

“A Good Story”

Matthew 13:1-3, 9-17

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • September 8, 2013

This morning we return to our study of the Gospel of Matthew, picking up where we left off two weeks ago. As we begin to look at chapter 13 we find that we have come to another major turning point, shifting from a major narrative section describing things Jesus did to a major discourse section with mostly things Jesus said, his teaching. But we also find that they are connected. Jesus' teaching is the result of what came before, namely his conflict with the Pharisees that takes up most of chapter 12.

The conflict begins with Jesus and his disciples walking through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples are hungry and they pick some of the heads of grain and eat them. The Pharisees are bothered by this. It is against their rules, which they have created in order to protect the Sabbath. The conflict then escalates in the synagogue where Jesus miraculously heals a man with a withered hand. But because it's the Sabbath the Pharisees become even more angry. Jesus shows them, though, that God is always more concerned about people than with the rules about Sabbath-keeping. The Pharisees respond by trying to figure out how to destroy Jesus.

Jesus heals a man who had a demon and the Pharisees accuse Jesus of using the power of Satan. The more Jesus demonstrates that he is truly divine, the more his opponents attack him out of disbelief. Even his own mother and brothers think he's lost his mind. It is in the context of these conflicts that Jesus begins to teach using parables, and so chapter 13 contains a number of those parables of Jesus, all centered on the theme of the Kingdom of God.

So what exactly *is* a parable? I think most of us who have been around churches for any amount of time sort of automatically associate parables with Jesus, and rightly so.

But the parable was already an accepted genre before Jesus perfected it. I think that is part of the key to understanding parables – it is a literary genre, just like you would find in movies, television, and books. For example, you might be in the mood for a fast-paced action/adventure story. So you know that if the movie is described as a light, romantic comedy it's probably not what you're looking for. In the same way, the parable is its own genre and so it has some distinct features.

The word parable comes from the Greek word *ballo*, which means “to throw,” with the prefix *para*, which means “along side.” So a parable literally means something that is “thrown along side.” In other words, it's an illustration or story intended to make a point. So like an illustration, they engage our imagination and draw us into the story, making it more memorable. But there's more to a parable than just an illustration. Parables use real-life situations to draw us in but they usually have some sort of surprise, something we weren't expecting, something out of the ordinary. As I mentioned, others used parables before Jesus, particularly the rabbis of the time. Scholars have noted that sometimes Jesus' parable is very similar to rabbinic parables, except that the point of the story is different. In those instances the difference between the common parable and Jesus' version can give us a clue as to the interpretation.

In verse 10 of today's reading we find that the disciples are concerned about this change in teaching technique. Perhaps they think the crowds are not understanding the point Jesus is trying to make, so they come to him and ask, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” The answer is a bit surprising, I think. Jesus tells them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” Then he goes on,

“This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

He even quotes part of Isaiah chapter 6 where God has finally had enough of the disbelief of his people. He sends Isaiah to essentially keep the people from understanding. Jesus is saying that he is teaching in parables so that the people *won't* understand. That's the dual nature of parables. They can both reveal and conceal. “In the genre ‘parable,’ lessons are veiled.” When we hear Jesus tell a parable it's possible hear great truth, but it's also possible not to. We can close our ears to the truth and only hear a story.

Jesus began using parables when the religious leaders began to attack him. They were able to hear but they didn't understand. Their hearts were hardened against Jesus and the truth of who he is. Jesus says, “to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” As one commentator pointed out, The one who ‘has’ is the person who already knows the person and the work of Jesus and wants to know more. The one who ‘does not have’ has seen the same events, but neither cares nor believes. Indeed, such a person may be hostile.”

The person who rejects God's truth will not be able to receive any more. The parables require active participation through listening and engaging the story, hearing the point being made. To receive and understand the truth there are things we must do. But that's not all there is to it. You and I cannot just go out and discover it on our own, the truth must be *revealed* to us by God.

Jesus said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” Jesus is describing what has become known as the doctrine of election. Simply put, the doctrine of election is that God, entirely by grace,

chooses to reveal himself to some people. He chooses or elects certain people, not because of anything they have done to earn it. Remember, Jesus chose his disciples, they didn't choose him. Over time he revealed the truth about himself to them. Some people are given the “secrets” or mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. They're secrets or mysteries because they are truths that we can only know because God reveals them to us. The mystery is Jesus himself, God in person. As the Nicene Creed puts it, “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God. Of one being with the Father.” What the crowds and the Pharisees were hearing but not understanding or believing is that Jesus is the Messiah. The God who created the whole universe was the one sitting in the boat teaching. He was the one healing and casting out demons. He was the one called satanic by the Pharisees.

While the disciples certainly didn't yet understand fully, they were beginning to be convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Because they had that limited faith, they would be given more. Much more, in fact. And it was given them in a supernatural way. Think about the difference between the scared disciples hiding in a locked upper room on the morning of Pentecost and the bold, fiery disciples preaching that afternoon to the very people they were afraid of. The difference was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells them, “blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” The Old Testament prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah but they never saw him with their own eyes or heard them with their own ears. Abraham and Moses and David died without seeing the Savior in person. But the disciples saw his miracles and heard his teaching. They

experienced what those before them had longed to see and hear.

You and I have the same privilege. Through the Bible, the Word of God, we can hear Jesus teach and we can “see” his miracles, which prove who he is. Like the disciples, we are blessed because of that. The question for us today is whether, when we hear the parables, we will be like the disciples and want to know more, or the Pharisees and reject the truth. Just like 2000 years ago, there are many today who hear these words and yet deny the first principle – that Jesus is

Lord and King. They may call Jesus a teacher or a healer or a prophet or simply a good man. But they deny that he is truly God. They may even attend a church from time to time. But if they deny that Jesus is the Savior, they will soon find that they never understand and that their heart has grown dull. Even what they have will be taken away. But blessed are you because to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven!

Amen