores” — and apparently little else, since dogs lick his sores. The rich man “feasted splendidly every day.” Lazarus “longed to eat the scraps” of bread discarded by the rich man and his guests at their daily banquets. The rich man is active. Lazarus is passive, unable even to fend off the animals whose attentions increase his misery. We are not even told that Lazarus begged. He simply lies there at the rich man’s gate, unnoticed by the rich man as he passes in and out each day. The rich man is an insider, Lazarus is the quintessential outsider.

Death reverses these contrasts. “The beggar died,” Jesus tells us with stark economy of language. The description becomes richer, however, as we hear about Lazarus (still passive) being lifted out of this world, in which he had been a neglected outsider, and “carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham.” Lazarus is now the quintessential insider.

Unlike Lazarus, the rich man has a funeral: “The rich man likewise died and was buried.” Now *he* becomes the outsider, buried in the ground of this world. Where previously he had “feasted splendidly”, now he is “in torment.” His daily feasting is replaced by craving for a drop of water to cool his tongue, parched from the flames which surround him.

And now the rich man does something he has not done before. For the first time, Jesus tells us, “he raised his eyes and saw Lazarus” — no longer near, however, but “afar off” in Abraham’s bosom, in a place of honor like the “disciple whom Jesus loved” leaning on the Lord’s breast at the Last Supper (cf. John 13: 23ff). Why is Lazarus in *Abraham’s* bosom? Because the patriarch was a model of the hospitality expected of the wealthy in the ancient world, a duty the rich man had signally failed to provide for the poor beggar whom he passed daily at his gate, yet never saw

The significance of Lazarus’ name is now manifest. He is the man whom God helps. Ignored in life — by the rich man, his guests, and everyone else — Lazarus is disclosed at death as someone especially dear to God, who sends angels to carry him to a place of consolation and honor. This would have puzzled the story’s first hearers, accustomed to

thinking that unfortunates like Lazarus were receiving the just reward for their sins.

Equally disturbing for the hearers would have been the rich man's punishment. This cannot have been the consequence of his wealth, for Abraham was rich. Nowhere does Jesus say that the mere possession of wealth brings condemnation or that poverty guarantees salvation. The rich man's punishment would have seemed especially unjust to Jesus' hearers, since he received no warning of the importance aiding Lazarus, and no opportunity to repent and atone for his sin. Like those on the king's left hand in Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats, the rich man is punished not for anything he did, but for what he failed to do. He failed to heed the command of the Jewish scriptures to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), called by Jesus one of the two basic laws of God's kingdom (cf. Mark 12:31).

In that other parable of judgment those at the king's left protest at the injustice of their condemnation, demanding to know when they have ever transgressed God's law. The rich man in this parable utters no protest. Seeming to recognize the justice of his fate, he merely asks that Lazarus (still passive) be sent "to dip the tip of his finger in water and refresh my tongue, for I am tortured in these flames." The rich man has forgotten nothing and learned nothing. He still assumes that he is in charge and can command others to do his bidding. Significantly, however, he directs his request not to Lazarus but to Abraham, a wealthy man like himself, but unlike him a model of hospitality.

Abraham's response is gentle. Addressing his petitioner as "my child," Abraham discloses that the separation between the rich man and Lazarus, formerly the result merely of the former's neglect and hence reversible, is now permanent because established by God. Abraham's use of the passive, "between you and us there is fixed a great abyss," is a way of saying: "God has fixed an abyss between us." The biblical writers often use the passive in this way, as a circumlocution to describe the works of the all-holy God whose name was so sacred that, when read aloud, it was always replaced by the word "Lord."

The dialogue which follows takes the parable to a new level. Up to now it can be read as an illustration of Jesus' contrast between rich and poor in the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's counterpart to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew: "Blest are you poor ... Woe to you rich" (Luke 6: 20 & 24). The rich man, who for the first time has "raised his eyes" and seen Lazarus, now makes his first move to repair his previous failure by helping others. Still assuming that others are there to serve him, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers on earth as "a warning, so they may not end in this place of torment." Abraham's response to this seemingly reasonable request sounds callous: "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them." The rich man immediately counters with an objection as plausible as his original request. "No, Father Abraham. ... But if someone would only go to them from the dead, then they would repent."

Across the distance of over seventy years I can still recall my reaction to the annual reading of this gospel in my youth, on one of the many Sundays after Pentecost. 'He's got a point there,' I thought each time I heard the rich man's objection. 'If someone were to go them from the dead, that would shake them up!' Enlightenment came one Sunday during my teens, when, listening to this gospel, I realized: 'Hey. A man did rise from the dead once. It didn't shake anyone up. The only people who believed in him were those who had believed in him before, and even they had to overcome initial skepticism.'

