**Parabolic Privacy**

June 14, 2015

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

*The prophet makes a surprising choice when anointed a new king for Israel.*

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

*Paul testifies that the love of Christ compels him to proclaim the gospel despite suffering.*

Mark 4:26-34

*The parable of the mustard seed*

Text: *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.*

Mark 4:33-34

Prayer:

Lord, we live in a society that exalts those who are successful, big, proud, and self-sufficient. We don’t like to be small, needy or dependent. And yet, we are. We are the new kid in the second grade, we got the low and the high school student who got a low grade in algebra, we were the only one in the Bridge Club who got a divorce, we grew older, our friends died, and we were left alone in a room at a nursing home, needy, dependent, smaller than we once were.

Remind us of your love for the least of those among us. Strengthen us and help us to sense Your Spirit beside us. Use those times when we feel vulnerable and dependent to draw us closer to you. Draw near to us now as we ask you to help us understand these ancient words of scripture.

I

n our lesson from Mark, Jesus is describing the kingdom of God:

"*This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how . . ."*

Jesus is not talking about being parents or grandparents in this passage, but isn't this the very first area in which we participate in the coming of God's kingdom to earth? It is in the raising of our children. Raising good children is something like scattering seed upon the ground.  It is sort of what we do as a congregation when we make promises in baptism.

Author Ken Canfield notes, there are no guarantees in either raising kids or planting seed. A farmer can do all the right things and still lose a crop. So can parents. The farmer can till the ground at the right time, put in the right seed, and irrigate and fertilize according to the textbook. But that does not guarantee a crop.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Some of us have learned the hard way that there are no guarantees. But generally, if we have done the best we can in planting and nurturing the seed which are our children, God will reward us with a good crop. Some of us can even say, the seed was good, the soil was good, but the sower really didn’t provide the best care. God blessed us with what should be unexpected results.

Jesus chose to speak in parables. Don’t you find that just a bit annoying, even dishonest? Why didn’t Jesus just come right out and say what he meant? Why did he leave behind all these cryptic sayings loaded with innuendo? Instead he could have provided a crisp code of laws or a stack of essays with titles like:

How to Be a Good Disciple (or)

A Brief Definition of the Kingdom of God (or)

Seven Key Features of the Heavenly Kingdom and What This Means to You (or)

How to Pray (or)

The 12 Step Program for Forgiveness.

But Noooooooo! We have this awkward absurd collection of mini-stories we call parables that Jesus used. Why would Jesus do a thing like this to us? All he had to do was to spell it out in simple terms - leave nothing to the imagination. But he chose to use stories through which to communicate divine truth.[[2]](#footnote-2)

He could have given us a list of rules or a set of essays. Don’t you think the master could have gotten his points across better with precise rules and a good index? But, I suppose that most of us just don’t become enthused with hard and fast rules. Try remembering the last time you sat down with a cup of coffee to spend an evening reading through Leviticus or the book of Numbers.

We do have sections of rules, the key ones numbering 10, but that brief synopsis has been problematic at best. One of our members once gave me a note that said that Jay Leno, in describing the movie *Commandments*, said that it was about a man who set out to violate all ten of them. When he had broken eight of them, he was made an honorary Kennedy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Dr. Leonard Sweet when he was dean of the Theological School at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey says that we are greatly mistaken if we think our traditions stems from only four canonical gospels. As well as The Gospel According to Matthew, The Gospel According to Mark, The Gospel According to Luke and the Gospel According to John the church has nearly 2000 years’ worth of other gospel books to celebrate. The Gospel of Augustine, the Gospel of Martin Luther, or the Gospel of John Wesley. All these gospels have been a vital part of our personal spiritual development because of their eternally rechargeable parable power.

There are lots of gospels which are less well known, but they are highly relevant for us and they have had a particular persuasiveness. How many have encountered Christ through the personal parable stories that make up The Gospel According to Grandma, or The Gospel According to Aunt Mary or the Gospel According to That Kid at Camp Whose Name I Can’t Even Remember?

All of us are in the process of writing our own gospels - our own accounts of our experience with the Good News of Jesus Christ and the coming kingdom. It seems to me that a week never goes by without someone calling to say, I had this amazing coincidence and wonder if it might be a special communication from God. Writing a gospel through the very act of living is part of being a disciple of Jesus. Jesus knew that storytelling is one of the most basic practices common to all human communities. Stories connect us to one another, to our ancestors, to our world and to our God. Mark tells us that when Jesus spoke to the crowds around him, he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Master knew that this was an effective way of communicating.

