# Proclaiming the Parables

## *Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*

Thomas G. Long

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—Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Helen H. P. Manson
Professor Emerita of New Testament Literature
and Exegesis, Princeton Theological Seminary

*For my wife Kim, true companion in every way,*
*who in years of love and grace,*
*and in seasons of patience and forbearance,*
*has made real for me the promise that the "kingdom of God has drawn near."*

# Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface xi

1. Jesus' Parables on the Playground of the Scholars 1

2. Decisions Preachers Make 23

3. Mark's Parables: Background 41

4. Mark: The Parables 55
    *The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1–20)* 56
    *The Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29)* 72
    *The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32)* 80
    *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12)* 89
    *The Parable of the Doorkeeper (Mark 13:32–37)* 97

5. Matthew's Parables: Background 103

6. Matthew: The Parables 121
    *The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1–23)* 122
    *The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43)* 133
    *The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31–32)* 139
    *The Parable of the Woman and the Yeast (Matthew 13:33)* 140
    *The Parable of the Treasure Hidden in a Field (Matthew 13:44)* 150
    *The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value (Matthew 13:45–46)* 157
    *The Parable of the Net (Matthew 13:47–50)* 160
    *The Parable of the Sheep Gone Astray (Matthew 18:10–14)* 164
    *The Parable of the Unforgiving Slave (Matthew 18:23–35)* 168
    *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16)* 174

*The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28–32)* 191
*The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matthew 21:33–46)* 203
*The Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1–14)* 207
*The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1–13)* 216
*The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30)* 231
*The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–46)* 238

7. Luke's Parables: Background 245

8. Luke: The Parables 257
*The Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4–15)* 261
*The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)* 267
*The Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8)* 276
*The Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13–22)* 281
*The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6–9)* 287
*The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Luke 13:18–19) and the Parable of the Woman and the Yeast (Luke 13:20–21)* 292
*The Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15–24)* 293
*The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3–7)* 304
*The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8–10)* 308
*The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)* 312
*The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–8)* 327
*The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)* 335
*The Parable of the Widow and the Judge (Luke 18:1–8)* 348
*The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14)* 356
*The Parable of the Ten Minas (Pounds) (Luke 19:11–27)* 362
*The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9–19)* 371

Notes 383

Index of Ancient Sources 411

Index of Subjects 419

# Acknowledgments

I have taught courses on preaching the parables for over forty years, and across that span of time, debts build up—to students who pressed me with just the right questions, colleagues who supported my work and chipped in wise counsel, and the hosts of witnesses in the scholarly world who taught me, stretched me, and reassured me. I am grateful to all of them.

Most of all, though, I want to acknowledge the impact on my thinking by my friend, colleague, and now neighbor in retirement, Professor Steve Kraftchick. Steve and I taught courses together on the parables, both at Princeton Theological Seminary and at Candler School of Theology. Twice a week now, we toss our household trash into the back of my pickup and head out to the dumpster at the local volunteer fire department, twenty minutes each way. Our conversations in the truck during these trash runs have been wide-ranging, but rare would be the trip that I would not ask for his wisdom about one or another thorny parable. It would be hard to overstate the impact he has had on my thinking. He is not responsible, of course, for the places where this book, like the parabolic lost sheep, has gone astray, but more than once he has found my wandering argument and carried it home on his shoulders.

I also want to express my thanks to some particular colleagues in the company of scholars who are dedicated to doing serious exegetical work on the parables, especially Klyne Snodgrass, Amy-Jill Levine, Arland Hultgren, John Donahue, John Drury, Mary Ann Tolbert, Norman Perrin, John Dominic Crossan, and Ruben Zimmerman. There are others, but these especially seem like family. I have learned from all of them and quarreled, as siblings do, with each of them, but this book could not have happened without them.

I am indebted to the theological schools who have allowed me to teach about the parables through the decades: Erskine Theological Seminary, Columbia Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, Candler School of Theology, Pacific School of Religion, Abilene Christian University, Luther Theological Seminary, and Yale Divinity School. I am also grateful to the wonderful and resourceful reference librarians at Candler School of Theology.

And, of course, I am indebted to my wife, Kim, who has given her unfailing love and support throughout this project and to whom this book is dedicated.

Thomas G. Long

# Preface

> "For the Jews . . . every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"[1]

> We are speaking of God here. Why are you surprised that you don't understand? If you do understand, then it is not God.
>
> —Saint Augustine, "Sermon 67 on the New Testament"[2]

## LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

"For you yourselves know very well," wrote the apostle Paul to the Thessalonians, "that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."[3] In a much more modest way, the core idea of this book came just as swiftly, just as unexpectedly, and just as nocturnally.

As a newly retired professor from Candler School of Theology, I was spending a semester as a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School. My course, "Preaching the Parables of Jesus," was an old friend. I had taught some version of it nearly every year over a four-decade career of seminary teaching, and each time I taught it, I opened the course with a lecture or two about the power of parables and the promise of embodying that power in sermons. I would often quote Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farms in Georgia, who once quipped, "When Jesus delivered his parables, he lit a stick of dynamite [and] covered it with a story."[4] Jesus' parables, I assured my students, were powerful stuff.

But at Yale, having just given this lecture about the explosive power of the parables, as I was walking back to my campus apartment, suddenly the obvious hit me like a thunderclap: the students in this course were going to create sermons on the parables, and because they were bright and able students, the sermons would surely be good as well (and, as it turned out, they were). But these sermons would probably be no more powerful than any other sermons the students had crafted. And as for my own sermons on Jesus' parables? Frankly, as I thought about my preaching over the years, my sermons on parables were just sermons, too, no more or less punch in them than my sermons on prophetic oracles, healing stories, psalms, or any other kinds of texts. If I was teaching that the parables are so powerful, I had to ask myself, where is the power drain when it comes to our preaching on them?

I fretted about this for days, and then one night, about 2:00 a.m., I sat bolt upright in the bed, not so much with an answer to my question but with a light suddenly shining on a new and unexpected path. I rushed to my desk, turned on the laptop, and by dawn I had hammered out pages of notes.

James Loder, who was one of my teachers in graduate school, once guided our seminar through a discussion about how intellectual problems are resolved. As much as academics might like to imagine that a careful linear and logical process leads from problem to resolution, the fact is that many insights arise suddenly, seemingly gratuitously, in the midst of messy conflict and struggle. He gave us a homey example about a college student who was trying energetically to solve the challenging, three-dimensional, plastic puzzle Rubik's cube. For days in his dorm room, the student twisted the cube this way and that to no avail. Finally, well past midnight one night, the student, weary, discouraged, and frustrated, flung the cube across his room and fell exhausted into a deep sleep. That night, he had a dream in which he rose from his bed, walked across the room, picked up the puzzle, and, with a few quick twists, solved it. When he awoke that morning, he picked up the cube and was amazed to discover that from that moment on he could solve Rubik's Cube every time.

It felt like that to me, the insight about parables and power that came in the darkness of night, like a gift freely given. I saw clearly mistakes I had made for years in teaching the parables, and I saw a new way forward. In simple form (and this will be explored more fully in chapter 1), the insight I gained that night was this:

I already knew, of course, that all parables are literary devices (in the major parables, usually a narrative) set in comparison to the kingdom of God. All parables say, implicitly or explicitly, "The kingdom of God is like *this*." That sets out two big questions for students of parables to explore, two paths to follow: What is the kingdom of God? And, how does a parable "work" as a figure of speech to disclose that kingdom? In other words, there was a theological path to travel and a literary and rhetorical one.

