

"It's about What They 'Do' More than What They 'Mean'"

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Judges 9:8-15

The trees once went out
to anoint a king over themselves.
So they said to the olive tree,
'Reign over us.'
The olive tree answered them,
'Shall I stop producing my rich oil
by which gods and mortals are honored,
and go to sway over the trees?'
Then the trees said to the fig tree,
'You come and reign over us.'
But the fig tree answered them,
'Shall I stop producing my sweetness
and my delicious fruit,
and go to sway over the trees?'
Then the trees said to the vine,
'You come and reign over us.'
But the vine said to them,
'Shall I stop producing my wine
that cheers gods and mortals,
and go to sway over the trees?'
So all the trees said to the bramble,
'You come and reign over us.'
And the bramble said to the trees,
'If in good faith you are anointing me king over you,
then come and take refuge in my shade;
but if not, let fire come out of the bramble
and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'

Mark 4:33-34

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Why did Jesus tell all those stories? What is God hoping that we will get out of them? If we can open our awareness more fully to the Spirit's leadings, what things could we hear that maybe we have resisted before? What things have we missed in the past that we might notice? What lessons could these stories even now teach us?

With many stories like these, Jesus presented his message to them, as much as they were able to hear. He was never without a story, then explained everything to his disciples when he was alone with them, sorting out the knots and tangles.

Jesus always has a story ready to make his point. We've all heard them. Help me out here and let's name some of them... Jesus tells these and other stories then he explains them to his inner circle in private.

Only a few of those explanations are recorded but maybe that's a good thing since the disciples misunderstand Jesus' meaning regularly. We shouldn't be too hard on them. They are looking for something that makes sense, something that's within their comfort zone, like we do. And like us, they resist what the parables might mean if they were to look more closely.

Jesus refers to this as receiving the mystery of the kingdom. Parables are mysterious because they challenge us to look into hidden parts of our own values and lives.

Today we begin our summer sermon series on Jesus' parables. As we examine some of them each week, I encourage us to look deeper, beyond what we usually hear and try to notice other things that these stories might mean. As you listen, try to open your awareness and listen to the story in ways you have never considered before. If we go into this prayerfully, expecting God as Spirit to reveal fresh insights, we can trust that we will receive them.

Some have said that religion is supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Jesus' parables are meant to do some of that afflicting. When we listen and then think, "That's nice," we have missed the point entirely. Or else, we tame these lessons and create platitudes like, "Be nice" or "God loves us" or "Everything is fine as long as you believe in Jesus." These are easier lessons to hear, but when we do this we are settling for something much smaller than Jesus intended.

The Jewish people who hear Jesus' stories know that parables are more than children's stories. They are aware of the parables that have been told through the generations, stories to prompt people to see the world and themselves in a different way, to challenge and sometimes to indict them.

Take the one [name] read from the Hebrew Bible a few minutes ago. The book of Judges records how Abimelech slaughters all but one of his brothers in an attempt to rule over the city of Shechem. His youngest brother Jotham hides, though, and survives. After Abimelech is in power, Jotham stands on Mt. Gerizim. He tells his parable to the city's leaders. Using trees as his subject, Jotham reminds his listeners that those with something of value to offer neither seek nor want political power.

The bramble – with nothing to contribute – is the only one willing to take the role and it threatens to destroy any who offer opposition. We might hear this as a warning today and remember always to consult our hearts, and our God, before seeking any leadership positions.

We hear parables differently at various stages of our lives or in different circumstances. The story of the lost son sounds very different to parents than it does to the irresponsible or to the overly responsible. Lazarus and the Rich Man sounds very different to someone with a large portfolio than it does to someone who has little or no retirement savings.

Nathan's parable for King David after he takes something that does not belong to him will sound different to those who have longed for, or taken another's property, or destroyed relationships, than to those who have been victimized. David was furious with the story, that someone would do such a thing! That person must be punished! Yet he didn't realize this was his own story. Proof again of how easy it is to hear parables and miss our own story in them. Only when Nathan spelled it out could David see how wrong he had been.

The Hebrew bible offers a number of such parables. In each case, the reader has to make a choice. What do we do?

Some of Jesus' stories begin, "The kin-dom of heaven is like..." yet we each have particular ideas when we hear those words. For some, God's realm is a time when all pain shall cease. For others, it's a place with pearly gates and golden sidewalks. Through his stories, Jesus asks us to think about how much we really want God's kin-dom if it's about loving our enemies, visiting prisoners, freeing those who are oppressed and feeding the hungry.

So many of us are satisfied with how things are right now; we don't want to hear that God demands differently of us. Another thing we can easily forget is how important context is. I remember watching reruns of *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* when I was a kid. I knew what was real and what was impossible. Rocket J Squirrel didn't really fly. Animals don't talk, surely they can't save the world. Beyond that, I knew nothing of satire. I was unaware of the Cold War. References even characters' names – like Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale – flew past me. I had yet to experience Mussorgsky's music and knew nothing of Boris Godunov. What's a *femme fatale*?

What I missed then, and what some of you missed even while I was talking, is the context. When we don't know what's normal to the world in that moment, we may enjoy the story but we cannot fully appreciate it.

Filling in blanks to make sense of the story can work sometimes. Rocky and Bullwinkle were only fifty years ago. Those who didn't experience the Cold War learn about it in school.

Events of two or three thousand years ago though? We can still guess to fill in blanks, but many, even most, of those guesses will miss the mark.

Jesus' first listeners would have understood more of what we miss. When Jesus says, "There was a man that had two sons," we might know what story's coming, but it's unlikely we'll think of other earlier bible stories in which a man had two sons. Those first listeners would have thought of Abraham and sons Ishmael and Isaac or Isaac and Esau and Jacob. Or Cain and Abel. Coming at Jesus' parable this way, hearing those connections, can give added depth a person's listening.

Parables will often tease us into recognizing what we have always known. They do this by reframing our vision. This summer, maybe rather than expecting these ancient stories to reveal something new, perhaps you can open yourself differently, and allow the story to resurrect what is very old, very wise and very precious.ⁱ

Just maybe this will be the Spirit's gift for each of us who gather here each Sunday morning.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, HarperOne, 2014, 25.