

**The Parabolic Life**  
**Matthew 13:24-43**  
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Where has it gone so very wrong?

A cardinal is defrocked...not just because he covered up sexual abuse of minors by priests but because he....the former Archbishop of Washington D.C....participated in it.

The state of Virginia is in turmoil because its newly elected supposedly liberal leaders are embroiled in controversies involving racism, wearing blackface, and alleged assault on young women.

Trevor Wehner, a senior at Northern Illinois University, shows up to work on his first day as an intern...one of the last requirements of his academic career...and six hours later is among the five who die and the many more, including five police officers, who are wounded at the hand of a man whose law enforcement knew was in possession of a gun his criminal history mandated be taken from him.

Where can we find meaning in the tragic mysteries of our brokenness? What are people of faith to do in the face of wrongs that are senseless, puzzling and infuriating?

We could wallow in lament for the world that used to be...but that won't move us forward and we tend to have convenient amnesia about the past...and besides...that makes it all about us...

We could wallow in self-congratulatory smugness—we aren't those kinds of people...that won't work either...

Today I want to propose that we consider what it might be like to try the parabolic life. What if we looked at our lives the way Jesus teaches about life...through parable?

What's a parable? Frederic Buechner says, it's a little story with a big point...but often a point that isn't easily discernable...and that may actually be different for different people at different times.

Today we get three of Jesus' parables...we're going to get a lot more during Lent this year. When you study Jesus' teachings...you necessarily end up studying parables.

But did you notice...they are fairly vague...weeds and seeds and yeast...not the stuff of our daily lives, right?

And did you notice? Jesus only provides an interpretation of one of his parables today...and only to the disciples...not to the crowd who heard it.

And it's not an explanation I particularly like.

Buechner says that parables are like jokes...if you need to have it explained...it's not worth bothering with.

I wonder, was Jesus' description an act of telling the disciples what they needed to hear in the moment...so that this is what the parable would mean for them in that very moment...that God and angels will do the deciding about good and evil and in and out...and not them?

I wonder, did he give them that interpretation of the parable because as the present and future leaders of his movement, there would be an oh-so-tempting desire to walk through the crowded gathering a few years hence and under their breath whisper...."wheat...fire....fire....wheat....big fire...."

I do find it somewhat comforting that though the vision of fire and gnashing of teeth doesn't jive much with other things Jesus has said...that his clear message that ultimate judgment is God's business does sound like gospel...particularly to me as someone in church leadership.

Still...that's not a sermon...that's just a sigh of relief...What **are** we to make of all of this? Just how do we figure out the point of the parables?

A few verses before today's passage, we get this exchange at verse 10...

The disciples ask..."Why do you speak to them in parables?" and Jesus responds "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given...the reason I speak to them in parables is that seeing they do not perceive and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." Which Jesus then says is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah...

I'm sorry, Jesus...but what? "seeing they do not perceive and hearing they do not listen nor do they understand."

What on earth is he talking about...

What if at least one of his points is that the parables by themselves have no real meaning...just hearing the words just seeing them spoken isn't enough.....What? Bear with me...

My Well colleague and friend Meg Peery McLaughlin, the co-pastor of Burke Presbyterian Church in Virginia, suggests we consider looking at things the way Jesus might....some examples...again borrowing heavily from Meg...

**You have heard it said:**

We can understand things if you think about them hard enough.

It is our job to make sense of the black, white, right, wrong of this world.

Christ has no hands and feet but yours.

You've got the whole world on your shoulders.

**But I say to you:**

God's ways are not our ways. We are surrounded by mystery.

There is a heck of a lot of grey; we are all a mixed bag; and we best surrender being judge, jury, and executioner.

No hands or feet, maybe, but Christ still has a mind and heart we can only try to understand!

God's got the whole world in her hands.

Those statements have power...are thought provoking...because two ideas are placed alongside one another...and both have their meanings changed by being connected with one another.

That's actually what parable means...to place along side...

It's from the same Greek root that gives us parallel...and parabola...

And parables...then...are stories that place two things along side one another: the situation into which Jesus is speaking...and the story he tells....

And for us, 2000 years later, parables are perhaps an invitation to place our lives along side both the parable and the context in which Jesus tells them...

Consider the parable of the wheat and the weeds...

Good seed....bad seed....stalks of grain that look just like stalks of weeds...roots intertwined so if you pull up one...you destroy all...only God's angels can reap the harvest at the end and figure out what is wheat and what is chaff...

Now...consider the situation faced by a woman I know of who was speaking to her pastor about her own #MeToo moment....when a friend and colleague of many years assaulted her.

Journey with her as she seeks to place her experience, and this parable alongside this reflection in the New Yorker...written at the height of the Harvey Weinstein scandal...