For well over a century, since the groundbreaking work of Adolf Jülicher in the late nineteenth century, modern parables scholarship has expended most of its energy on the second path, the literary and rhetorical route. Vigorous arguments have been waged about literary form, about whether this or that parable is an allegory, a simile, an example, or a metaphor, and significant advances in parables theory have occurred around deciding which of these literary types best defines the genre "parable." Some scholars, of course, have explored the theological path (and again, this will be discussed more fully in chapter 1), but most of the traffic has been on the literary corridor.

I had followed the pack down the literary critical road. I spent much time in class scrutinizing how the gears, levers, and pulleys of a particular parable worked to generate its impact on hearers. I still think it is important to examine the inner workings of each of the parables (and the commentaries on individual parables in this book will include much of that sort of analysis), but I had assumed that the lauded power of Jesus' parables sprung from their literary dynamics, how, for example, the parables as metaphors overturned hearers' expectations and refreshed their imaginations in surprising ways. I had come perilously close to the view that parables scholar John Donahue criticizes in *The Gospel in Parable*: "The impression arises that at times salvation comes from metaphor alone!"[5]

The insight I had in the middle of that night was that the true power of the parables lies down the other path, not primarily in their literary form, but in the kingdom of God to which they refer. Yes, parables are potent literary devices. They would not have enchanted readers over the centuries if they were not. But their deepest purpose is to disclose the kingdom of God, which, as I will argue, is not an idea, not even just a complex symbol with generative and centrifugal force, but an event: the inbreaking of the life of God into life and history. I began to see parables not merely as creative figures of speech, but as GPS devices taking hearers to those places where the event of God is happening all around us. The parables take us to the places where the prayer "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is even now being answered.

I do not claim this insight as a field-changing one by any means, and I do not imagine that others have not come to similar views before I have. But it was revolutionary for me, and this reorientation of perspective led me on a five-year journey to rethink the possibilities of Jesus' parables for preaching. The fruit of that journey is this book.

Thomas G. Long
Feast of the Epiphany, 2023

## 1

# Jesus' Parables on the Playground of the Scholars

> The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognize, with "theological" joy, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one's very eyes.
>
> —Jean Luis Segundo[1]

> Entering the *basileia* [kingdom] is not an autonomous human action that transfers the disciple into another world, but rather an incorporation of [the disciple] into God's powerful invasion of this world.
>
> —Joel Marcus[2]

### THE TWO ROADS

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it," the Yankees' famed catcher Yogi Berra is alleged to have said.[3] Over a century ago, scholars interested in Jesus' parables came to a fork in the road, and many of them took it, mostly in one direction and not the other, with dramatic and not altogether beneficial consequences.

First, picture the fork. A parable is a literary performance in which a story, example, or image from our world of experience or imagination is compared to God's kingdom.[4] To put it even more simply, a parable brings two things together and lays them down, side by side: on the one side, something literary (usually a story) and, on the other side, something theological, the kingdom of God. That is the fork in the road, and to understand parables and how they work, we need to travel down both paths, the literary one and the theological one. For the most part, however, modern parables scholarship has chosen to traffic the literary path more than the theological one.

## BANISHING ALLEGORY

The first modern scholar to hijack the bus and insist that it travel down the literary road was the enormously influential late nineteenth-century biblical professor at the University of Marburg, Adolf Jülicher. His massive two-volume treatment of Jesus' parables, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu,* first published in 1888 and 1889, dominated parables scholarship for nearly a century.

Jülicher argued that what a parable *is*, in terms of literary form, governs to a great extent what it can *mean* and that, sadly, for eighteen centuries churchly interpreters made a huge, basic mistake: they misunderstood what a parable *is*. They thought parables are allegories, but they are not, insisted Jülicher; they're similes.

Jülicher began his study with a 120-page survey of the history of the interpretation of the parables from the patristic period up to the nineteenth century, and he found that history to be a garden overrun with toxic weeds. What the church got so wrong, Jülicher said, was that it saw parables as literary allegories, which are codes in which every detail stands for something outside the story. As C. H. Dodd describes the allegorical approach, "Each term [of a parable] was a cryptogram for an idea, so that the whole had to be de-coded term-by-term."[5] When the parables are defined as allegories, Jülicher railed, then the meanings of those parables can be known only by cracking their codes. Small wonder the interpretation of those parables degenerates into a confused mess.

As an aside, I confess that I was once in the thrall of Jülicher's and Dodd's antiallegorical prejudice. When I first began to teach about preaching the parables, I would chuckle in class over Dodd's scoffing description of Augustine's treatment of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. As Dodd presented it, Augustine advanced an enormously complex interpretation of the parable, in which every element of the narrative allegorically stood for something else. The man going down the road to Jericho was Adam, the robbers were the devil and his minions, the Samaritan was Christ, the inn was the church, and the innkeeper was the apostle Paul, just to mention a few of the allegorical decodings Augustine gave to this story. How could anyone, I wondered to my students, construe the parable so bizarrely?

Then years later I actually read a sermon of Augustine in which he employs this interpretation. The sermon is not on the parable at all, but on Psalm 126, one of the "psalms of ascent." Augustine understood this to be a psalm that pilgrims would chant as they climbed the steps of the temple in Jerusalem, as they ascended to the place of worship. Near the end of this sermon, Augustine, remembering the parable about the man who did not ascend to Jerusalem but rather went down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, said (probably improvising brilliantly, as was his custom), "Remember: do not love to descend instead of to ascend, but reflect upon your ascent: because he who descended from Jerusalem to Jericho fell among thieves."

With that, the eloquent preacher was off and running. His congregation now rhetorically descending away from the holy city and having fallen among thieves, Augustine exulted that the Samaritan depicted Christ, who, unlike the priest and the Levite, did not pass us by in our fallenness:

> The Samaritan as He passed by slighted us not: He healed us, He raised us upon His beast, upon His flesh; He led us to the inn, that is, the church; He entrusted us to the keeper of the inn, that is, to the Apostle Paul; He gave this innkeeper two coins whereby we might be healed: the love of God, and the love of our neighbor. The Apostle spent even more on us. All apostles are permitted to receive, as Christ's soldiers, pay from Christ's followers, but that Apostle nevertheless toiled with his own hands and excused the followers the debt they owed him. All this has already happened: if we have descended and have been wounded, let us ascend, let us sing and make progress, in order that we may arrive![6]

Jülicher misunderstood. Dodd misunderstood. I misunderstood. Augustine was not mechanistically decoding allegorical cryptograms; he was preaching! Augustine was exercising what New Testament scholar Mary Ford calls "personal allegorical interpretation" or, perhaps better in our context, "homiletical allegory," in which the speaker is not arguing that one must understand the two coins in the parable to be implanted codes for the love of God and the love of neighbor, but rhetorically and artistically describing them that way is a creative and legitimate way to allow the parable to connect with our lives. Ford states,

> Allegorical interpretation provides a way to apply the text to oneself, by seeing, for example, that I am acting like the elder brother or the prodigal son. None of this implies that the text originally had these implications. It does imply that Scripture is expected to be practical, to provide models of reality in patterns of events so as to indicate a way of understanding, a course of action, a reason for hope, as well as insight into some aspect of the spiritual life.[7]