Well, tell us, what chapter did you add to your gospel this week? How did the parables acted out in your life witness to the Good News? Do any of these titles remind you of this week’s additions to your work in progress?

❖The Parable of the Crabby Boss and the Christian Coworker

❖The Parable of the Kids Who Won’t Clean Up their Rooms and the Mother Who is threatening to Ground Them for Life

❖The Parable of the Flat Tire and the New Suit

❖The Parable of the School That Doesn’t Feel Safe and the Kids Who Must Attend There

❖The Parable of the Empty Cupboard and the Overflowing Bills to Pay Slot

❖The Parable of Red Light that Never Seems to Change When You are late

If it is our task to tell the good news, through parable or through direct communication, chew on this thought, we can’t preach the Good News and then be the Bad News.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*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.*

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it . . . Mark is concluding a section here that began at the beginning of verse 1 in chapter 4. This is the chapter in Mark’s gospel where the biographer has sought to examine the teaching method of Jesus. Actually if we look at the passage as a whole we need to start reading before the two parables for today, the seed growing of itself and the parable of the mustard seed.

There is a composite nature to the whole collection of parables in chapter 4. Some Bible scholars call this section the parables by the sea. This editorial unit in Mark represents the first explicit elaboration of the message of the Kingdom of God which Jesus announced back in chapter 1.[[6]](#footnote-6) You will find all of this material except the parable of the seed growing of itself in Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke have Jesus telling these parables in different historical settings. Maybe our attempts to reconstruct these settings are filled with conjecture and the hypothetical may not serve us well, but it is important to see that the gospel writers not only had the same material, but they placed it in different arrangements in their texts for particular purpose.

All of chapter 4 contains parables about seeds

⚫The sower

⚫ The seed growing of itself

⚫The mustard seed.

To these are added a word from Jesus about parables in general and a cluster of sayings about light and hearing. The word parable is used in Greek much more broadly than in English. We distinguish between parable, allegory and saying whereas parable in the New Testament is used to refer to all of these sorts of comparisons and others, too, including proverbs and riddles.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As a metaphorical mode of communication, parables are open to multiple meanings and so it is possible for us to hear different things as we read and reread these texts, especially when we bring our personal experiences to bear on the words of God. Even the gospels themselves give evidence that not even the first hearers comprehended everything Jesus intended to teach. Why else would Mark have stated, “But he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Don’t you wish you knew what Jesus had said in private! If only we had been there we could have gotten a first hand understanding of the Master’s intention. Perhaps he connected the dots a little between what he was saying and what the Old Testament had said, contrasting the two. Maybe Jesus told some additional stories to further explain what the ones he had told meant. We really don’t know and can only surmise that this is what is intended with much preaching . . . to take the parables and attempt to explain what they mean for those who didn’t catch it when they first read it.

If for example you had picked up a Bible, and read:

*"With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? {31}It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; {32}yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."*

We probably would have wanted to know:

🞊 What is the kingdom of God?

🞊 Why are you choosing to illustrate this through a mustard seed?

🞊 What does the size of this seed and the size of the shrub have to do with this?

🞊 Kingdom of God, whatever that is, really?

Because the parable of the mustard seed follows a parable about the seed growing by itself are you suggesting that we don’t have to water or nourish what God plants, but that God will give the growth?

Do you suppose that Jesus would have said to his disciples, “Now whatever else you learn about this, I want to inform you that the parable of the seed growing by itself and the parable of the mustard seed has three main themes, like all of the parables that Mark will later record of my teaching. These parables have an Christological focus (describing my identity), a theological focus (on God’s bringing in the kingdom) and a pedagogical focus (on the path of proper discipleship).[[8]](#footnote-8)

No I suppose that what Jesus had to say went differently. And our conjecture here is just as valid as most anyone’s. We might suppose that Jesus went on to say, “In the kingdom of God there will be reversals from what we have thought to be noteworthy, strong, or important. We think that might makes right, but in the kingdom of God right will be right. We may believe that survival belongs to the fittest, but in the kingdom of God survival will go to the faithful. We may believe that the golden rule applies - he who has the gold makes the rules, but in the kingdom of God, it is the humble that God empowers and it is the poor in spirit that will receive large inheritances. Actually we may find ourselves valuing things and acquisition but in the kingdom of God it is not receiving, but giving that is most valued. Everything in God’s kingdom puts our current value system in reverse. Whereas we may believe that it is the strong that will be chosen, God has a way of reversing what we perceive to be strong.

