

WALL OR WINDOW?
Sermon for June 13th, 2021
Given by Jack Fashbaugh
Mark 4: 21-34; Isaiah 6: 1-13; Ephesians 6: 10-17

When we say that Jesus made frequent use of “parables” in His teaching, we refer to several kinds of metaphor. The word “parable” derives directly from a Greek word that could describe a simple comparison (for example, people of faith compared to salt), an extended metaphor (as in our gospel reading this morning, where Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed planted in a garden), or an allegory (such as the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids). At points, a parable of Jesus may seem to obscure or to make mysterious what is meant (as when Jesus refers to the “yeast” of the Pharisees, for example), while at other points (when, for example, Jesus compares a willingness to share one’s spiritual insights to putting a lamp on a stand), the meaning is immediately clear. However, all of the parables are alike inasmuch as they draw us into seeing a world that is rich with symbols of God’s relationship with humanity. The parables teach a way of perceiving and of responding to the world. Actually, their purpose is more than rhetorical. They are meant to foster what we might describe as “a heightening of consciousness.” We might think of parables, generally, as devices that serve to illuminate spiritual realities – realities in the relationship between God and human life.

We may be somewhat confused, though, by a statement in a passage of *Mark* immediately preceding the verses of *Mark* in our gospel reading this morning. After telling the Parable of the Sower to a crowd of people who gathered around Him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and concluding by saying, “Let anyone with ears to hear and listen!” Jesus leaves that quite public place and finds a place where He can be alone with a circle of people, including those established as “disciples,” who seek additional instruction from Him. Alone with that circle, He says, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that...”. He quotes then verses of *Isaiah*: [in order that] “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven” (*Mark* 4: 10-12). We may receive the impression, from what Jesus says and the lines of *Isaiah* He quotes, that Jesus uses parables for the purpose of concealing His thoughts and observations. But such an impression is at odds with the obvious fact that Jesus is a kind of rabbi – a *teacher*.

As a teacher, Jesus’ intention, His motive, it to be understood. If it were not so, His presenting parables to those who gather to hear Him everywhere He goes would lack purpose. After explaining the meaning of the Parable of the Sower to His disciples, Jesus compares the truth about God’s presence in the world to a lamp one naturally sets on a stand, not “under the bushel basket, or under the bed”; and He goes on to say, “There is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.” If the truth is meant to be disclosed, then the purpose of the parables must not be that of *concealing* the truth. It is reasonable for us to suppose that even though revelation of the truth through parables is indirect, the purpose is, nevertheless, revelation of the truth.

It seems that the parables of Jesus are intended to be understood by those who have experienced a readiness to understand. Concluding His brief “parable” of a lamp on a stand, Jesus says what He often says: “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” And then He observes that to those who use what He offers – to those who “give” a “measure” – “still more will be given.” Those who take to heart what the parables offer and let it affect the way they live will go on to experience expanding revelation of God’s presence and the Divine Kingdom. Those who are not responsive to parables will only see more and more of what the world values in their experience of what life puts before them. The difference between those who will gather to themselves greater understanding of God’s relationship with humanity and those who will not achieve such understanding is not attributable to intelligence, as one might think in trying to grasp what Jesus intends with His use of parables. Gather, the difference between those who will gain and those who will lose is a difference in sensibilities – in spiritual readiness.

And yet, we may detect an ironical note in what Jesus says. The *tone* of Jesus’ words, on the surface, seems wrong – doesn’t it? A reality in which those who have will have more and more and those who have-not will have, impossible as it may seem, less and less may seem a cruel reality. As a vehicle for metaphorical expression, an extremely inequitable distribution of worldly wealth and goods is suggested. But such was the material reality in Judah in the time when Isaiah lived, when the prophet whom Jesus quotes lived – in the

second half of the seven-hundreds B.C. At that time, the Northern Kingdom – referred to as *Israel* – was under the control of the Assyrian Empire, while the Southern Kingdom – *Judah* – was threatened with invasion by the Assyrians. An attitude of every man-for-himself was prevalent. In fact, wealthy landowners were able to exploit the situation, squeezing increasing wealth out of sharecroppers, driving those in poverty into still more desperate poverty. Isaiah offered the wisdom of a return to the Judaic values of mutuality of care and fidelity to God above all worldly interests. But Isaiah knew that he was, generally, ignored – that to his career as a prophet he would give a good deal of seemingly futile effort; that the inability of the people to receive the truth, generally speaking, would be made all the more manifest as Isaiah exerted himself, so that it would seem that through him, paradoxically, the ears and eyes of people, rather than being rendered more receptive, would be closed. Great faithfulness was required of Isaiah. He would have to be content with God's assurance that a remnant of true servants of God would survive – a remnant of a remnant, actually. As our reading from Isaiah envisions the future, after the destruction of Judah, "Even is a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing where it is felled." The holy seed is its stump."