Ford goes on to claim that the bias against allegory shown, for example, by C. H. Dodd came in part because Dodd had a too restrictive definition of allegory. For Dodd and others like him, the structure of allegory was simply $x = a$. So, if the father of the Prodigal Son is $x$ and God is $a$, then the only proper way to read the Parable of the Prodigal Son would be to see the father of the prodigal as a piece of code, a cryptogram, that equals God. However, most biblical narrative, Ford argues, typically manifests a different structure, something more like typology, in which *x* is to *y* as *a* is to *b*. Under this logic, the way the father in the parable (*x*) mercifully welcomes home the prodigal son (*y*) is like the way God (*a*) welcomes repentant sinners (*b*). She says,

> Once it is realized that most of the New Testament parables are situational allegories with the structure indicated above, then it is clear that the evangelists did not intend these parables to be cryptograms. Dodd, and others, only believed this because the cryptogram is the only type of allegory with which they were familiar. Most of the biblical critics' objections to the allegorical interpretations of the parables given by the evangelists (indeed, most of their reasons for rejecting allegory in general) disappear when an adequate understanding of allegory is brought to these texts.[8]

Jülicher, however, believed he had caught centuries of interpreters in the sin of misconstruing parables as allegories, secret codes able to be cracked only by spiritual virtuosi. For Jülicher, though, Jesus was not an enigmatic teacher, and parables aren't allegories at all but *similes*. In a simile, something is compared to something else, A is like B, as in "Amanda is like a bird." The goal of a simile is to reveal something about a complex subject (in this case, Amanda) by comparing that subject to something simpler, something that is known (in this case, a bird), Unlike allegories, similes have only one point of comparison, a single overlap, a focused *tertium comparationis.* So, if I say, "Amanda is like a bird," because this is a simile, I mean to say that Amanda is like a bird, not in a hundred different ways but in one, and only one, way.

Now, as it turns out, what I mean to say is that Amanda *sings* like a bird. But how do we know that I mean that Amanda sings like a bird and not that she is frail like a bird or eats like a bird or that, God forbid, is flighty like a bird? Listeners figure this out from the context. If my friend says, "Oh my, Amanda's solo at the concert last night was amazing!" and I reply, "Yes, Amanda is like a bird," then the context makes it clear that we are talking about singing and nothing else.

For Jülicher, Jesus' parables were similes, in which the kingdom of God, a complex and inherently ambiguous reality, is compared to something everyone can see and know clearly, like a mustard seed or a lost sheep. Since parables are similes, each parable teaches one and only one idea, one point per parable, to make everything clear and simple.

How did Jülicher come to the conclusion that Jesus' parables are similes and not allegories? Who gets to say that Jesus' parables are similes and not sonnets or rap songs or Zen-like koans or jokes? Jesus never introduces a parable, "Hey folks, don't take this allegorically, but . . . ," and, as a matter of fact, several of the parables we have in the New Testament practically scream that they are in fact full allegories. So where did Jülicher get his confidence that centuries of allegorical interpretation of the parables were off base and that the whole idea of allegory ought to be scrapped in favor of simile?

Significantly, Jülicher's prejudice against allegory comes not primarily from the evidence, from the actual parables found in the Synoptic Gospels, but rather from Jülicher's own view of the historical Jesus. The real Jesus, the Jesus of history, the Jesus behind the Gospel, Jülicher believed, was a preacher and a teacher who was heard by people gladly, clearly, and with deep understanding. (In the Gospels, of course, Jesus is not always heard gladly, was misunderstood a lot of the time, even by his disciples, and sometimes ticked off his hearers so much they wanted to kill him. But Jülicher didn't let that stand in the way of the "historical Jesus" he held in his imagination.) Perhaps the early church saw Jesus as a teller of parables that were hidden, secret communication in which the true meanings could be known only by insiders and spiritual elites who could break the allegorical codes, but that was the early church serving its own purposes and not Jülicher's "real" Jesus.

He was scandalized by the fact that, while everybody for centuries seemed to agree that the parables were allegories, no two interpreters could seem to agree on what any of the parables meant, which implied that Jesus was a mysterious and confusing teacher. The result was a veritable Babylonian captivity of the parables[9] or, perhaps better, a Tower of Babel of competing and conflicting interpretations. "It is positively alarming," said another parables scholar, Joachim Jeremias, "to read in [Jülicher] the story of the centuries of distortion and ill-usage which the parables have suffered through allegorical interpretation."[10]

Speak in allegories? Not the historical Jesus! Not my Jesus! Jülicher thundered. His Jesus would never have intentionally created mysterious parabolic puzzles that had to be decoded by bewildered listeners. No, this Jesus would have created simple and accessible pictures that could be readily grasped by all. In short, he would obviously have told parables that were simple similes.

## THE SINS OF ADOLF JÜLICHER

Jülicher was an accomplished and meticulous scholar, and he argued his case so decisively, so thoroughly, and so well, the field was silenced before his logic. When he died in 1938, his obituary in the *Journal for Biblical Literature* could still boast that he had inaugurated "a change in the interpretation of the parables that will never be reversed."[11]

Not so. As a later parables scholar, Norman Perrin, liked to say, "Today's assured results are tomorrow's abandoned hypotheses."[12] Hardly any contemporary interpreters of parables stand with Jülicher now on the idea that Jesus' parables were all similes. If Jülicher has not been entirely reversed, he has certainly been thoroughly revised, and we need to make at least three objections to Jülicher's views on parables as we chart our own path forward:

1. First, Jülicher wouldn't allow Jesus fully to be a Jewish teacher. Jülicher looked to Greek thought, to Aristotle's *Rhetoric,* to make the distinction between simile, on the one hand, and metaphor (which in extended form would be allegory), on the other. What's the difference? When the poet says of Achilles, "And like a lion he rushed on," that's a simile. One single point is being made about a complex subject, Achilles, namely, that the way he rushed on was lion-like. But when the poet says of Achilles, "A lion rushed on," that's a metaphor.[13] Now Achilles *is* a lion, and the implications of that can be endless. The distinction was important to Jülicher because the simile is clear, the metaphor ambiguous. Since the historical Jesus, as Jülicher pictured him, was a master of clarity, then he must have been a maker of similes, not oblique metaphors.

But Jesus was not a Greek orator. He was a rabbi, and rabbis used all manner of lively figures of speech in their teaching—riddles, proverbs, similes and similitudes, and yes, metaphors and allegories. Sometimes the rabbis wanted to reveal things, and sometimes they wanted to conceal. In fact, the earliest biblical testimony about why Jesus spoke in parables, namely, Mark 4:10–12, does not portray Jesus as a clear teacher at all but as one who spoke in parables to conceal, so that his hearers "may indeed hear but not understand." The Hebrew word for all these striking rabbinical figures of speech, *mashal*, the antecedent of "parable" in the New Testament, has allegory well within its compass.

Jülicher's picture of the "historical Jesus" was suspiciously non-Jewish (in fact this Jesus sounded more like a nineteenth-century German professor than a first-century Jewish rabbi). His refusal to let Jesus be a Jew and to entertain that he, like other rabbis, might have spun some allegories and mysterious sayings among his parables turned out to be at least a category mistake, if not an expression of the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) anti-Semitism of German idealism.

