

Sermon: Incomparable  
Text: Mark 4:26-34  
Date: June 17, 2018  
Context: WWPC  
Father's Day  
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*[Jesus] also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"*

Mark 4:30

Parables. What are they good for?

As teaching tools, they're notoriously hard to interpret. As doctrinal conveyances, they're open to multiple interpretations.

So it's not surprising that the disciples never did have a good handle on them. And 2000 years later even the best biblical scholars still concede that their specific meaning is impossible to pin down. And anyone who insists that he -- it's usually a he that insists -- has the exclusive, inside track on interpreting them, well, that person is either lying or deluded, because, he -- again, usually he -- doesn't.

No one does.

So, I think it's a fair question: What are parables good for?

If you were to ask Jesus, his answer would likely be swift and decisive. They're good for conveying the nature of the realm and reign of God.

He effectively says as much in this very passage that just read: "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"

Indeed, given how much time Jesus spends trying to answer it, one could make a convincing case that this this rhetorical question -- "What parable can we use to compare the kingdom of God?" -- is the thesis statement for the gospel of Mark.

Unfortunately, it would seem that there is one tiny problem with this idea: no one parable is apparently up to the task of fully conveying the nature of the Kingdom of God.

We can safely conclude this because Jesus then goes on to compare the Kingdom to a surprising array of different things: seeds, coins, sheep, gardens, vines, leaven. Lots of short little stories, about all of these specific, concrete things.

One on hand, this makes obvious, intuitive sense. There is no one thing to which the realm and reign of God can be compared because it is literally incomparable. It is not of this world. It is a divine thing. It is too vast, too wondrous, too surprising, too revolutionary, to be compared to any one earthly thing.

And so Jesus needs to draw on all these stories to fully convey its character, its structure, its scope, its mission, its personnel, and its limits, if there are any..

In spite of the interpretive challenges parables present, all of what I've just said has been the conventional understanding as to why Jesus insists on deploying a steady stream of parables to describe the thing he's come to reveal and disclose.

Because, taken together, this succession of stories is the only thing up to the task of conveying this incomparable thing.

But there are two other possibilities as to why he does this, both of which are worth naming here.

One, Jesus uses parables precisely because the truth of these short narratives cannot be easily pinned down. The incarnate Christ has not come to found a new religion. And he certainly has not come to reveal and institute a new set of doctrinal codes to which all of humanity is meant to subscribe.

We preachers will often tell you otherwise, and make the gospels more complicated than they are. But if you read what Jesus himself says about his mission, it's simple: He has come to reveal the nature of the realm and reign of God, which includes preaching Good News to the poor and liberating the captives. The gospel story really is that simple and that profound.

So, in service of that mission gives us stories, not doctrinal statements and propositional truth claims.

And he does this because stories are living things. You can't dismiss them out of hand if you don't believe them, as you might with a specific doctrinal claim.

And you can't withhold belief in them if they cannot be empirically proven because they are not science experiments, and because that is not how stories work.

Instead, like the subject of this first story he tells, parables themselves are like seeds. You tell the story. You plant it in the listener's mind.

Then you just sit back and let the story do its thing, just like you let a seed do its thing. You let the insight and the truth it is meant to convey take root, blossom and grow. Might take a day, might take a week, might take a month or a year.

Might even take a lifetime. Indeed, this truth might never take root and grow. That's sometimes just how seeds work, or don't work.

So, that's one reason Jesus might have opted to employ parables as his main teaching tool.

But there is another reason he might have opted to rely on stories to carry the truth he'd come to convey.

It's slightly more serious but also very simple: it's because he had no other choice.

Now, the case for this claim is a little bit audacious, and it's not something one typically hears in church.

But I'd like for you to stay with me for just a moment more because this alternative view of why Jesus had to use parables as his main teaching tool is one that feels like it is becoming increasingly relevant in our own time.

The theologian Ched Myers was arguably the first scholar to perceive that the gospels are an extension of the revolutionary story begun in the book of Exodus. We have a liberator sent by God to lead an oppressed people to freedom.

In the case of the gospels, the people are not living under Pharaoh, but they are living under the boot of Caesar.

Others writers and scholars like John Crossan and Marcus Borg have expanded upon and popularized Myer's initial insight.

But I'm going to let a more contemporary author, Rachel Held Evans, explain the basic idea. She is a wife and a mother and not a biblical scholar, so maybe a bit more like the rest of us.

In her new book *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Loving the Bible Again*, she writes:

“It’s easy for modern-day readers to forget that the Bible was written by oppressed religious minorities living under the heels of powerful nation-states known for their extravagant wealth and violence. For the authors of the Old Testament, it was the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Persian Empires. For the authors of the New Testament, it was, of course, the massive Roman Empire. These various superpowers which inflicted centuries of suffering upon the Jews and other conquered populations, because collectively known by the people of God as Babylon.”

“One of the most important questions facing the people who gave us the Bible was: How do we resist Babylon, both as an exterior force that opposes the ways of God and an interior pull that tempts us with imitation and assimilation?” (“Inspired”, chapter on Resistance Stories, pg. 115 ff.)

The answer, for Jesus, was parables. They are what Ms. Held Evans would describe as resistance literature.

Think about it. Jesus was an emissary of the Kingdom of God. Everything about the way Rome was run and managed was at odds with what he stood for, with what he came to reveal:

- The elevation and veneration of one man -- Caesar -- to a position of such god-like power he insisted that people refer to him as “Lord”
- The stratification of society into a thin layer of extremely wealthy, highly privileged ruling elites, and everyone else;
- The use of force and the threat of violence to protect that order and to maintain the wealth and privilege of the ruling elite.

Then one day, into this mix comes not just a teacher but a would-be messiah, not just a self-proclaimed son of God, but the *incarnate* son of God.