In Jesus' day, as in the time of Isaiah, many centuries before, the destruction of Nation Israel – as a cultural and religious entity that was already, as a political entity, under the iron fist of Rome – seemed imminent. And, as in the time of Isaiah, an everyone-for-one's-self attitude was prevalent. "Haves" acquired more, and "have-nots" sank more deeply into poverty. Society seemed ready to go to pieces. The disciples of Jesus, in their apostolic careers, would receive the impression that however hard they tried to educate people, they would succeed only in stiffening their resistance, in plugging their ears and blinding their eyes. They needed assurance that through their service they would serve Divine Destiny. We might notice that disciples of Jesus in our day could benefit greatly from taking to heart the assurance Jesus offered to a circle of followers in a place apart, about two thousand year ago.

With two extended metaphors in our gospel reading this morning Jesus communicates to those who would be His faithful followers the wisdom of patience and watchfulness. In the case of the symbolism of the man who scatters seed in a field, we might think of the man as God's active agency that has established the means by which God's Will will finally be manifested and in which resides knowledge of when that manifestation will finally occur in all its fullness. The energies of God's intentions, symbolized by the seeds, and the world God has made, symbolized by the soil, come together in ways that may seem opaque or mysterious to us. But those who would be faithful followers of Jesus must remain in the faith that whatever the world presents, it will ultimately contribute to the complete actual action of God's intentions. If we think of the seeds as symbolizing the truth and spirit embodied in Christ, we appreciate our condition as one of watching and waiting while the work of Christ continues, often well beyond our capacity for a complete understanding.

The symbolism of the mustard seed and the plant into which it grows impresses upon us the truth that as small as the power of God may at times seem relative to the scale of the world's dimensions, symbolized by the garden, God's power will finally rise above all else. Again, the wisdom of watching and waiting is impressed upon us. We might also receive this wisdom if we take the mustard seed as a symbol of our faith and if we accept the reality that whatever the world presents to us can in one way or another contribute to the growth and expansion of our faith. *Wisely* watching and waiting, we are in a consciousness that transcends the awareness to which our lower natures would limit us, and we align ourselves with the workings of the Spirit of God, even though complete understanding of the Kingdom of God is unavailable to us in this life.

A parable – in the form of a single image, an allegorical narrative, or something in between – will seem to block the understanding some and offer insight to others. To some, it will be a wall; to others, it will be a window. But the metaphorical expression has the potential of involving the sensibilities of a listener or reader in a way and at a depth that discursive language cannot. Then receptive listener or reader invests "sensory memory" in an effort to understand. When you picture a small seed and the large plant that will spring from it, your mind's eye sees what your mind's understanding must grasp in order to appreciate the power of faith – especially when the day seem dark, dangerous, or forbidding.

In our reading from *Ephesians* this morning, an author who probably was a disciple of Paul, writing sometime following the execution of Paul in Rome, engaged the emotions of original readers in an interesting, paradoxical way. His readers, native-born residents of Asia Minor who were subject to Roman authority, saw evidence all around them, we might imagine, of Roman power and, therefore, of their own powerlessness.

What Rome wanted, they had to deliver. Hated and feared Roman soldiers patrolled their streets and roads. Anyone foolish enough to resist Roman authority would soon receive the reward of death dealt by Roman sword (the particular end to which Paul came, in fact). The Roman soldier, outfitted for battle, was a living symbol of Roman power. The sight of the Roman soldier was not a welcomed sight. And yet, our author called upon readers' familiarity with that sight to instruct them, using an extended metaphor, a kind of parable, in how they might, in strength of mind and heart, resist what in their flesh they could not resist. They were pressed by Christ Jesus into spiritual service. It may be difficult for us to imagine that the familiar "Armor of God" passage was off-putting for some original readers – that for some it was most decidedly a wall and not a window. Since we are very far removed from the threatening figure of the Roman soldier, the idea of spiritually arming ourselves against challenges to our faithfulness presented by the world, whatever those challenges might be, is not at all difficult to grasp and appreciate. For us, the passage is most decidedly a window and not a wall.