Jülicher's insistence that parables were similes also runs aground on the evidence, the actual body of parables in the New Testament. Yes, many of the parables look somewhat similar in terms of literary form: lots of stories about homey settings in real life. But when they are placed under a microscope, they turn out to show wide literary variation. No single literary category can contain all of the parables attributed to Jesus. Once Jülicher, or any other student of parables, makes an a priori decision that a parable must be a simile, or any other literary genre, and nothing else, then the question becomes what happens when the New Testament embarrasses the interpreter by including parables that don't fit the definition? These outlier parables either have to be rejected as corruptions of the pure parabolic form fostered by the early church, or they have to be subdued by radically reinterpreting them in nonallegorical ways. For example, when Matthew includes the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt. 21:33–45), which is inescapably an allegory, or when we find in Mark 4:13–20 an undeniably allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Sower, any interpreter following Jülicher's lead is condemned to build a firewall between these allegorical texts and the "true" parables Jesus first uttered. The allegories we have are then deemed inferior to the originals we don't have and tossed out as distortions of Jesus' real intent.

2. At least as damning were the simplistic moral lessons that Jülicher heard Jesus teaching in the parables. Since, for Jülicher, parables are similes, each parable is a clear-glass jar with a single idea inside, and because Jülicher was a classic nineteenth-century liberal, it is not surprising that the ideas he found in those glass jars were ideas compatible with those of his own age and his own ideology. As Robert Stein has observed, in Jülicher's hands Jesus turns out to be a typical nineteenth-century "apostle of progress," and "the main point of Jesus's parables was always a general tenet of nineteenth-century liberalism."[14]

The so-called clear points Jülicher heard in Jesus' parables were often incredibly gaseous and banal, fortune-cookie-like moralisms. For example, the one point of the Parable of the Rich Fool is that even the richest person is dependent upon God, and the point of the Parable of the Unjust Steward is that wise use of the present is the condition of a happy future. The lesson of the Parable of the Talents? Reward is earned only by performance.[15]

People who say things like that don't get crucified; they get tenure.

3. It is Jülicher's third sin, however, that most sets this book in motion. When Jülicher hit the fork in the road and decided to go down the literary and rhetorical path to understand Jesus' parables, the next century of parables scholarship followed after him. Even though most contemporary parables scholars reject Jülicher's claim that all parables must be understood as similes, they still travel mainly the literary path, trying to figure out, if the parables aren't necessarily similes, then what literary forms are they? Are they narrated metaphors? Expanded symbols? Realistic tales designed to raise political consciousness? The tacit assumption remains: once we determine the true literary structure and character of the parables, we can name their meanings and how they work to generate those meanings. That was Jülicher's agenda, and he has largely influenced the direction of the guild.

## THE NEXT NEW THING:
## THE SBL PARABLES SEMINAR

As Jülicher's consensus that parables are similes began to unravel in the mid-twentieth century, a formidable new venture in parables interpretation emerged in the Parables Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature. This seminar was formed in the early 1970s and operated for five years in connection with the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, the major North American guild of Bible scholars.

All of the biblical scholars who founded the Parables Seminar had already been doing innovative research on the parables of Jesus, but in the early 1970s they felt a collective energy gathering around their work. The Parables Seminar would be an opportunity for them to test their ideas over against each other, flint and steel. The result was that they changed the direction of academic parables study for at least a generation.

The ringleader of the seminar was Robert Funk, then a religion professor at Vanderbilt, who later founded the controversial Jesus Seminar. In addition to Funk, the Parables Seminar was populated with luminaries in the world of parables scholarship, such as John Dominic Crossan, Dan Via, Norman Perrin, and Amos Wilder; they eventually brought to the table Bernard Brandon Scott, Krister Stendahl, Eta Linnemann, Paul Ricoeur, Sallie McFague, and others.

The way the seminar was conducted was that a cluster, ten or twelve, of these principal scholars would gather around a long table placed in the center of a large meeting room. They would respond to each other's papers with lively and vigorous debate about approaches and methods in parables research, all along dismantling the old approaches and bringing in exciting new possibilities. As they did so, one or two hundred silent observers would surround the table, fishbowl style.

I was a brand-new doctoral student when the seminar began, and I took my place eagerly in the fishbowl year after year, the wind of excitement ruffling through my hair. These parables scholars were approaching biblical texts in bold and fresh ways, and they were producing essays so experimental and venturesome they were difficult to place in the established journals like the *Journal for Biblical Literature*. So they published them in a periodical they birthed for their own purposes, *Semeia*, a journal so unpolished in format, avant garde in content, and "hot off the press" that it looked like it had been printed on a mimeograph machine in the basement of the New School for Social Research.

This seminar not only introduced me to cutting-edge New Testament scholarship and advanced hermeneutical theories; it also stimulated me to teach an ever-evolving course on "Preaching the Parables of Jesus" almost every year of my more than forty years as a seminary teacher. The SBL Parables Seminar changed my thinking, changed my teaching, and changed my preaching.

Two aspects of the seminar's work I found particularly energizing:

1. First, this group of mavericks, following the lead of Joachim Jeremias at Göttingen, boldly and scandalously played taps over the once seemingly impregnable parables work of Jülicher, the Mount Everest of parables scholars, and then danced on the grave. Jülicher thought he had found the historical Jesus, a teacher of universally valid moral truths. The Parables Seminar, however, unmasked Jülicher's Jesus as a bland and boring bloviator of nineteenth-century ethical bromides. The Parables Seminar participants were not seduced by Jülicher's insistence that Jesus' parables were simple similes. The seminar members saw the parables, rather, as generative and powerful metaphors, sometimes quite complex and mysterious.

2. That leads to the second development of the Parables Seminar that engaged my imagination. The scholars in the seminar were tapped into the amazing rhetorical power of Jesus' parables. Most of the members of the seminar had been influenced by Ernst Fuchs's understanding of Jesus' parabolic speech. Jesus did not use parables, Fuchs insisted, to teach ideas or moral principles. No, Jesus used parabolic language to *cause things to happen*, to create a change in the world and in those who hear. The parables of Jesus, said Fuchs, are not mere teaching devices, but language events.[16]

The seminar members wanted to know how the parables worked as revolutionary speech, and to do so they were willing to stand bravely at a busy and dangerous interdisciplinary intersection. They broadly engaged linguistics, folklore studies, psychology, contemporary literary criticism, structuralism, social anthropology, and more, in attempting to understand how these language events took place. And in doing so they plumbed not only the rhetorical structure of Jesus' parables but also how those rhetorical structures managed to exercise life-changing power in those who heard the parables.

Crossan, for example, could say things like, "Jesus was not crucified for parables but for ways of acting which resulted from the experience of God presented in the parables. . . . [P]arables are the cause not effect of Jesus' other words and deeds."[17] In other words, Jesus wasn't killed because he spoke in parables; he was killed because he *believed* parables, saw the world parabolically, and acted according to the powerful vision generated by parables.

Parables, the seminar participants said, were literary devices with transformational, even destabilizing, power. To quote Crossan again: "Myth establishes the world. Apologue [that is, moral fable] defends the world. Action investigates the world. Satire attacks the world. *Parable subverts the world*."[18]

Seminar participant Amos Wilder, a Harvard professor and an expert on early Christian rhetoric, claimed Jesus' parables stimulated shocking transformations in hearers: “The hearer not only learns about [the kingdom of God], he participates in it. He is invaded by it. Here lies the power and fatefulness of art. Jesus’ speech had the character not of instruction and ideas but of compelling imagination, of spell, of mythical shock and transformation.”[19]

Another seminar participant, Sallie McFague, is even more dramatic regarding the power of Jesus’ parabolic art: “If the parable ‘works,’ the spectators become participants, not because they want to necessarily or simply have ‘gotten the point,’ but because they have, for the moment, ‘lost control.’ . . . The secure, familiar everydayness of the story of their own lives has been torn apart; they have seen another story.”[20]

Powerful stuff there.

