

Devotion for Week of July 10, 2022

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

I am beginning a series on parables in Luke beginning next Sunday, so I'd like to give you some background about Jesus' parables. First of all, what is a parable? The definition is "a short allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principle, or moral lesson." The word is from the root word "paraballo" or in the Greek "parabole." This compound word comes from "para" which means "to come along side or compare" and "ballo" which literally means "to throw" or "cast." Jesus' parables are only in the synoptic gospels. There are none in John, and those in Mark, only two – are short and terse. There are 28 different ones in the synoptic gospels.

Luke has more parables than the other gospels, and most are in a "travel narrative" of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Jesus' activities and the stories he tells are intertwined and mirror each other – almost like Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. They deal with practical realities, especially wealth and poverty, and are more realistic than those in Matthew. Jesus' parables have distinctive features:

- Images are always familiar and drawn from everyday life
- They are characterized by intriguing plots
- They have an element of surprise; they are events of revelation
- There is often a tension between good and evil, or sinful and holy meaning - they proclaim what is good versus what is bad, and what is evil in contrast to what is holy or God-like
- They often use a significant comparison between two objects that may be used as a mirror image of a comparable object – like the "prodigal" vs the "good" son
- Jesus often introduces them with "The Kingdom of heaven is like..."

All but the parable of the Sower have to do with hierarchy or status/relationships. They often have to do with kingdom economics – usually a reversal of fortune - wealth management, debts, daily wages, land ownership, lost coins – Luke has several that start "There was a rich man who..."

Jesus' parables are also concerned about relationships: parents/children, siblings, neighbors, leaders/followers – caring for the other, servant leadership, humility. Often the characters are seen in a light that is unexpected – the GOOD Samaritan, the rich man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the toll collector. In other words, the stories flip upside down the world that his listeners expect.

We need to think about the audience hearing these stories. We need to remember that this is Jesus, a Galilean Jew interacting with fellow Jews in late Second Temple period – we need to hear them in their "rawness." We need to remember that the hearers of these parables had "no idea that Jesus will be proclaimed Son of God by millions, no idea even that he will be crucified by Rome." What would this storyteller be telling them? And why is that message still relevant today, 2000 years later?

Stephen Wright says this about the parables: "The parables do not 'proclaim' God's kingdom, though Jesus did so in other times and ways. Nor do they give 'teaching' about his 'identity.' Rather, they reveal the standpoint of one who observed contemporary Jewish life in its richness, its potential and its urgent demands, and with idiosyncratic, humorous, deep-sighted penetration, narrated some of its possibilities, then left his hearers and their successors to enter his narratives, if they would."

So I invite you to journey with me this summer and fall as we look at the parables in Luke, and see what they have to teach us.

Jeanne