

A Story-telling Man

Matthew 13: 10-13

This is it, the last sermon in this “Ask Jack” series. Your questions and suggestions for this series prompted sermons on: the nature and importance of baptism, the meaning of the Good Samaritan story, who is God?, who is Jack?, what about suffering?, Liberation theology, prayer, angels, and the separation of church and state.

Today’s question is, “Which parables are from Jesus?” The theme of parables prompts this sermon’s title: *A Story-telling Man*. What about parables? British New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd writes: “The parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from the nature of common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” (from *The Parables of the Kingdom*)

Jesus taught using parables. Why? His disciples asked the same question in today’s scripture passage. Matthew 13:10-13 actually refers back to Isaiah 6 when the prophet, in response to his vision of God’s glory has cried out, “Here am I; send me!” The voice of God then commands, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’”

It sounds like Jesus used parables to avoid talking about God’s activity in straight forward and factual terms. God’s realm is a reality that can only be understood by entering it, by being open and vulnerable to it. God is not a concept to be grasped, but a reality to be embraced.

Most reputable scholars think that not all the biblical parables placed on the lips of Jesus represent his original sayings. If this is true, how does this knowledge affect our hearing them? Does it matter?

I suspect there are deeper questions behind today’s question. They might include some of the following. Who was Jesus really? What was he saying? What can we trust and how far can our questioning go? How can we hear his genuine voice? What does he say to us today? I invite you to listen with these questions in mind.

A hundred years ago, Albert Schweitzer wrote a book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. “It is a good thing that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the modern Jesus” – the modern understanding of Jesus. In recent years, an organization called The Jesus seminar has been on a similar quest, but with more information. One of its founders, Robert Funk, echoed Schweitzer: “The real reason for rediscovering the historical Jesus is to allow the ancient Jesus to confront the many faces of the modern Jesus [to the extent he is a] creation of creeds [and our own] images”. (The

A parable is a window on the world. It depicts familiar scenes seen in new light. It opens the door to a new interpretation of life. For Jesus, it seems that an everyday perception of the world was false, deceptive, and misleading. It tended to obscure the real world of God’s domain. For most people, however, everyday perception was all they had. Some people thought Jesus was crazy.

It is perfectly acceptable not to agree with everything that comes out of any school of biblical and theological thought. These are groups of scholars who do scholarly research and suggest scholarly theories – theories such as which parables likely originated with Jesus. But to hear Jesus who walked this earth, whose life, teachings, and death so inspired and challenged his followers, requires hard work. It often requires scholarly work and patient listening.

There are some good ground rules for this work. The first is to remember that human knowledge is finite. Even if some revelation of the divine is infallible, the human agents of its reception and transmission are not. So, we need to bring our best thinking to focus on the issues.

A second ground rule is to keep the big picture in mind. It is a large framework that includes the whole world and all our knowledge. This includes, but is not limited to, the Bible. Religion is always a product of culture. Its study demands a knowledge of the cultures of its origin and of its current practice. Biblical study demands a knowledge of languages, both original and current. When interpreting Bible in a scholarly way, the Bible is not a sufficient proof text for biblical assertions. Let our questions and answers both be informed by all available information.

credible evaluation

A third important ground rule is that credible evaluation requires credible evaluators. Scholarship, with its requisite linguistic and methodological skills, is vital.

A fourth ground rule is to keep a sense of humor. Even the best theories can turn out to be wrong. We do theology for this generation, even as we build on the faith and discernment of those who have come before us. Future generations may find that they have a very different understanding of these same issues. They will build on what we do, but may make develop interpretations.

How can we know which parables originated with Jesus? The truth is we can't. The New Testament comes to us through many layers, transcriptions, cultural translations, and linguistic translations. There was a twenty-year period after Easter before the earliest gospel-like documents were probably written.

We are countless layers away from even those original documents, much less the original oral tradition. That's why it is so exciting to find such discoveries as the Dead Sea scriptures and the Nag Hammadi scrolls. These are actual documents from around the time of Jesus.

You can choose what you believe. If you want to believe that all the New Testament is verbally inspired and literally true, then all the *words in red* were spoken by Jesus. If you want to believe that virtually none of the New Testament represents the Jesus of history, that too colors your perspective.