## LOSING FAITH

But in recent years, I have had some second thoughts, not only about Jülicher and Dodd, but also about the Parables Seminar and some of the seminar’s major directions. Doubts arose for me about the seminar’s ideas concerning what parables are and what they do, and about some of the hermeneutical and pedagogical decisions those ideas prompted me to make. As I indicated in the preface, my doubts came to a head when, after years of making claims for the intrinsic power of the parable form, I compared that claim with actual performance: my students’ sermons on parables, my own sermons, and the sermons of others. If the parables are so powerful, I wondered, why does that impressive power seem to drain away in the gap between parable and sermon?

Slowly I began to realize that the seminar’s whole approach to parabolic speech was highly hyperbolic. They talked of the hearers of parables being “invaded” by the kingdom, that the parables create “spell, . . . shock, and transformation.” Under the sway of parabolic narratives, hearers “lose control” and have their lives “torn apart.”

But if someone were to run on stage at the Super Bowl halftime show, steal the mic from, say, Eminem or Snoop Dog or Rihanna, and, before security muscled them off, were to recite to the startled crowd one of Jesus’ parables, maybe the Mustard Bush or the Seed Growing Secretly, the crowd would probably be confused, perhaps intrigued, but would almost surely not experience mythical shock, transformation, a loss of control, and their lives being torn apart.

Responding to this tendency in contemporary parables research to exaggerate the parables’ rhetorical effect, and to McFague’s claims in particular, Mary Ann Tolbert says,

> This kind of inflated language about the parables grants to them a power to which very few individuals or societies, much less literary texts, have ever held. . . . That these stories qua stories . . . have the inevitable ability to force hearers to lose control of themselves is rather unbelievable. It would be difficult to document cases of people who in reading a parable . . . experienced in that moment their lives being "torn apart." . . . [W]e must beware making exaggerated claims of power for the parable stories qua stories.[21]

But hyperbolic speech in academic scholarship can be handled. Just turn the volume down and glean what we can from more humble claims. But even when the claims of some in the Parables Seminar are softened, an underlying assumption that undergirded the seminar began to look more and more questionable, namely, that the parables themselves *as literary devices* are the redemptive change agents, and that redemption is accomplished by what the parable triggers in the existential awareness of the hearer.

Yes, Jesus' parables, rightfully understood, are engaging, imaginative, surprising, often provocative speech acts, and like poetry, parables have their undeniable appeal and effects. And they often have twists, unexpected features, and plot turns that cause hearers to stop and reimagine the possibilities. But the real power of the parables is not in the naked parables as performance art or in the recesses of the metaphorical process alone, but somewhere else.

The main power of parables is in their capacity to point to what God is doing in the world, that is, to the kingdom of God. The power is not in the trope, but in the referent. As theologian Austin Farrer said, "Christ does not save us by acting a parable of divine love; he acts the parable of divine love by saving us. That is the Christian faith."[22] In other words, Christ saves us, and by saving us enacts the true parable of divine love. It is not a parable, however vivid and full of divine wisdom, that saves us, but Christ.

## DOUBLING BACK TO THE THEOLOGICAL PATH

When we recognize that the true power of parables is in their referent, the kingdom of God and what God is doing in the world, we are beckoned back to the fork in the road, called to travel not only the literary path but also that other, more theological, path. Ironically, we can perhaps allow Robert Funk, the originator of the Parables Seminar, to guide us back up the literary path and to lead us over the bridge to the theological one.

I will look at three claims about parables made by Funk. First, he, along with Dodd, Wilder, and many others, understands Jesus' parables to be "realistic."

Unlike the otherworldly pictures of saints singing praises in heaven, such as those found in the book of Revelation, the parables are about recognizable moments in everyday life, such as shepherding sheep, planting seeds, or attending a banquet. This "everydayness" of parables is important to Funk because, as he says, quoting Wilder: "Jesus . . . shows that for him [human] destiny is at stake in . . . ordinary creaturely existence, domestic, economic, and social."[23] People hear one of Jesus' parables, Funk states, and they respond, "Yes, that's how it is,"[24] and parables do not direct attention "away from mundane existence but toward it."[25]

Second, Funk acknowledges that there is some quality about parables that signals to hearers that there is more here than meets the eye or, perhaps better, more than meets the ear. "When Jesus speaks of a lost sheep, a mustard seed, or a banquet, or some other commonplace," Funk writes, "the auditor senses without prompting that more is involved than a pleasant or amusing anecdote."[26]

So far so good. Parables are about everyday, mundane realities but tease the hearers with the possibility that they are about more than what lies on the surface. But it is Funk's third claim that gets really interesting. Yes, the parables of Jesus are everyday narratives, but every one of them, Funk says, has some kind of joker in the deck. Every parable, as Peter Hawkins cleverly says, is "a curve ball."[27] All parables, says Funk, have "an unexpected 'turn' in them which looks through the commonplace to a new view of reality."[28] It may be some strange and unexpected development in the plot, like a corrupt judge who surprisingly ends up granting justice to a widow, or maybe an exaggeration, like an over-the-top, hundredfold harvest, but there is something in every parable that strikes the hearers that "the everyday world is surprisingly and oddly disfigured."[29] Paul Ricoeur calls this characteristic of the parables "extravagance."[30]

Funk seems unsure what to do with this insight that parables turn everyday reality upside down and inside out. On the one hand, he seems to think that parables, by presenting a topsy-turvy world, all by themselves shock hearers into a choice: Do you want to live in the everyday world as you normally see it, or do you want to open up a new future by living in the new, upside-down world portrayed by the parable? But to understand parables this way would mean only that they operate like all other imaginative fiction, presenting an alternative reality to readers that allows them to imagine themselves leaving where they are, to live in that new reality. That's powerful, but is it the deepest power of parables?

On the other hand, here and there Funk senses that, taken alone, this view of parables is too weak. To underscore an earlier point, a parable may contain an unexpected plot twist when a woman who has lost one of her coins throws a wildly extravagant party for her neighbors when she finds it, but no reasonable hearers are going to be thrown by this into an existential crisis in which they have "to choose between two worlds."[31]

Funk seems to recognize a deeper, more theological truth: that the real shock generated by parables is in the transference between what happens in the parable and a vision of the life of God.[32] The shocking surprise in the Parable of the Lost Coin is not that a woman loses all sense of proportion and throws an over-the-top party when she recovers one little coin, but that this unreasonable celebration of the least and the lost is also true of God. That's a radically different matter. Suppose (and this is a safe assumption) there are people who see the world like those who grumbled that Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2), the people to whom Jesus first told the Parable of the Lost Coin. Now, if they (we?) encounter through this parable the disclosure that, like that woman in the story, God is ready to throw a lavish and festive party, one where the saints lift high their glasses, sing noisy songs of joy, and swing exuberantly from the chandeliers, whenever one lost sinner is found, then that's genuinely an "oddly disfigured" world to be reckoned with. There's the true shock and awe, and the parable forces the choice: my world or God's world?

## WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

If, as we are claiming, the greatest power of parables is in their referent, the kingdom of God, what do we mean when we say "the kingdom of God"? To ask that question in a study of parables is, at best, ironic, at worst, foolish. The parables insist that we define the kingdom indirectly. What is the kingdom? Well, it's like a man who had two sons, it's like a woman mixing yeast into flour. One cannot speak straightforwardly about the mystery of God's kingdom. Indirection is necessary, and that's why there are parables in the first place.

If the kingdom of God could be described full flush—say as a list of principles, or a collection of big ideas, or as a series of scenes like those in a travelogue of Aruba—then once we had derived this description from the parables, we could throw the parables away. But when Jesus wants to talk about the kingdom, he looks off into the distance and asks, "What is the kingdom of God like, and to what should I compare it?" Then he tells a parable.

In one of his sermons, Frederick Buechner remembered standing at night on the bridge of a freighter somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and conversing with one of the ship's officers. The officer's duty that night was to scan the horizon, being on the lookout for the lights of other ships. The officer told Buechner that the way to see the lights of ships on the horizon was not to look directly at the horizon, but indirectly, at the sky just above the horizon. “I discovered,” said Buechner, “that he was right. This is the way to do it. Since then, I have learned that it is also the way to see other things.”[33]

Indeed, that is the way to view the kingdom of God, indirectly, looking just above the horizon, where the parables give us not dictionary definitions but comparisons: the kingdom is like this, and it’s like that. But this is not to say that the concept of God’s kingdom is a black hole, completely mysterious and beyond conceptualization. Like a journalist interviewing eyewitnesses to an event and gradually getting a sense of what happened, just so, Jesus, in forty or so parables, gives us multiple testimonies about what the kingdom is like, and together they begin to reveal the whole.

There is reciprocity here. The way we interpret the parables shapes what we understand of God’s kingdom, and then what we understand of God’s kingdom repays the favor, governing how we interpret the parables.

Perhaps a good place to begin trying to say what we mean by the “kingdom of God” is to start midstream with the impressive work of Norman Perrin, a notable New Testament scholar and a participant in the Parables Seminar, one who in many ways broke ranks to travel the theological path and to give sustained and influential attention to the theological character of the kingdom of God.

In his first major monograph on the subject of the kingdom, published in 1963, before the advent of the Parables Seminar, Perrin presented the kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching as a big theological idea or, maybe we could even say, a doctrine.[34] God’s kingdom was not a place, not a national possession; it was a statement, a claim, made in faith and hope, that one day God would establish full sovereignty over creation and the redeemed.[35] The kingdom of God was, for Perrin, an “apocalyptic concept,” namely, the idea of “God’s decisive intervention in history and human experience” and the implications concerning “the final state of the redeemed to which that intervention leads.”[36] The function of the parables, then, is to fill in the concept, to flesh out the definition, to indicate what this hoped-for reality is going to be like.

In defining the kingdom this way, Perrin was taking on earlier modern scholarship about the kingdom of God. Nineteenth-century theologian Albert Ritschl, for example, understood the kingdom in purely ethical terms. Jesus had won freedom for individuals, through works of love, to establish a just and loving human society, to bring in the kingdom of God on earth.[37] Another nineteenth-century theologian, Johannes Weiss, however, took a position diametrically opposed to Ritschl. Jesus, said Weiss, wasn’t interested in ethics or politics at all. To the contrary, the kingdom of God is a reality that only God, not human effort, can bring, and it involved the expectation that the drama of history was soon coming to a close and that God would establish dominion over all creation, destroying all of God's enemies, establishing Jesus as the royal Son of Man.[38] Alas, it didn't happen. This expectation for an imminent kingdom was not fulfilled in Jesus' lifetime, and Weiss decided that Jesus' mythological concept of the kingdom was a failed hope and irrelevant to modern people.

Perrin, though, didn't like Ritschl's idea of an ethical kingdom, nor did he favor Weiss's notion of a failed apocalypse. For Perrin, the kingdom of God was "apocalyptic concept," a claim that God's reign was already present but was to be fully realized in the future. People "can now experience the eschatological forgiveness of God and the manifestation of his eschatological powers," said Perrin, "and in the light of this, they are called upon to accept the responsibilities and privileges revealed in the eschatological Law."[39]

Ten years later, though, as Perrin actively participated in the Parables Seminar, he changed course. The notion of the kingdom of God as an "apocalyptic concept," an idea, was now, in his view, too static. He turned to literary theorist Philip Wheelwright to make the case that the kingdom of God was not a doctrine or a concept but rather a dynamic symbol that evokes a myth.[40] "[T]he teaching of Jesus has been bedeviled by the fact that scholars have thought of the Kingdom of God as a conception rather than a symbol,"[41] Perrin said, scolding his earlier self as well as other scholars.

Wheelwright defined a symbol as something that is given, something people can perceive, but that stands for something that cannot be fully perceived. A symbol stands for something else, something that cannot be fully described apart from the symbol itself. But not all symbols are alike, and Wheelwright named two different kinds: "steno symbols" and "tensive symbols."

Steno symbols have a one-to-one relationship to what they represent, for example, a red, octagonal road sign inscribed with the single word "Stop." When it comes to Stop, public safety pretty much depends upon the willingness of interpreters to forgo all hermeneutical cleverness and creativity in favor of just accepting the plain sense of the text, the one-to-one relationship between the stop sign and the behavior of putting on the brakes. This is the case even if the interpreter of that stop sign happens to be a Volvo-driving assistant professor of English approaching the intersection fresh from teaching a Jane Austen seminar. Pedestrians in the crosswalk are counting on him obediently to apply the brakes instead of searching the text for irony, ambiguity, unreliable narration, and the like.

A tensive symbol, on the other hand, doesn't have a one-to-one relation to what it symbolizes, but instead generates many meanings, and they "can neither be exhausted nor adequately expressed by any one referent."[42] Perrin now saw parables as tensive symbols, churning out endless meanings related to the myth of God's reign. He said,

> I argued that the Kingdom of God was a *tensive* symbol in the message of Jesus, that it was . . . a symbol of cultural range, a symbol having meaning for people in cultural continuity with ancient Israel and its myth of God acting as king, a cultural continuity in which Jesus surely stood. On the lips of Jesus the symbol evoked the ancient myth, and the claim of his message was that the reality mediated by the myth was to be experienced dramatically by his hearers.[43]

The myth of God's reign is what religion professor Stephen Crites would call a "sacred story."[44] Sacred stories are the most significant stories a culture has, since they point to the deepest values and understandings of that culture. But sacred stories cannot be told directly. No one can gather the children around a campfire and tell them a sacred story. They can only be told indirectly through smaller, everyday stories, which Crites called "mundane stories," and the parables are just such mundane stories.[45] For Perrin, parables are indeed mundane stories, and they function as tensive symbols to generate multiple meanings about the big, untellable sacred story, the myth of God's reign, and thereby to make that myth existentially present for the hearer.[46]

At the risk of shallowing this out, we can say that Perrin now understood the kingdom of God as a myth-based, open-ended symbol, something like our own culturally grounded, open-ended myth "the American dream," which is one of our culture's sacred stories. What is the American dream? "Tell me the story of the American dream, Mother." It can't be told straightforwardly; it resists definition, even as it perpetually generates itself in our imagination, by telling smaller mundane stories, like the one about mother and son who left Vietnam after the fall of Saigon on a thirty-foot-long fishing boat with forty others. They ended up in America with nothing. The mother worked as a seamstress, and money was a struggle. But they prevailed, and now the son is a successful businessman.[47] The American dream is like that. That's the way parables work too, Perrin claimed. "The kingdom of heaven" is like someone scattering seed on the ground—this smaller mundane story acting as a tensive symbol and centrifugally throwing out meanings related to the unspeakable myth of the kingdom of God.

