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The Power of Parables

BY REV. CHUCK MIZE

Ken was one of the shining stars of his church. He was a hometown boy, a respected community leader, and a senior executive in a successful, sterling corporation. Besides that, he was blessed with a family of leaders in their own right: a talented wife, and a daughter and a son who were both popular without being coopted by their egos. It goes without saying that they were all held in highest esteem in their church.

One Sunday, the prescribed gospel text was from Luke 15; a story that we have named The Prodigal Son. As I was writing my sermon, I had a new revelation about that parable that felt fresh, even revolutionary. I could hardly wait for Sunday morning to come so I could preach it!

After church, Ken sought me out. "I've heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son more times than I can count, but you said something about it this morning that I never knew." Well, I was feeling proud and puffed up, so I began expounding on my revolutionary revelation. As I did, Ken's eyes glazed over and his face clouded with a quizzical look. He stopped me and said, "That's interesting, but that's not what surprised me. What surprised me was when you said that the father in the story is God."

In my sermon, that was an off-handed, spontaneous comment. I hadn't written it into my notes because it seemed too obvious. But, for some reason, I was inspired to say it: "Of course, the father in this story is God." That's what Ken had never heard or realized before that Sunday morning; not the insight of my revolutionary revelation!

This is the power of parables. They are not two dimensional. They are three dimensional. They are not declarative. They are imaginative. They do not communicate information. They kindle inspiration. They do not describe. They create new things in those who hear, and listen.

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The Power of the Parables cont.

Even when we label the parables with titles, we limit their power. Why do we call this parable The Prodigal Son? What is a prodigal and, if there is one in this story, who is it? Why do we call another famous parable The Good Samaritan? Isn't that story at least as much about those who ignored the man who was dying beside the road.

For Protestants, scripture has almost sacramental status. It is as holy and mysterious as are baptism and the Lord's supper. And it stands on its own. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it speaks to our hearts, not just to our minds. And, when it does, it transports us to God's new heaven and earth; a whole new world where peace prevails for everyone and everything.

Parables meet us where we are, as we are. But they don't leave us there! Ken taught me that. His lesson wasn't mine. As Jesus teaches us in parables, what's important isn't that we all affirm the same interpretation. What's important is that, in teaching by telling a story, Jesus breaks us open so that we can be changed by the power of the parables.

Back to the Past

At times even blessings will bleed us.

There are some who lost their lives
& those who were lost from ours,

Who we might now reënter,
All our someones summoned softly.

The closest we get to time travel
Is our fears softening,

Our hurts unclenching,
As we become more akin

To kin, as we return
To who we were

Before we actually were
Anything or anyone—

That is, when we were born unhating
& unhindered, howling wetly

With everything we could yet become.
To travel back in time is to remember

When all we knew of ourselves was love.

Excerpt from Amanda Gorman poem "Back to the Past" from Call Us What We Carry (Viking Books, ©2021)

“Let me keep my
distance, always,
from those who think
they have the
answers. Let me keep
company always with
those who say
“Look!” and laugh in
astonishment, and
bow their heads.”

~ Mary Oliver





The Weeds and the Wheat

Jesus uses a number of images that illustrate the tension between good and evil. They seem to say this world is a mixture of different things, and unless you learn how to see deeply, you don't know which is which, and you don't notice that God allows both good and bad to grow in the same field (Matthew 13:24-30). When a student asks Jesus if he should pull out the weeds, Jesus says to "let them both grow together until the harvest" (13:30). Then, at the end of time, God will decide what is wheat and what is a weed. In a certain way, he is saying it is none of our business to fully figure it out. This is really quite risky of God—and it takes tremendous courage on our part to trust God and ourselves here.

We are all a mixture of weeds and wheat and we always will be. As Martin Luther put it, we are simul justus et peccator. We are simultaneously saint and sinner. That's the mystery of holding weeds and wheat together in our one field of life. It takes a lot more patience, compassion, forgiveness, and love than aiming for some illusory perfection that is usually blind to its own faults. Acknowledging both the wheat and weeds in us keeps us from thinking too highly of ourselves and also from dismissing ourselves as terrible.

