

In the process of following the narrative lectionary, we receive large swaths of texts. Today we are offered a buffet of parables: the parable of the Sower, the parable of the lamp, the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the growing seed.

I've decided not to deal with the content of the parables. If I were to attempt that, we could be here all day. For parables are meant to be openers - stories that use everyday examples to crack open the mystery of the kingdom of God. The Greek word *parabole* literally means "a placing of one thing by the side of another / a comparing, comparison of one thing with another." Thus Jesus used earthly stories and paired them with a heavenly meaning.

(<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G3850&t=KJV>)

Parables are meant to make people think. They are not meant to give simple answers; they are meant to raise a question; they are meant to lead you to some place. But the "you" in that equation is not a universal "you" - as in everybody will get the same thing out of the parable. The "you" is YOU. What do YOU hear in Jesus' parables as they relate to gaining a firmer understanding of the kingdom of God?

It is quite interesting how Mark deals with this issue in these verses. First off, it appears as if Jesus has two different approaches to telling these stories. For the past few weeks, we've talked about how, as soon as Jesus started his public

ministry, he attracted crowds. Even when he tried to go into the desert to get away from people...they showed up out there. At the outset of today's text, he was at the edge of the sea and so many people came to listen to him that he had to climb into a boat to teach them all.

But he seems to come to the conclusion that, even with all those people clambering to hear his message, only a small percentage are going to "get" what he's teaching. In verse 12, he even harkens back to the young Isaiah who receives a call to serve as God's prophet. You know the call and response: (This is in Isaiah 6.)

"Whom shall I send?" The Holy One asks. "Who will go for us?"

Isaiah's response, "Here I am. Send me."

Then God says, "Go and say to this people:

'Hear continually, but never comprehend!

See continually, but never perceive!'

Dull the heart-minds of the people,

Stop their ears,

Shut their eyes--

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

Understand with their minds,

And then turn back and be healed!"

This is what Jesus says the purposes of the parables are - to trip up "the outsider" from actually comprehending the kingdom of God.

Jesus is willing to explain the parables to the Twelve and others in the intimate circle. But to the rest...they are left on their own to comprehend the meaning of his teaching.

I have to admit, I've never quite understood this strategy--whether in Isaiah or from Jesus.

Maybe God knows humanity too well.

Maybe God knows that we are well intentioned, and we are good at claiming we want to participate in the kingdom, but we're not prepared to discipline ourselves in order to do it with any sort of integrity.

Maybe Jesus thinks his best shot is to work with a smaller group, and bring them along for the ride and hope that in their commitment to truly "Follow" they will have ears to comprehend and eyes to perceive.

Huh, maybe that parable about the sower is a true reflection of Jesus' expectations for how God's word will find a fertile place to grow and thrive? Is Jesus realistic that only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the seed will grow to maturity - the rest will fall victim to:

- The evil one distorting it; or,
- Shallow roots leading to stumbling or turning away at the first sign of persecutions or trials; or,
- The thorny worries of this world, the lure of riches and all other passions choking out the Word, so that it produces nothing?

I have to admit - this is some pretty prophetic stuff Jesus is teaching here. I will raise my hand to each one of these scenarios which has taken my attention away from participating in the kingdom, and losing my way.

How easy would it be to get hooked by those lures, if it weren't for the discipline of returning to the Word? Whether it is daily devotions, or weekly attendance in worship, the activity of hearing the word read and wrestling with its meanings helps to nurture our lives of faith.

It also helps prepare us to bear *kingdom* fruit.

Jesus seems to be explaining in his stories that there is something to be shown for living within the kingdom of God. Those who allow the Word to be nurtured within them, Jesus explains, will bear fruit: thirty, sixty, one hundredfold.

Let me stop for a moment, and invite you to consider for a moment, those in whom you have witnessed the fruit of the Word. Examples help us "see" what it means to be people of the kingdom. Examples help us perceive "kingdom values" at work in the world. When we look at another, and judge for ourselves that they embody what Jesus was talking about, it makes us hope that we can reflect that faith in the way we intersect with the world.

There's an intriguing use of the word "parable" that I discovered in my research this week. The word is found in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. Chapter 11 is filled with descriptions of faith taken from characters in the Hebrew scriptures. Each paragraph is set off by the phrase, "By faith so

and so did this and such,” thereby reflecting God in their lives. Verse 17 begins this way:

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. Abraham who had received the promises was ready to sacrifice his only son, 18 of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” 19 Abraham considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—**and so he received Isaac back as a *parable*.**

The story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, is a complex story -- especially taken as a literal story of Abraham’s willingness to take his son’s life as sign of his faith in God. However, the point for the author of the letter to the Hebrews, is that the event had kindom implications: in Isaac we receive the message of God’s capacity to create life out of any situation...including death. In Isaac we see the precursor to that promise; and in Jesus we see its full fruit. In those parables we are given the ultimate hope: that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8)

The idea of “parable” being more than just “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” but also being a heavenly meaning **in an earthly life** was powerful for me.

This weekend, we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Our nation set aside this commemoration of his birth because of what he did to help inspire others to commit to civil rights. For me, it was his conviction that the Way of

Jesus was the way of nonviolent resistance; that it was the way to justice; that it was the way of real honest love of neighbor. For me, Dr. King just got it. You can hear it in his voice when he preached, or when he spoke to the media. You could see it in the way he steadfastly walked for freedom. You could feel it when he laid down a philosophical or theological argument that was watertight and called to account those who *thought* they could see and hear, but who found themselves questioning what they perceived and understood. Was Dr. King perfect...no. But he was perfectly human parable who pointed toward the kingdom of God.

Dr. King is an obvious and notable example of a parable who lived in our time. There are many more quiet and unassuming folks with whom we live side by side who have served that role for us. I assume you have yours. And I invite you to call them to the fore of your mind. That you may be re-inspired by them.

I also invite us to take inventory of how we are invited to join the community of those who listen to Jesus' words and become those in whom others see a parable - indeed, our own lives being a way of living that reflects glimpses of the way God desires for the world to be. By participating in the life of the church, you are giving your soul the best opportunity to be fertile ground in which the seed of God's Word can take root and blossom in order that you can be a light for the world and a reflection of Christ for others to see and emulate. Thanks be to God. Amen!