So we now have two ways to think about the kingdom of God. Maybe it's a concept, or maybe it's a tensive mythic symbol. Actually, I think Perrin was closer to the truth early on, in his 1967 book *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus,* where he wrote a description of the kingdom of God not as a concept or a symbol, but as the activity of God: "The kingdom of God is the power of God expressed in deeds; it is that which God does wherein it becomes evident that he is king. It is not a place or community ruled by God; it is not even the abstract idea of reign or kingship of God. It is quite concretely the activity of God as king."[48]

The kingdom of God, in other words, is not an idea, not even a tensive symbol. It's an *event*. God is acting in the world, and acting in ways that demonstrate God's kingly rule. Parables are not first and foremost language events; they may be that, but what is important about them is that they take us to another and greater event: the places in our lives and world where God is acting. Those inbreakings of God we call glimpses of the "kingdom of God."

The theologian Christopher Morse is helpful here. In his *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News*[49] he explores the idea of heaven in the New Testament and finds that heaven is not primarily a place where the redeemed go after death but the place from which God comes to earth. If heaven is a symbol for the life of God, then the primary traffic is not that we go to heaven but that heaven comes to us.

Whatever comes from God is said to come from heaven," Morse says.[50] God speaks from heaven, acts from heaven. He remembers a song from his childhood: "Life is like a mountain railroad," and Christians are on that train, traveling to heaven.[51] But the song had it backwards. The traffic is not from here to there, but from there to here. Like waves crashing on the beach, God keeps adventing into our life and history, not only revealing God's life but also "overtaking what is passing away on earth."[52] Whenever God's kingdom advents, it brings with it the end of all temporary human kingdoms, no matter how strong or permanent they may seem. As God's life is constantly revealed among us, what is also disclosed is that, as Paul said, "the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31). The inbreaking of God's kingdom is a perpetual revolution.

When God's life advents into ours, what results is not simply illumination or spiritual insight. Something actually happens. Morse quotes approvingly Barth's statement that "there is no Word of God without a physical event."[53] The world is changed when God advents. Using a line from Emily Dickinson, Morse says that God's advent is "invisible as Music, But positive as Sound."[54]

Morse ends his book with this provocative statement. People of faith are "called to be *on* hand for that which is *at* hand. But not *in* hand."[55] The kingdom of heaven comes "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2). As Jesus said, "Keep awake—for you don't know when the master of the house will come" (Mark 13:35). God's kingdom is always "at hand." But it is not "in hand"; that is to say, it is not under our control, and it cannot be captured, institutionalized, and turned into one more rival kingdom on the earth.

The kingdom of God is "at hand" but not "in hand." This means that when God's life breaks into our lives, it makes a difference in this world, but it does not belong to this world. As Jesus, on trial, said to Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). The fact that the kingdom of God is not "in hand," and is subject to neither being defeated by nor being managed by the Pilates (or the pastors or the popes) of this world, exposes the grievous blasphemy of Governor Kevin Stitt of Oklahoma, who prayed when he was reelected in 2022,

> Father, we just claim Oklahoma for you. Every square inch, we claim it for you in the name of Jesus. Father, we can do nothing apart from you. We don't battle against flesh and blood but against principalities and darkness. And Father, we just come against that, we just loose your will over our state right now in the name of Jesus. We just thank you and we claim Oklahoma for you as the authority that I have as governor and the spiritual authority and the physical authority that you give me. I claim Oklahoma for you that we will be a light to our country and to the world. We thank you that your will was done on Tuesday and Father, that you will have your way with our state, with our education system, with everything within the walls behind me. Lord, we pray that you will root out corruption and bring the right people into this building.[56]

We are called to be "on hand" for God's kingdom, which is always "at hand," but is never in our little hands to claim as territory, even in Oklahoma.

What if we wanted to be on hand for that which is at hand, but not in hand? That is what the parables ask. They are like GPS devices that take us to the places where God is breaking in and open our eyes. There's the real power in what God is doing in the world. The kingdom of God is an event, and the parables take us to the feast so that we can marvel and participate.

Preaching the parables now becomes exciting, because we do not stand in the pulpit to explain the inner workings of the Prodigal Son or the Wheat and the Weeds. Our task is not to explain the parables but to *proclaim* them. We allow the parable to disclose where God is at work in the world, and with amazement we are privileged to announce this event. Preaching is not explanation, but exclamation and proclamation. There is where the power of the parables lies, the power I missed in so much preaching on the parables. All Christian preaching is an echo of Jesus' first sermon: "The time is now, God's life is breaking in. Turn around, look, and believe!" (paraphrase of Mark 1:14).

My wife and I live on the Chesapeake Bay in rural Maryland. There is a small church down the lane from our house, and for many years this was our church. On a good Sunday, there would be about twenty of us in worship. This congregation was so few in number, we had no educational program, no youth group, no committees, no choir, only Sunday worship and a tiny group of saints trying the best we could to show hospitality and grace to each other and to the rare visitor. The outreach mission was modest: serving meals at the Salvation Army overnight shelter in town and gathering socks and bath items for the residents.

The church had a long-standing and cherished practice of leaving the building open all the time for anyone who wished to come in and pray. When the church's insurance company cracked down and insisted that the church building be locked during the week, the congregation had no choice but to comply. So they installed a padlock and put the key under a rock beside the door with the word "key" painted on it.

Every summer, on an August Saturday, the church would hold its annual Peach Festival. The women of the congregation would stay up all night on Friday baking gorgeous peach pies and peach pound cakes. The men would set up folding chairs and wooden tables and churn gallons of fresh peach ice cream.

People would come in large numbers from all over the county to the festival, eager to consume peach fritters; to eat crabcake sandwiches, a local delicacy, and delicious chicken salad prepared according to a recipe handed down through the generations; to consume gallons of ice cream; to wander the booths set up by dozens of local craft artisans; and, of course, to purchase bushels of ripe and juicy peaches.

One year, I was behind the counter dishing up peach ice cream in what we euphemistically called our "fellowship hall," actually a rough cinderblock building set apart about a hundred feet from the wooden frame sanctuary. Between the church and the fellowship hall was the church cemetery, and wooden picnic tables had been placed on the green spaces between the graves. Two vans from the residential center for adults with intellectual disabilities had just arrived, and as the residents flocked eagerly to the line for ice cream, the staff of the center asked us to be generous with the portions, and we were.

At one point our pastor came over to me and said, "Come, look." Something about her face and voice made me immediately take off my apron, hand the ice cream scoop to another volunteer, and follow the pastor outside to the cemetery. There, sitting at the wooden tables set among the tombs and shaded by live oak trees, were a couple dozen folks quietly eating peach ice cream. They were rich, poor, and very poor; Black, Asian, Hispanic, and white; young and old; men and women; oystermen in bib overalls and women in faded-flower-print dresses; people able and infirmed; children, the stain of ice cream around their mouths, playing hide-and-seek among the gravestones; the living and the dead.

"Do you see what I see?" the pastor asked.

"I think I do," I said. "Yes, I do."

What she saw, and what I saw, was a glimpse of the beloved community, the peaceable kingdom of God breaking through and making itself known.

