

Introduction to Parables

Our culture is comfortable with parables for they seem like such endearing and cozy stories. But in reality, they give us surprising insights into how God is acting and present in our lives.

Parables fall under the category of Wisdom literature. Wisdom in scripture has many meanings. It is the quality of prudent and insightful decision making. "Good advice and sound judgment belong to me" (Wisdom 8:12). Wisdom is a quality that is learned not just by the head, but also by the heart. "When wisdom comes into your heart and knowledge is a delight for you, then prudence will be there to watch over you, and discernment be your guardian" (Proverbs 2:10). Wisdom, however, is more than the accumulation of knowledge and facts. Even though we seek wisdom, we will never fully grasp it because in scripture Wisdom is also a name for God.

Parables are a specific kind of wisdom stories. They are stories and sayings that need to be probed and pondered. They are religious riddles that invite us to look at our lives and find similar situations where God is evident but acting behind the scenes. Since they are stories, they are open ended. They stir our imaginations. Because we bring our experiences to them, they can be understood from different points of view. Think for example the story of the Prodigal Son (LK 15:11-32). For years many of us read the story focusing on the prodigal son who lived irresponsibly and wasted his family's resources. But in more recent years that same story is often referred to as the Story of the Prodigal Father. When we shift our attention from the son's extravagant wastefulness, to the father's extravagant forgiveness the whole parable shifts.

Sometimes Jesus addresses the parable to his disciples. Other times he is speaking to the crowd. Often Jesus begins the parable with a question that requires a response from those listening. The parable of the Lost

Sheep begins with, “Which one of you wouldn’t leave your ninety-nine sheep and go after the one lost?” Many of the parables speak about the kingdom of God. We know that this kingdom is not a geographic place, but is an experience where God’s power and presence is shown. We have to be careful when reading the “Kingdom Parables” that we don’t equate the authority figures as images of God. The parables are not allegories where the king/master/judge represent God. Yet, in the parable there is something that speaks of the power of God – God working in our lives.

Jesus’ parables talk about ordinary items like fig trees, mustard seeds and yeast in flour, but the parables challenge our expectations and presumptions. As we grow and change our experiences help us see and hear the parables from different points of view.

What is the best response to parables? (Or, "Do we get it?")

-- Laughter

-- surprise –unexpected reversals

-- awe/wonder - encouragement, hope, possibilities

-- prayer/praise/Thanksgiving - calm, accepting

-- humility - not as smart as I thought, maybe another way to see things

-- optimism - there’s more to the now and future than what I often perceive

-- determination, to live and see life parabolically -

 Willing to be curious, seek, search for truth,

-- keep the door open, don't shut it too soon - everything is not over yet.

There’s more to come

-- patience - let the dust settle, step back, listen, imagine

-- hope - keeps us alive, but not complacent

-- willing to take a chance (risky) make sacrifices for something we don't yet see - not immediate satisfaction/gratification

-- willing to adopt another system of values, another world you...

Forsake standard of measurement - what is lasting -give life for

-- willingness to let go of something for a pearl of great price