

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Associate Rector

Scripture: Many from the Gospels

“Parables of Jesus – Part 1”

Have you ever gone to a gathering or party and someone was telling a story? They had a knack for drawing you in - so much so that you could picture the entire situation being explained in the story. Whether that story was for laughs or for describing an actual event – you were listening intently to every word. I'd even venture to say that you might even remember details of that story now.

Jesus used a form of storytelling in His teaching. As a matter of fact, approximately one third of His teaching was in this form – called parables. These are more than just stories, however, because they point to something else and they need to be interpreted. This week and next – I want us to take a closer look at Jesus' parables, their purpose and their meaning. A parable is different from a fable because it contains things that might possibly happen or be true – where as a fable is strictly fantasy.

The word “parable” comes from the Greek word **παραβολή** (parabole) which means “*to place beside or to cast alongside.*” This is done for the use of comparison – putting the known next to the unknown so that we can learn.” In the Old Testament – for example in Psalm 78:2 the word parable has a Hebrew root מָשַׁל “*mashal*” which can mean parable or proverb. A key word that you will often find in a parable is “like.” You might call them earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. The parables are all about “waiting.” I think you have to agree with me when I say waiting is the most difficult part. Think about it:

- The farmer waits for the harvest time, watching and frustrated as weeds grow alongside and in between his crops.
- The birds wait for the tiny mustard seed to grow into a tree.
- The woman who is baking the bread has to wait for the leaven, the yeast – to work its way through the dough to multiply it in size.

That's what Jesus says God's Kingdom is like. Jesus' followers' reaction was “they didn't want to wait” – but who does?

Let me share with you a real life example – right here at St. Bart's – of someone willing to wait on God – trusting in Him to act – to step into her life and change her situation. Many of you know Carolyn Callari – longtime member of this parish – wife of Louie. I could go on – as to the connection – let me name a few; sister of Connie Prohaska – and aunt of all her children which incorporates the Garrasi family; Mom of Denise Callari and Kris Wydro. Big faithful family! I had better get to my point. Just a few weeks ago Carol was complaining of shortness of breath and she went to her doctor – who ordered a chest X-Ray and stress test. She failed both! There was a catch-22 situation – they could not fix the heart and circulatory blockage and they could not operate on the cancerous mass in her lung because of her heart. I was blessed to speak with her over the phone and we asked God to heal her – and her response was filled with courage and faith: Carol said – “there is nothing that God and I can't do – one day at a time.” They ordered an angiogram for her – but could not fix any problems found because she would have to be on blood thinners for 30 days before. A week ago Tuesday Carol went for the test, and as she was waiting to be wheeled to the procedure room, a woman came to her and started taking her to the elevator. She told Carol “if you believe in God – Jesus will heal you!” Then when she left Carol she squeezed her hand and said “you're going to be just fine.” My first instinct regarding this, due to what you are about to find out, is that this woman had to be an angel, sent by God to encourage Carol – because in today's day and age – anyone speaking like this to a patient would be escorted out the door. Well, Carol called me the next day to tell me the good news – the angiogram showed no blockages and no problem with her heart. Can you

imagine that? She has now been cleared for the surgery to remove the mass on her lung on August first – that is - if there is anything still there by then! My friends, I do believe that we are talking about a miracle of faith here: trusting in God – one day at a time – and He removed the mountain that she was facing. No problems found after a test that most certainly predicted the worst. Thanks Be to God!

Just as Jesus used fictional character and situations in parables to exhibit faith and strength in the Lord – I had to use this true story to do the same. They seem so real that as a matter of fact – sometimes people confuse the parables for actual events. I remember on our trip to Israel in 1999 - our bus began its' journey from Jericho (the second lowest place below sea level on the earth) to Jerusalem. It is along the old Roman road that treacherously winds through the Negev desert. It was not a safe place to be “on foot” – and it wasn't all that great on the bus either – looking out the side at sheer drops into endless valleys. It was on that bus ride that I heard someone ask our Rector – “where did the Good Samaritan happen?” That may not sound like a crazy question – but Jesus used that parable to illustrate and answer the question “who is my neighbor?” Yet it seems so real to people who relate to the story – that the question was asked.

So why did Jesus teach in Parables? The primary reason was because of the hardness of people's hearts Jesus could separate the truth seekers from the curiosity seekers – concealing the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven. When the crowd lessened He would often explain the parable to His disciples, revealing to them the basic meanings of what they had just heard – and then the known or earthly truth would help to shed light on the unknown or heavenly truths. For many of the Parables – the subject matter was the Kingdom of Heaven.

- Jesus would use the parables to give us **a view of the character of the kingdom:** in the parable of the Mustard Seed, the Leaven, the Hidden Treasure, and Pearl of Great Price.
- Jesus would give us **a glimpse of the character of the King** in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, the parable of Lost or Prodigal Son.
- Jesus would give us **a view of the character of the King's subjects** in the parable of the Good Samaritan and Persistent Widow.