If you have ever experienced sexual assault or harassment, you know that one of the cruelest things about these acts is the way that they entangle, and attempt to contaminate, all of the best things about you. If you're sweet and friendly, you'll think that it's your fault for accommodating the situation. If you're tough, well, you might as well decide that it's no big deal. If you're a gentle person, then he knew you were weak. If you're talented, he thought of you as an equal. If you're ambitious, you wanted it. If you're savvy, you knew it was coming. If you're affectionate, you seemed like you were asking for it all along. If you make dirty jokes or have a good time at parties, then why get

moralistic? If you're smart, there's got to be some way to rationalize this.<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly the wheat and the chaff are not good people and evil people...that field of indistinguishable wheat or weeds becomes the relationship of two colleagues...where it was impossible to tell until it was too late if his entire presence in her life was all fire-bound evil. For this young woman the parable speaks truth that is painful and comforting....for even Jesus knew that it would be impossible for us to tell....that our lives and our relationships would be entangled in ways we won't be able to interpret fully in the moment....but wanted us to know that what is good will be preserved and what is not will pass away....

No...the parable doesn't make it all bearable...but it creates a space to not be alone in the pain and unjustified sense of guilt that so many victims and those who love them feel...

We like to know...we like to be certain...

But parables invite us not to know...but to explore...to imagine...to reflect...to place our lives alongside Jesus' teachings...

The Kingdom of Heaven is like when through a great deal of work by a baker....a bit of leaven causes the whole loaf to rise...

What does it mean? Ask the 8-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> grader at Roundtown Elementary in York Pennsylvania who asked school administrators a simple question... why isn't there a place for lonely children to find a friend on the playground....Five years later.... there are over 2000 buddy benches in public school playgrounds across the US and 13 foreign countries...

What might be the bit of leaven we can be a part of working into something that will rise and feed the souls or minds or bodies of so many others?

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/how-men-like-harvey-weinstein-implicate-their-victims-in-their-acts>

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that becomes the hugest bush for the birds to seek shade and rest...

A virtually deaf 51-year old divorcé in the pre-World War I Jim Crow south throws a tea party, inviting 18 girls from across the cultural and ethnic diversity of Savannah to talk about a new endeavor to empower young women in a world where they had little or no legal power....and 50 million young women later, Juliette Gordon Low's Girl Scouts of America don't just sell cookies, they raise up global leaders and lead the way on inclusion in youth organizations...

What seed of hope or empowerment is being implanted in our community today?

Parables invite us to find meaning, but not with the kind of certainty we post enlightened people like.

And that's what makes them scary...

Kate Bowler's *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, one of the books Jessica has so ably brought into our common conversation, is in some ways a chronicle of how Ms. Bowler learned to let go of having all the answers, being in control...and living a parabolic life...after receiving her stage 4 colon cancer diagnosis...

Kate notes, "I can barely admit to myself that I have almost no choice but to surrender, but neither can those around me. I can hear it in my sister in-law's voice as she tells me to keep fighting. I can see it in my academic friends, who do what researchers do and google the hell out of my problem. St. Teresa of Avila once said: 'We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can—namely, surrender our will and fulfill God's will in us.'<sup>2</sup>

In his essay, *Poetry in a Prose Flattened World*, Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann says...

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I Have Loved*, pp. 84-87.

*There is something more than our carefully managed reality. And scripture points to it all the time....*

The language of the biblical text is prophetic: it anticipates and summons realities that live beyond the conventions of our day-to-day, take-for-granted world.

This language is longingly received by those who live at the edge of despair, resignation, and conformity. Our preferred language is to call such speech prophetic, but we might also term it poetic. The power of poetry is that it is shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities<sup>3</sup>."

I want to invite us into a parabolic time....a time when we encounter in scripture and the world around us stories that might confuse and confound us if we try to make of them rule books or primers for living...or that invite us to join the all or nothing....black or white culture of endless division...

The parabolic life sees scripture as an invitation to weave our story together with not just Jesus' parables, but all of the Biblical narrative....

It sees scripture as a library of God's mysterious, loving, sometimes confounding, sometimes confusing sojourn with humanity.

Jesus invited his people into a parabolic life because the world around them was filled with chaos and powerlessness and oppression...but it was also filled with moments for reclaiming humanity and dignity...for living with grace and hope...for meaning beyond the moment...

And in scripture, I believe the Spirit invites us to do the same...not to play a comparison game about which situation is better or worse...but to be able to see our lives...our fears...our hopes...our challenges...reflected in stories and narratives as old as any civilization on the planet...

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.preaching.com/articles/poetry-in-a-prose-flattened-world/>

What a gift to join our stories to theirs...and to one another's...and together to find at the heart of it all...the God whose wish for us is life...and love...and peace. Amen.