Luke's language confirms this youthful insight. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if one should rise from the dead." "Moses and the prophets" means simply "Holy Scripture." Jesus uses Abraham's refusal of the rich man's final request to state what Jesus himself has already experienced many times over: signs and wonders, no matter how dramatic, can never compel faith in those who have not already gained faith through attentive reading or hearing of God's word. The greatest of all Jesus' signs was the empty tomb of Easter morning. It was the occasion of faith to one man only: the disciple whom Jesus loved, as he is called in John's gospel (cf. John 20: 2-8). Jesus' other

followers came to faith in the resurrection only through seeing the risen Lord. Those who had refused to believe in him before the crucifixion had a simple explanation for the empty tomb, reported in Matthew 28:12-15: Jesus' disciples stole his body while the soldiers guarding the tomb slept.

Abraham's seemingly callous reminder that the rich man's brothers need only "Moses and the prophets" to avoid his fate is Jesus' way of telling his hearers, ourselves included, that present circumstances are always enough for us to believe in God and serve him. Most of us, most of the time, live and work in circumstances that are far from ideal. Confronted with our modest achievements, we plead that they are a consequence of our limited opportunities. When things change and we get into *better* circumstances, we shall be able to accomplish so much more. I call this "the Santa Claus illusion."

And an illusion it is. The golden opportunities that beckon on the other side of the horizon will never arrive if we are not using the opportunities, however limited, that are before us right now. It is here and now, in the present moment (the only time we ever have) that we are called to faith in God, and to generous service of God and others — and not somewhere else, tomorrow, when everything changes at the touch of some magic wand and our lives cease to be drab and become wonderful.

To be close to the Lord, we need to do also what the rich man in the parable *failed* to do. We need to *see* the needs of those around us. And like the despised outsider in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we need to minister to those needs in caring, costing ways. The Lord seldom demands heroism. Often a kind word, a friendly gesture, or an encouraging smile is enough. But unless we are open to the needs of those we encounter on life's way, and are trying to meet those needs, we shall discover one day that we have lived far from God, no matter how many prayers we have said. And if we have lived far from God in this life, we shall live far from him in eternity. God's judgment is not something imposed on us from without. It is his ratification of the judgment we make in this life by the way we choose to

live here and now.

This story of the rich man and Lazarus is clearly a parable of judgment. God's judgment need not be fearful, however. In reality it is part of the good news. The judgment meted out in this parable to Lazarus — passive throughout and speaking never a word — assures us that the inarticulate, the weak, the poor, the marginalized and neglected, are especially dear to God. Lazarus, the man whom God helped, tells us that in the kingdom Jesus came to proclaim the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and run without growing weary; those who hope in the Lord renew their strength and soar as on eagles' wings; the tone-deaf sing like the Metropolitan Opera stars, René Fleming and Placido Domingo; the poor are made rich; the hungry feast at the banquet of eternal life; the sorrowful are filled with laughter and joy; and those who are ostracized and persecuted because of the Son of Man receive their unbelievably great reward. That too is the gospel proclaimed by this parable. That is the good news.

It's time to wrap up. Let me do so by telling you about the parable of the Sower and the Seed. The parable is Jesus' antidote to discouragement and despair. Most of the farmer's work, and most of the seed he sows, is wasted. Despite this, the story promises not merely an abundant harvest, but as *super*-abundant one. A modern commentator writes: "A 20-to-1 ratio would have been considered an extraordinary harvest. Jesus' strikingly large figures are intended to underscore the prodigious quality of God's glorious kingdom still to come."

So many of our own efforts seem to be wasted. So much of the Church's work seems barren of result. The Christian community for which Mark wrote his gospel was discouraged, as we are often discouraged. Like Jesus himself when he first told the story, the Christians for whom Mark wrote had been banished from the synagogue which they loved, which was their religious home. They faced the same hostility as their Master. Despite the rising hostility he could see all round him, Jesus refuses to yield to discouragement. He remains confident — and tells this story to give confidence to others. "Jesus is not only the sower who scatters the

seed of God's word," Pope Benedict writes. "He is also the seed that falls into the earth in order to die and so to bear fruit."

Are you discouraged? You have made so many good resolutions. Some you have kept. Many you have not. You seem to make no progress in prayer. When you come to confession, it is the same tired old list of sins. You wanted so much. You've settled for so little. If that — or *any* of that — applies to you, then Jesus is speaking, through this parable, very personally to you. Listen.

'Have patience and courage,' he is saying. 'Do your work, be faithful to prayer, to your daily duties. God has sown the seed of his word in your life. The harvest is certain. When it comes it will be greater than you can possibly imagine. The harvest depends not on you, but on God. And God's seed is always fruitful, his promise always reliable.'