

Have you ever tried to retell a funny story or joke that previously split your sides -- only to see it fall flat as a pancake the second time around? The same setup, the same characters, the same punch line that left yesterday's lunch crowd holding their sides and wiping their eyes, may leave tomorrow's employees gathered around the watercooler, yawning as they sip their morning coffee. We've even come up with some standard comebacks to cover ourselves and explain these freakish occurrences:-- "I guess you just had to be there."-- "Something must have gotten lost in the translation."—or "You just don't get it."

But the fact is; storytelling of any sort, be it an amusing narrative, or a tragic tale, is an unrepeatable art form. The variety of people listening, the inflections in your voice, the mood of the day, the color of the sky -- they all combine to create a one-time-only atmosphere for the words we speak. A story may bring a tear or a smile at one telling, and yet, the very next audience may experience the same words in a completely different way.

With that in mind, Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus chose to speak in parables. Some people find that very frustrating, even a bit dishonest. Why didn't Jesus come right out and say what he meant? Why did he leave behind all these cryptic sayings, loaded with innuendos, instead of a crisp code of laws or a stack of essays with titles like "How to Be a Good Disciple," "A Brief Definition of the Kingdom of God" or "Seven Key Features of the Coming Kingdom and What This Means to You."

But no.... instead we have this cross-eyed, mysterious, incomplete, and at times seemingly awkward collection of sayings known as Jesus' parables. Now if we were to come up with an outline of Mark's early chapters the first part would be called "Jesus teaches by Parables" and the next section would be called Jesus teaches by Miracles. Let's jump back just a little bit earlier in Mark's Gospel to see if we can try to figure things out.

After the proclamation of John the Baptist in the wilderness, and after Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, he begins to teach and do miracles. When his preaching tour begins, people go to great lengths to follow Jesus in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, and beyond the Jordan, and on the outskirts of Samaritan villages. Around the same time, there are people that say he has gone of his mind, people who are curious as to where he gets his ideas and his power. Scribes from Jerusalem say, by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.

Now how can there be such a diverse response to Jesus? If Jesus is proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God, how can people respond so differently? Why isn't he being universally embraced? If demons recognize and confess who Jesus is, why not the religious leaders? Chapter 4 of Mark's Gospel seeks to answer these questions.

Whether it is a collection of sayings known as Jesus' parables, or a list of rules that never change, written essays can be beautiful and precisely formed, but at times they appear to be no longer vital or alive. Sometimes it takes the fluid format of a story -- a tale that can never quite be told the same way twice -- to keep breathing new life into the Good News. So, if you still think Jesus would have gotten his points across better with hard and fast rules, try remembering the last time you sat down and really enjoyed reading Leviticus or the first few chapters of Numbers. Let's face it, without the accessibility Jesus' parables have to engage us, and entice us into their world, even God's Word can become a hard read.

By preaching to his followers in parables, Jesus let each listener make the Good News become his own story, her own experience. As we are swept up in the tale or narrative, we ourselves become part of a new parable -- the parable of our lives. Taken all together, our individual experiences of the kingdom, our personal stories of God's work and witness in our lives, end up creating a new gospel.

Whether we are aware of it or not, all of us are in the process of writing our own gospels -- our own accounts of experiencing the Good News of the coming kingdom in our midst. Writing a gospel through the very act of living is part of being a disciple of Christ. It is why Jesus gave the power of the parable to all those listening to his words. How many of you know that the personal parable stories making up "The Gospel According to Grandpa," or "The Gospel According to Mom," or "The Gospel According to a favorite Pastor of yours," have affected our lives dramatically?

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. In this week's gospel text, Mark notes that when Jesus spoke to the crowds, he "spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables." Jesus knew that only parable power had the ability to make the Good News of the kingdom a potent reality for every listening ear. To understand a parable, is usually to be changed, or at the very least challenged to change, not just to be enlightened.

Earlier we encountered people traveling to Jesus in great numbers, and even though we can imagine giant crowds, gathered around him, we might wonder if they will grow in their faith, and if so how? As I was reflecting on Today's Gospel I began to wonder if those people who learned from parables grew to have a deeper, longer, lasting faith than those who believed because they witnessed a miracle! Perhaps this is because if you actually have to learn about something and have put forth time and energy into figuring out's it is meaning, it will have a deeper impact. It will mean more to you.