A scholarly approach is that only those sayings and parables that can be traced back to the oral period (30-50CE) and the writing of the earliest gospel-like documents (the Q source and perhaps an early version of the Gospel of Thomas) can possibly have originated with Jesus.

Mark was most likely the earliest biblical gospel written (ca. 70CE). It contains some original sayings of Jesus. There are lots of parables and sayings. Following is a sample of many that are likely “originals”:

- Well people don't need a doctor, the sick do...
- Groom's friends can't fast while the groom is present
- Nobody pours new wine into old wineskins...
- Sabbath created for people, not people for the Sabbath
- No one can enter a strong man's house to steal...until he first ties him up
- Parable of sower and seeds (not explanation)
- To those who have, more will be given, and from those who don't have, even what they do have will be taken away.
- God's reign like the mustard seed
- It's not what goes into a person that can defile, but what comes out of the person.
- Let the children come to me; of such is God's domain.
- How difficult for those with money to enter God's domain
- Easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye
- Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor; and God what belongs to God.
- Blessed are the poor (in spirit)
- Those who grieve/weep
- Those who hunger and thirst for justice
- Also
- If salt loses its flavor, how can it be salty again?
- A city on a hill can't be hidden
- Don't react violently against the one who is evil
- When someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well
- What someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat
- If anyone forces you to go one mile, go an extra mile
- Love your enemies
- Heaven is like leaven that a woman concealed in fifty pound of flour until it was all leavened.
- Day laborers hired to work in the vineyard; new ones added throughout the day; pays them all the same
- Give to everyone who begs from you.
- Good Samaritan parable
- Parable of the dishonest manager

How do scholars determine which are likely the authentic Jesus parables? One consideration is the question of how often a particular saying appears -- in how many of the gospels. A parable that only occurs in one gospel is less likely to be original than one that appears in two or more of the gospels.

Another consideration is the matter of context and interpretation. A parable is more likely to be considered authentic if that story reflects badly on those who would have originally transmitted it. An example of this is the Good Samaritan parable. It

reflects rather badly on the Judeans and their prejudice against Samaritans. Yes, there it is in Luke's gospel.

A third consideration is whether one can hear the voice of a first-century rabbi in the parable. Are characteristic features of the rhetorical Jesus present? Does it sound like something a first-century rabbi would have said?

There is also the coherence test. Is the parable about victims and marginalized people being brought to full inclusion. Again, in the Good Samaritan story, there is a totally unexpected role reversal and an untenable hero. Jesus' listeners would have felt uncomfortable hearing that story and seeing themselves in it. Those who are religiously privileged don't need help and so they do not stop to help. Outcasts have nothing to lose and so they stop to help. They recognize a victim. They see the invisible person.

How important is it that parables originated with Jesus? Many early first-century Christians believed in the Holy Spirit's continued inspiration. They looked back on their oral tradition and on their memories of Jesus and found new understandings – things they had missed before. To them, this was genuine inspiration. These insights were, in many ways, better for them than the actual words. They heard the voice of the risen Christ and read that voice back onto the lips of the historical Jesus in the Gospels. They used this inspired understanding to proclaim their faith that God's new creation, God's reign and dominion, had been revealed in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

You and I can hear the voice of Jesus in parables. What do parables tell us? Those most likely original with Jesus tell us that God's domain (kingdom) is not a royal or political kingdom. It's not apocalyptic (end of time) or after death (world to come). To Jesus, God's domain is about the relationship between God and the world. It is a present reality now – a present reality for Jesus' life. Jesus saw it and was living it!

When we hear that voice in the Bible, in our tradition, within ourselves, and in our community, there's a good chance we are hearing the voice of Jesus.

In the Gospel of Luke (17: 20-21), Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

The journey of Christian faith is learning to hear the voice of Jesus and respond. This voice calls us to our full humanity, risking everything to become who God created us to be. A poet writes:

It is the heart that speaks.
It tells of a God who does not ask questions
But who acts
Who does not offer explanations
But lives out an answer." (Leonardo Boff)

Parables are windows through which we see that self God has made us to be; doors through which we pass to God's own realm. When we hear the voice of God through Jesus, then let us tell the story because it is our story.