

MEDITATION 41

Mark 4: 33-34

"With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples."

What makes a good teacher? There are many things that make a good teacher like a balance between kindness and caring on the one hand, with clear structure and a willingness to discipline as necessary on the other. But what makes a good teacher in terms of educating and helping students better understand what they are to learn? Well, a key element of good teaching is having good illustrations. Whether as a story or some example from everyday life, students need to see how something they easily know and understand from everyday life, is then applied to something they don't know or understand.

Jesus is a teacher. And one of the most popular devices he uses to teach people, and something people remembered even many years later, is what's called a "parable."

So what's a parable exactly? Here's a dictionary definition provided by A.I. 😊:

"A parable is a short, simple story that uses everyday situations to teach a moral, ethical, or spiritual lesson." The word "parable" is originally a Greek word which means "comparison". A story that is a parable is placed beside a more difficult idea to help explain it.

But why is the spiritual or moral lesson a parable seeks to teach difficult to understand? It's not difficult to understand intellectually. No. It's difficult to understand existentially and with one's heart. Why? Because it challenges us at the heart level with our behaviour and way of relating.

Here's an example of a popular parable, not found in Mark but in Luke, that is very well known: The Good Samaritan. The story is easy enough to understand. A man is making a journey on foot, and on the way he's attacked, robbed and beaten, left for dead (something people in that world travelling by foot could very well relate to). Various people pass by, but even those highly religious by their profession or practice, avoid any contact with the man lying on the road (this is a highly religious society and religious officials are leaders of their communities). But then there is one man who does stop. Why? He feels deep compassion seeing the wounded and near dead man groaning in pain. He helps him get up, gets him to an inn where he can take care of his wounds as best he can (this is a time before any hospitals), and makes sure all his medical care needs are covered until the man can regain his health and move on.

Now for us today, we would immediately recognize the difference between the indifference and selfishness of the people who passed by versus the compassion and kindness of the person who stopped to help. But here's where it gets more challenging still. The people who pass by are

supposed to be especially faithful and holy Jews, just like Jesus and the people he's addressing. Meanwhile the person who actually stops to help is identified as a "Samaritan." Samaritans are especially hated by Jews and the animosity and racism between both groups goes back many centuries.

Imagine the audacity of Jesus suggesting that the compassion of a person, whoever they are, is prized by God, whereas the indifference and selfish disregard of those who pass by, whoever they are, are condemned by God. Race and ethnicity matters not a bit to God. What matters is love, and sometimes we must learn what it means to love from the most unlikely of sources. Imagine a Samaritan helping a Jew in need while some Jews, even those supposed to be especially holy, do not help their fellow countryfolk. Wow!

So where's the difficulty in this parable? It's easy enough to understand if we're open to understand and seek to understand at our heart level. But a parable also exposes all those difficult walls and layers of resistance in us. We all love love. But love is very difficult when it becomes particular and specific. Jesus the good teacher provides many parables that easily draw his audience in until they are hooked with the challenge of what he is actually saying.

So, where are those resistances in you. Even as Jesus will explain and break down the full meaning of the parables with his disciples, the question for all people then and now is: do we want to understand more deeply? Are we open to that and all the challenge and change it will demand of us?

More parables to come as we meditate through the gospel of Mark!

PRAYER: Thank you, O God. You not only call us to love, but you challenge us to love in specific ways and with specific people not always easy or straightforward.

What is it people need from us, O God? What kind of loving is the right kind in various situations and relationships? Is it always compassion? Or is it also the courage to be truthful? Is it always to be giving without expecting? Or is it also about having expectations because we welcome reciprocity as the basis of a genuine relationship? Is it always a willingness to forgive, or is it also about confronting another with their need for forgiveness and for making amends? And is it always about expecting forgiveness, or is it also our need to acknowledge the wrong on our part and seek to make amends somehow?

Love is difficult, O God, especially because life is complicated, with mistakes, hurts and regrets... with broken promises, disappointments, frustrations and sadness too.

Thank you for those who show us love and are resilient in their loving despite the challenges.
Thank you for challenging us to grow in our loving. Thank you for teachers and for good
illustrations like parables that confront us with truth we are not always ready to hear or accept.
In Jesus' name we pray this way. Amen.