Maybe Jesus would have drawn some further parallels saying:

“You remember how Samuel wrote about the anointing of David. As the youngest son of Jesse, the smallest clan of the smallest tribe in Israel, David was not allowed to come to the sacrifice. He was left tending some of the sheep. Eliab, the oldest son, seems the first choice, for he is the largest. Yet Samuel notes that God does not judge people as we judge them, the Lord looks on the heart.

If you examine that story you can see how God is free to bypass our established, conventional power configurations in order to step into history and make a fresh beginning. This story about the selection of David is placed with all those stories in Scripture of dramatic inversion, the casting down of the high and mighty and the uplifting of the young and the lowly. God’s choices disrupt our arrangements.

In this story, those who are small, young, powerless can gather courage and self-identity. And so I have told you the parable of the mustard seed to say much the same thing. In that parable the seed is outwardly small, but in God’s hands it can do great things when God is permitted to give the growth. You may think that you are of little importance and ability, but if you bring your faith to almost anything you encounter, God will help it to blossom and flourish for his purpose. You may believe that you have lived a life that is an offense to God, but if you bring your humble faith, small as it may be, confessing your shortcomings and sin, God will restore you and make you whole.

Now that graduation is fast approaching for a number of Senior Highs in our congregation and since this is almost one of the last opportunities for parents to manage their children before they are launched into freedom, except for perhaps the dependency of having them pay tuition that we should have some word of wisdom, and so I am dragging out Paul Dickson’s little volume, The Official Rules at Home. At least they will know what laws they are leaving behind.

Among others he discusses these three immutable Laws‑‑Laws which he says are corollaries of Murphy's famous Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will. If anything can't go wrong, it will anyway."

❖ The first of these is Ballweg's Discovery: "Whenever there is a flat surface, someone will find something to put on it."

❖ The second is known as Smith's Fourth Law of Inertia: "A body at rest tends to watch television."

❖ The third he calls simply Parent's Law: "By the time you're right, you're dead."[[9]](#footnote-9) Many of us can relate to these three laws. They grab our attention because they create a reversal of sorts from what is the expectation. Jesus did very much the same thing with the stories, allegories, and riddles that he used.

*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.*

We wish we knew the content of those private conversations with the Master, we can only surmise. But the Master had a way of taking the commonplace from the agrarian culture, things like sheep and shepherds, fish and fishermen, seeds and shrubs and used them to help understand the nature and intent of God through them. Perhaps we ought to be looking for the parables in the commonplace of our lives that will change our behavior.

Writer Tim Kimmel has six individually framed pictures across the upper shelf of his roll‑top desk at work. The picture on the left is of the Jameson Memorial Hospital in New Castle, Pennsylvania. When I read Tim’s writing, my mind transported me to that hospital where I had walked all of its halls visiting people from my first parish. That's where Tim was born. The picture on the right is of a six‑foot‑high granite monument that stands in the middle of the Graceland Cemetery just outside of New Castle. You can't miss the word "Kimmel" carved on its side. The earth beneath it conceals the remains of several generations of his family. The four pictures that sat between these two outer pictures are of Darcy (his wife) and Karis, Cody, and Shiloh, his three children.

"What we do for a living has a way of absorbing our attention," Kimmel writes. "Its demands are so great and its ego satisfaction so intoxicating that it can easily become the focus of our lives. I love my work, but I don't want it to become the heart of my existence and my reason for living. That's why I have those pictures strategically placed on my desk. When I look up from my work, I come eye level with a reminder of my purpose. Stealing a peek at them several times a day has a way of keeping my work (and my life) in proper perspective. In the brief moment it takes me to scan them I receive a message in the cluttered back rooms of my brain.

"The pictures say, “Don't forget, Tim, THIS is where you checked in (the hospital), THIS is where you're checking out (the cemetery), and THESE FOUR PEOPLE in the middle are WHY GOD PUT YOU HERE."[[10]](#footnote-10)

Perhaps we ought to be looking for the parables in the commonplace of our lives that will change our behavior.

Few things can rival the thrill of catching a baseball at a live game. Maybe you saw the same sports report that I did this past week where a boy in the first row of the outfield was ready when the Oakland Athletics visited the Detroit Tigers. This young lad is a Tigers fan, one of the most passionate. Tuesday night…well, at first. So as his pal hugged him, the poor lad's euphoric joy plummeted to pure devastation when he realized that Ben Zobrist’s grand slam in the seventh inning gave the A's a lead they would never relinquish. He had caught the ball that caused his Tigers to loose. But, that only reminded me of one of my favorite baseball catch stories.