To avoid cynicism and negativity, you have to learn to accept and forgive this mixed bag of reality that you are—and everyone else is, too. If you don't, you'll likely become a very angry person. To accept the weeds doesn't mean that you say, "It's okay to be ignorant and evil." It means you have some real wisdom about yourself. You can see your weeds and acknowledge when you are not compassionate or caring. You have to name the weed as a weed. I'm not perfect; you're not perfect; the church is not perfect; America is not perfect.

If we must have perfection to be happy with ourselves, we have only two choices: We can blind ourselves to our own evil (and deny the weeds), or we can give up in discouragement (and deny the wheat). It takes uncommon humility to carry both the dark and the light side of things. The only true perfection available to humans is the honest acceptance of our imperfection. This is precisely what Divine Perfection can help us do; only God in us can love imperfect and broken things. By ourselves, we largely fail.

Learning how to love—which is our life's project—is quite simply learning to accept our messy reality. If you love anyone, then you have learned to accept them despite their faults. You see a few things you'd like to change in your partner, your children, yourself. By the Largeness of God within you, you are able to trust that the good is deeper than the bad, and usually well hidden. This is probably why so many of Jesus' parables are about hiddenness, seeking, and finding.

Adapted from Richard Rohr Homily "[The Weeds and the Wheat](#)," July 20, 2014.

Bless Me

Lyrics by Donald Lawrence

Bless me, bless me
Oh Lord, bless me indeed
Enlarge my territory
Oh Lord, bless me indeed
(I pray for increase)
Bless me indeed
(I pray for increase)

Increase, increase
Oh Lord, bless me indeed
Enlarge my territory
Oh Lord, bless me indeed
(I pray for increase)
Bless me indeed

Keep Your hand upon me
That no evil cannot harm me
Sunshine and rain, sickness and pain
God, I humbly come to You

Enlarge my territory
Enlarge my territory
Oh Lord, bless me indeed
(I pray for increase)
Bless me indeed





A Sheep Lost and Found

A sheep was enjoying his grass . . . and then when he started feeling chilly, he didn't recall, but the only thing that he remembers is that suddenly he became aware that he was cold, and there was a throwback in his mind, and he realized that he had been cold for some time. But, the grass was good. Then he looked around, and he discovered that he was alone. That everybody had gone. That is, that all the sheep had gone. And he began crying aloud.

And then the shepherd, who had many sheep, missed him when he got back to the fold, and he left his ninety and nine . . . to try to find this sheep that was lost. And Jesus says, "God is like that." Nothing heavy and theological about that. Very little that is dogmatic, technically, about it. Just that here is a shepherd who loves his sheep, and one of the sheep in doing the most natural thing in the world—and that is to eat the grass—did it with such enthusiasm and over a time interval of such duration that he didn't know when the shepherd called, and he was lost.

And why was he lost? He was lost because he was out of touch . . . with the group that sustained him, the group that fed him, that gave him a sense that he counted. That's all. And as soon as he was out there alone, he said, "I'm just here by myself. Nothing but me in all of this? And I want to feel that I count with the others." There's a certain warmth in that. There's a certain something that is creative and redemptive about the sense of community, about the fellowship.

Insulation is something that is spiritual; . . . there's something inside of me that pulls up . . . the drawbridge. . . . Sometimes I do it because I'm afraid; sometimes I do it because I'm clumsy and awkward, and I don't quite know how to establish a relationship or relationships with my fellows that can float my spirit to them and bring their spirit to me. . . .

Now, Jesus says that God is like the shepherd, seeking always to find those who are out of community with their fellows, and when they have found it, when they have found their community with their fellows, then all the world seems to fit back into place, and life takes on a new meaning. . . .

The lost sheep. The searching shepherd. And the cry of anguish of the sheep was the voice of identification that the shepherd heard. That is how God is, if we let him.

Howard Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables*, ed. David B. Gowler and Kipton E. Jensen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 22–24, 25.



**"We know that in all things God is working together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."
- Romans 8:28**