Jesus purposefully explained the central truth in the Parable of the Sower –or the Parable of the Four Soils – helping us to therefore be able to understand other parables. We should use that parable and its' explanation to make sure that our interpretation of the other parables are in harmony with it. Indeed, not all of them will be crystal clear – but don't get frustrated – ask God's help as you read them, that the Holy Spirit would open your eyes, and open your ears that you might understand more fully the mysteries that they contain regarding the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said in Matthew 13:16-17 *“But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. “For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.””*

When Jesus refers to the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven – He is speaking of the same thing and often refers to it in the present: It is spiritual, which is reflected in the hearts of mankind, and is now reflected in believers - the Church. Jesus also refers to it in the future – which will be when He comes again to deliver the Kingdom to the Father, and the righteous will *“shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”* (Matthew 13:43) The kingdom will reflect the new heavens and the new earth as described by both Peter (in 2 Peter 3:13) and

John (in Revelation 21:3) where the tabernacle of God will dwell with His people – those who do the will of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21-23)

Jesus masterfully uses the illustrations in His parables to identify the good, the bad, and the ugly – so to speak. For example - He uses the seed, the wheat and the tares to represent people in the world – and the enemy as Satan, the reapers are angels who will come and do the separating at the harvest. In what appears to be hard judgment is also the message that Jesus is willing to wait for those who need to change. (We will address this more in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard next week.) **The enemy is always on the attack:** just listen to the words of 1 Peter 5:8 *“Be of sober spirit, **be on the alert**. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. **But resist him**, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.”* **We have been given what we need to combat and overcome the wicked one.** The Apostle John wrote in his first epistle: *“I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”* (1 John 2:14) There is good reason that God’s Word is called the “Sword of the Spirit!”

When Jesus used the Parable of the Mustard Seed to describe God’s Kingdom – He in essence said that like one’s faith at the very beginning – it will grow – and you’d better get out of the way – because its’ tremendous growth would be the exact opposite of its humble beginnings. The Kingdom of God will grow and benefit the whole world – for it is *“righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”* (Romans 14:17) The Kingdom of God is a place, now and in the future, where just like with the birds in the parable, people can seek rest for their weary and troubled souls, a place where the King offers His tender invitation to: *“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-30) The Parable of the Mustard Seed should serve as an encouragement for each of us – to experience great things, even though starting small; it should also serve as a reminder to us that in this ever growing Kingdom – we can be useful if we *“abide in Him”* so that we can indeed bear much fruit.

Like the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the Parable of the Leaven, which are both in next weeks’ Gospel, talk about the remarkable growth that can and does take place – and that our involvement in carrying the Word of God into the world would foster its’ growth – multiplying its original size. There has been a misconception of the use of the word “leaven” or “yeast” and its meaning. In ancient Israel leaven or yeast was seen symbolically as a sinful or corrupting influence. Jesus even warns to *“watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”* (Matthew 16:6) Their teachings were laced with contradiction and hypocrisy – based on a legalistic viewpoint. The Apostle Paul spoke about people withdrawing from those who were non-repentant by saying: *“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”* (1 Corinthians 5:6-8) Now that should certainly sound familiar.

Leaven was something that needed to be cleaned out of homes each year at Passover – symbolizing sin – and bread was therefore made without leaven – no time to rise; all symbolic. So why would Jesus be speaking of leaven in this way and the woman who hid three pecks in the flour until it all was leavened? Leaven had gotten a bad reputation as being evil! Well, Jesus was making an example of something that would have the capability of permeating, spreading

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or flowing through the whole world – with the loaf being the world and the leaven being the Kingdom of God, which would gradually make its influence felt in the whole world. The Gospel would be proclaimed, as Jesus commanded in the Great Commission, and the church would be its messenger or carrier. The growth would be slow – but would also be invisible - with little noticeable effect until the whole loaf is all leavened. You don't see the wind, do you? You see its effects – and so it is with the leaven or yeast – the growth of the Kingdom.

Using the Parable of the Sower or the Four Soils as our guide or measuring stick – we can see that unfortunately the Gospel will not be received by everyone. There will be some “seeds” that totally reject the Gospel. The Kingdom of God is taking root and will bear good fruit wherever the Gospel falls upon good “soil.” Remember Fr. Molison asked last week “what kind of seed are you?” The question this week could be “what kind of *leaven* are you?”

Lastly, let's look briefly at the parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price. These two speak of the preciousness and value of the Kingdom of God. The first parable tells of the man who accidentally found a great treasure in a field– he hides it and sells what he has to buy the property where he hid the treasure – so that it would be his forever. There are many who find the rich treasure of salvation and give up much to accept it and follow the true path, no matter what the cost. It is not a matter of weighing the cost of discipleship beforehand, but of accepting it and be willing to pay whatever the price that comes with it; the price of repentance, the price of submission to the Lordship of Jesus, and the price of putting Him first in our lives.

Just think if you will of Saul of Tarsus – who as a member of the Sanhedrin was responsible for persecuting many followers of Christ – but discovered Christ on the road to Damascus – and left it all to be transformed and become the obedient Apostle Paul – who though suffering much – brought many to Christ.

How similar is the man who was seeking beautiful pearls and finds one that is extraordinary, and sells his possessions to buy it. This was not accidental like the hidden treasure, but this man was actively looking for a pearl! This is suggestive of those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” for those who “seek first the Kingdom of God,” who know there is some greater meaning in life, some purpose that they seek and spend their lives trying to find it. When they find it – when they find Jesus – they are willing to give it all up just to have Him. We have been witness to many who have lived this experience – and it maybe even some of us present here today. I have got to ask you this: how do we live our lives as Christians? Do we demonstrate how precious and how treasured to us is the gift of our salvation, the gift of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Next week we will look even further at the parables of Jesus, beginning with the Dragnet – and then ask why there seems to be no Parables in the Gospel of John. You will find a chart, on your way out today, on a table right outside the door going into Fr. Amend Hall. It is a chart of all of the Parables of Jesus and where you can find them in the Bible. Think of it as homework for next week!

I want to close with a prayer from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: “*Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.*” (Romans 16:25-26)