One cool summer night at Yankee Stadium in New York, a foul ball was hit into the lower left field stands. It was heading right toward a boy of about nine who had obviously come to the game that night hoping for just such a moment. He had a pair of cheap binoculars around his neck and was wearing an oversized Yankees cap and a small Little League glove which had the hardly-broken-in-look of a mitt worn by a kid you let play right field in the late innings of hopeless games.

The foul ball was arching directly toward this boy’s outstretched hand, but suddenly, a man of about 35 wearing a knit shirt and horn-rimmed glasses reached over the boy, jostling him aside and caught the ball. In the jostle, the plastic binoculars were broken, and the boy, despite his mother’s comfort, was clearly crushed. Everybody in the left field stands had seen this, and, after a second or two of stunned silence, someone shouted, `Give the kid the ball! Then another cried, `Give the kid the ball! A couple of rows joined in unison, ‘Give the kid the ball!

Horn Rims shook his head and put the ball in his pocket. That inflamed the whole crowd and with one voice they took up the chant, `Give the kid the ball! It spread to the center field stands, then to right field, until the whole outfield, including people who did not even know the story, were shouting, `Give the kid the ball! Players began to glance up from the field to the stands to see what was going on.

Horn Rims remained stubbornly firm. Finally a man got up out of his seat, walked over to Horn Rims and spoke some words patiently to him. Horn Rims hesitated, then reached into his pocket and handed the ball to the kid. `He gave the kid the ball! Someone exclaimed. Then the whole stands thundered, `He gave the kid the ball! Applause rippled around the stadium.

Then an even stranger thing began to happen. When another foul ball landed in the left field stands, the man who caught it walked over to Horn Rims and gave it to him. Horn Rims incredulously, thanked him and took it. The next foul ball was caught by a man in a muscle shirt who was sporting a Fu Manchu mustache. He turned and tossed the ball to the kid, who, to everyone’s delight and surprise caught it. More enthusiastic applause from the crowd, who had come that night to see a baseball game but witnessed instead a city parable about justice and grace.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There are lots of gospels which are less well known, but they are highly relevant for us and they have had a particular persuasiveness. How many have encountered Christ through the personal parable stories that make up

The Gospel According to Grandma, or the Gospel According to Aunt Mary, or the Gospel According to That Kid at Camp Who’s Name I Can’t Even Remember? The Gospel According to Pictures on a Desk?

The Gospel According to a Boy and a Baseball?

All of us are in the process of writing our own gospels - our own accounts of experiencing the Good News of the coming kingdom. Writing a gospel through the very act of living is part of being a disciple of Jesus. They are the private explanations that will declare in a public way, what we believe.

Dr. Fred Craddock, the eminent retired seminary professor who has influenced so many pastors across our land once told of the teacher who most influenced him.

Her name was, “Miss Emma Sloan.” Miss Sloan was an elderly woman, single. She taught him in the primary department, and since there was nobody to teach his group as juniors, she went right on with them, and taught them for years. She gave him a Bible. She wrote in the front: “May this be a light to your feet, a lamp for your path. Emma Sloan.” She taught the children to memorize the Bible; she never tried to interpret it. Craddock says he doesn’t remember her ever explaining anything. She said, “Just put it in your heart, and just put it in your heart.”

She used the alphabet, and they’d go around the room saying verses. “A A soft answer turns away wrath. B Be ye kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, as God also in Christ has forgiven you. C Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden. D Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. E Every good and perfect gift . . . F For God so loved the world . . .”

He says he can still remember those verses. Miss Emma didn’t explain what the verses meant. She just sowed those seeds of Scripture from the King James Bible in their hearts. They learned those verses and then recited them before the adults on Sunday afternoon. “I can’t think of anything, anything in all my life that has made such a radical difference as those verses,” says Fred Craddock. “The Spirit of God brings them to my mind appropriately, time and time and time again.” [[12]](#footnote-12)

1. Steve Farrar, Standing Tall (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc.  2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leonard I. Sweet, Parable Power, in *Homiletics*, Vol. 9, No. 2, April-June 1997, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note from Bill Cochrane, member of my congregation in Canton, Ohio. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mark 4:33. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Karin Bacon, Houston Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mark 1:14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* from *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays, (Atlanta: John Knox Press), 1983, pp. 87-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Claude N. Pazur, “The Grain Is Ripe: Parabolic Meaning in Mark 4:26-29”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* vv. 17, 21-23, January 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Walker and Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tim Kimmel, *Little House on the Freeway*, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1987), p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. "Metropolitan Diary, *The New York Times*, June 10, 1984 quoted by Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter*, Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)