Let's face it, we might witness something spectacular and amazing with our very own eyes, but eventually it wears off. Unless we were able to record a video of it with a mobile device so that we can watch it over and over again, it we may

eventually lose our interest. And yet, if we have to figure something out, like studying about God, hearing his words, and working on puzzles like Jesus' Parables, which aren't always easy for us, then maybe our faith will grow and stay with us longer. Like in today's story, we can picture parables being like seeds, sown into our lives.

The point of today's parable is that the Kingdom of God grows, in a hidden, mysterious way, independent of human effort. Though Jesus story speaks to growth, its meaning is not that the Kingdom of God develops naturally in history thanks to human efforts, rather, growth is spoken of as the miraculous work of God, and the harvest is an outcome that is both a gift and a miracle.

Mark's story for today is significant whenever, and wherever, we Christians take ourselves and our efforts too seriously, seeking by our own plans and our own programs to "bring in the Kingdom of God." Jesu's parable with its assurance that the harvest will come stands in opposition to any form of doubt or care, which instead of waiting for God to fulfill his promise, endeavors to force the coming of the Kingdom, or to build it ourselves in some way. Thus today's parable is asking if we are willing, for Jesus' sake, to wait with him for God to do what he is sure to do.

Of course we don't want this to mindset to go too far in the other direction! ...we don't want to have a congregation full of people sitting around waiting for God to take care of everything. Often times our problem is not with people thinking that their work will bring in the kingdom; but with people who are doing no work. Take the following newsletter article from a Lutheran church in Roswell, NM.

A preacher in the Midwest tells of a woman who called him to speak of her dissatisfaction with a program from his Church. He invited her to come to his

office and talk the problem over with him. She accepted the invitation and brought to his attention some of the things that were needed and could be done.

He gratefully acknowledged the wisdom of her ideas. He then said, "This is wonderful that you are so concerned and interested in this. You are the very person that this Church needs to head up this program. Will you take the job?"

Her reply was just as immediate. "Oh, no, I don't want to get involved. With my club work and the hours that I put into other things, I just don't have the time. But I will be glad to advise you any time." The preacher's answer to her response was classic and well put: "Good, gracious, lady, that's a problem I seem to always be faced with. I already have 400 advisers. I need someone who is willing to work."

Note the different actions of the "person" in the story that Jesus tells: casting seed on the earth, sleeping and getting up, and putting the sickle to the ripened grain. Now, I'm not sure if I like how some interpreters equate the person in Jesus' story with God. While the "harvest" is often equated with God's coming judgment, the picture of God doing nothing while life on earth proceeds "naturally" seems way too hard for us to comprehend.

It seems more likely to me that the "person" is us. We have our jobs to do: casting seed on the earth and being ready to participate in the harvest when the time is right. God's "job" is to create the "natural" growth. Rather than just a theme of "doing nothing" to bring about the *Kingdom* of God, I think the parable illustrates our need to know what we are to do, and what we need to leave up to God.

So...what chapter did you add to your gospel this week? How did the parables acted out in your life witness to the Good News of the Gospel? 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 Father 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.

Don't worry if these, or the particular parable stories you experienced this week, didn't seem to have any grand significance, any definitive "gospel" quality to them, as you lived through them. The power of a parable is partly its ability to stand up to scrutiny and self-examination at a later time -- and there to reveal its true meaning, its gospel heart. Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds. Only later did he explain to his own disciples the kingdom kernel that lived within his stories, who he was, and why he was with them.

It is the job of all of us, as Jesus' disciples, to come together and plug into the parable power running through each other's lives. Because we know the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- the gospels of Luther, Calvin, C.S. Lewis, the gospels of grandpa, our Sunday school teacher, and our little sister -- we, as the body of Christ, as a community of faith, can work together to discern in what new direction each week's parable power has taken us. Our final duty, then? Let us return to the **world** Monday morning and tell **it** the parables of our lives. In this way we become living gospels of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! AMEN