And by his own admission he has come to proclaim good news to the poor and liberty to the captives.

Of course crowds followed him. And one would have to believe that there was a very good chance that among the throngs, were agents of the state whose job it was to keep an eye on this interloper, observe his actions, monitor his words.

With all of that as background, the very last sentence in today's text begins to make sense:

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

Here's what that looks like in practice:

Instead of reminding his followers that there is no God but Yahweh and that Caesar must be resisted, he tells a story about how the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

After all, this is just a tiny little husk, which merely grows into a large shrub, the first century equivalent of kudzu, an invasive exotic that will grow and grow, and eventually even provides shelter for birds. And, oh, by the way, it just so happens that it cannot be stopped once it is set loose in the world.

If you have ears to hear what Jesus is saying, his meaning will be clear. But if he's taken aside and asked by the local security forces if he's inciting rebellion or preaching sedition, he can honestly reply that he is merely teaching his followers about botany and ornithology: nothing but shrubs and birds.

Which brings us to today. Literally to this day. Over the last year and a half we've watched a new American administration behave like their own kind of invasive exotic.

We've looked on with varying degrees of dismay as they have dismantled the institutions, and undermined the norms and values that have made America safe and free, that have made America possible, for the last 240 years.

I have spoken out, from this pulpit, when it feels like these assaults have crossed over from the political sphere to the sphere of morality: when they have tried to institute discriminatory travel bans based on race and religion, when they have praised white supremacists, when they have engaged in efforts to take health care away from poor and vulnerable Americans so that the savings can be passed on to the wealthiest Americans.

These are the kinds of things that lie at the heart of the Bible's moral and ethical tradition and we know this because these are the kinds of things the Hebrew prophets, and even Jesus himself, spoke out about.

Still, I've tried to be restrained about this. Because even with the words of the biblical prophets ringing in my ears, I am mindful of why we all come to church: for inspiration rooted in scripture and in worship, not for rants and lectures rooted in ideology.

But this week, something changed. A line was crossed. I'm not even talking about the president's effusive admiration for a murderous dictator. As alarming and offensive as that may be, he is the president and he can admire and attempt to emulate whoever he pleases. And it's up to the voters the next time they have the chance to decide whether or not that's appropriate, and something they support.

No, I'm talking about this new so-called "Zero Tolerance" policy of literally ripping children from their mother's or father's arms, and then putting both the children and their parents into separate detention centers, including, as of today, sending the children to tent cities in 100 degree heat.

This policy was officially affirmed this week by the Attorney General who then went on to cite a scripture about obeying the government to defend its obvious cruelty--a scripture, I would hasten to add that was also once cited to try to keep upstart colonists in their place, and then again, a century later, to keep slaves in their place.

On its face, this is a deeply immoral policy and a genuinely horrible thing to do. But it's actually even worse than that.

The president of the United States now wants to use these children as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with congress.

His hope and his intention is to trade these children for funding to build the wall he is so obsessed with. So technically these children are not bargaining chips. They are hostages.

As Rev. Dr. William Barber, founder of the Moral Monday Movement and the Poor People's Campaign, likes to say: we are no longer talking about right vs. left. We are talking about right vs. wrong.

Ripping children away from their mothers and their fathers is not just the opposite of a core practice one would find in the Kingdom of God. It is something one would only expect to be pursued by a heartless tyrant.

So, this is no longer even a question of right vs. wrong. This is a question of humane vs. inhumane, of cruelty vs. decency. It's not an exaggeration to say of good vs. evil.

So, today, Father's Day, is not traditionally a religious holiday. Except that it is now. Because on this Father's Day I'm going to say that this is our mustard seed moment.

On this Father's Day I'm going to say that we have had enough.

On this Father's Day, I'm going to say that as a community of faith and a community of conscience, we're are going to go invasive exotic on this mess. And, together with hundreds perhaps even thousands of other communities like us, we're not going to stop until we win.

On this Father's Day, I'm going to say to all of you who have children, and to all of us who have a beating heart and an active conscience, let yourself feel outrage.

It is literally impossible not to.

Because taking a two-year old girl from her mother, and inflicting permanent trauma on her -- trauma that will stay with her for her entire life -- just so that you can use her as a bargaining chip to build a wall to keep brown-skinned people out of the United States of America -- this is not making America great again.

This is making America into a monster. It is turning depravity into policy.

So when you see those horrifying pictures of scared little children screaming for their mothers, you should feel outrage. (If you don't, please seek help immediately because something in you is fundamentally broken.)

But on this Father's Day, this is the other thing I want to say to you. Don't stay there. Outrage is like adrenaline. It's highly motivating. But it's also caustic, literally. If it too much of it stays in your body for too long it becomes toxic.

So take the next step. Let that outrage motivate you and turn it into something better. Turn it into action.

And, here is the Gospel twist, the one thing Jesus would likely insist on: Let love, not anger, fuel those actions.

Currently 43 US senators support a bill to reunite those kids. But this list does not include either of our senators here in NC.

So call them. But remember you're not calling to yell at them, or to engage in an ideological or partisan debate. You're calling out of love for those children, and even out of love for this country.

Be clear, be firm, and speak the truth, because that is exactly what Jesus would do. But be loving because that, too, is what Jesus would do.

Or if you prefer, do some research and donate to social service agencies and legal agencies and child protection agencies that are already on the ground in Texas, agencies that monitoring these detention centers and working to advocate for the safety and the interests of these children.

We are witnessing a humanitarian emergency brought about and caused by a policy instituted by our government.

So, on this Father's Day, I'm going to say that this is our mustard seed moment. This so-called Zero Tolerance policy raises serious the questions about what it says about America.

But it also raises important questions about what us: about what we stand for, and what we believe, and what we're going to do about it.

Amen.