It would have been foolish to try to preserve the moment, to "make three dwellings" as Peter had wanted to do to hold the power of the transfiguration of Jesus. It would have been a blasphemy to erect a tent and to invite people to come in to see God's kingdom. They wouldn't have seen anything anyway. There was no holy glow over the scene; all that the naked eye could see was a group of miscellaneous people under the trees eating ice cream. Only to eyes focused by the promises of the gospel was this a revelation, and it was not ours to hold. The pastor and I were "on hand" for that which is "at hand," but it was by no means "in hand." This was gift and fleeting glimpse, the kingdom showing itself for a transitory moment, revealing the hope of a greater feast of glory to come, in which "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and take their places at the banquet in the kingdom of God" (adapted from Luke 3:29).

The next morning, the festival now over for the year, we gathered for worship as usual. The pastor had invited a young man in the congregation, a diesel engine mechanic who worked on bulldozers and earth-moving machinery, to read the Gospel lesson for the day. He was considering a call to ministry, and the pastor decided that giving him a role in worship would be a good way to encourage that sense of call.

When the time came, he got up from the pew and walked to the pulpit. He wore his Sunday best: boots, a western shirt with a bolo tie, and a black cowboy hat. When he stood behind the pulpit, he took off his hat reverently, and opened the Bible to the lectionary reading for the day in the Gospel of Luke. His voice was halting as he voiced the ancient promise. As I listened to him read, I realized that only the Spirit could have chosen that text for this day. He read, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

## A WORD ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

Readers will have already noticed my decision to retain the traditional New Testament terminology "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven." I am not unaware of the problems and controversies around such language, but none of the substitutions that have been advocated in recent years accomplishes, in my view, what the original language achieves.

Three significant claims are embraced by "kingdom of God" language. First, the kingdom of God is a revolutionary event initiated by God, not a political or philosophical innovation generated out of the human prospect. As Karl Barth once observed, without angels, the messengers of God, speaking

God's revelation, that revelation "would be hopelessly confused with some earthly circumstance, whether in the form of a sublime idea or a golden calf."[57]

Second, the kingdom of God, as God's activity in the world, creates an event, a troubling of the water in human life and history, a toppling of some proud earthly reign. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" (Rev. 11:15). God's kingdom cannot be contained by any one moment in history, nor identified completely with it, but God's kingdom can be perceived and experienced in pivotal individual and societal events. As Jesus announced, "The time is now, the kingdom has drawn near" (Mark 1:14, adapted).

Third, as an event perceived in time and space, the event of the kingdom of God is perceived by some and generates a response. It creates a community of participants, "citizens" of the kingdom as it were, who are drawn into relationship with each other and who seek to adopt practices, customs, ways of speaking and living congruent with what God is doing in the world.

Language such as "the reign of God" or "the sovereignty of God" gets at the first claim, perhaps, but only weakly at the second and not at all at the third. As for "the commonwealth of God" or the popular suggestion of "the kin-dom of God," advocates of these phrases almost always underscore the first word in the term, "commonwealth" and "kin-dom," which gets at the third aspect nicely, the communal, but underplays the first and the second. Moreover, attempts to picture "kin-dom" type communities in actual practice, defined apart from God's calling, sustaining, ruling, and judging presence and activity, tend to ignore the historical evidence that such communities dedicated to inclusion soon display their instincts to neglect ongoing repentance and gravitate toward rigidity and intolerance.

For those who might object that kingdom language is obsolete, a constellation of dead metaphors, no longer accessible or meaningful to the modern democratic world, which is mostly far removed from monarchs and monarchies, I invite you to sit on the sofa with me and my granddaughters as we watch the *Frozen* movies. The dramatic events around Queens Anna and Elsa in the Kingdom of Arendelle are not only accessible to them but enchanting. If preschoolers can imagine and delight in a lively kingdom, perhaps biblical scholars and preachers can too.

## 2

# Decisions Preachers Make

> Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.
>
> —Matthew 25:13

> Tell my brothers to be always watching unto prayer, and when the good old ship of Zion comes along, to be ready to step aboard.
>
> —Harriet Tubman[1]

> Maybe I see schizophrenia because the idea of a world with wandering prophets is particularly threatening; maybe the idea of a world riddled with psychopaths wandering around acting out of faulty brain chemistry is somehow less frightening than a world of prophets acting out God's will.
>
> —Psychologist Elizabeth Simonsen, on Flannery O'Connor's "The Violent Bear It Away"[2]

When a preacher or a teacher chooses to present a parable, this sets in motion a domino chain reaction of other decisions. While we would love to imagine that these choices are like the buffet at Golden Corral, a nearly endless array of tasty options, in truth we are not at a tantalizing buffet at all but on a battlefield. Every one of these decisions is contested, and the choices we make will go a long way to governing what we are able to hear in the parable.

Here are four decisions any interpreter of the parables must make.

## 1. WHAT IS A PARABLE?

In the last chapter we advanced a simple definition of a New Testament parable: a parable is a literary performance in which a story, example, or image from our world of experience or imagination is compared to God's kingdom. Even though this definition is quite modest, it does have at least three significant implications:

First, our definition claims that a parable is a "literary performance," which is another way of saying that parables do not lie docilely on the page but demand an interaction with those who read and hear them. When I look up my favorite recipe for Three-Cheese Lasagna, I am grateful for the list of ingredients and cooking instructions, but I do not expect this recipe to jump off the page and demand that I change my life. Not so with parables. Just to read them is to "perform" them, to release their drama in which all who hear are involved. Klyne Snodgrass is correct when he states, "A parable's ultimate aim is to awaken insight. Stimulate the conscience, *and* move to action."[3]

Second, our definition recognizes that parables come in a variety of literary forms. There really isn't any tight literary genre called "parable"; rather, parables cover a cluster of genres. The New Testament word for "parable" is the Septuagint's rendering of the Hebrew *mashal*, a word that includes riddles, proverbs, stories, allegories, and more. Any attempt to force all of Jesus' parables into the same shoe box will mangle many parables that don't fit neatly into the container.

Third, in a parable some literary figure of speech is compared to God's kingdom, and, as we claimed in the last chapter, the kingdom of God involves the inbreaking of the life of God into history and life. Parables are not word games, like Wordle or the daily crossword puzzle, which can be "solved" by staying completely inside the puzzle. All of Jesus' parables, implicitly or explicitly, say, "The kingdom of God is like *this.*" To wrestle with a parable is to be guided (or pushed) to the brink of mystery, to those places in life where God's reign is revealed. Parables move with centrifugal force, moving out from themselves to God's active presence. Parables are not done with us until we have allowed the parable to move us from where we are to those places where God's activity is erupting in the world and we have exclaimed with surprise, "Oh, now I see!"

The world of parables scholarship is, of course, awash with definitions of parables, many of them sexier and more appealing than the rather simple definition we have advanced. But more often than not, these definitions turn out to be like MG sports cars in the 1950s and 1960s, dazzling but prone to breaking down on the highway.

Take, for example, a definition that has won many fans, inside the academy and out, namely, C. H. Dodd's memorable statement: "At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to tease the mind into active thought."[4]

Nice. Parables are vivid and strange, and they tease us into active thinking. But we can quickly see, however, that this sports car of a definition may take us a long way, but it won't take us home. First, when Dodd claims that parables are metaphors or similes, what he doesn't say is that he is fencing off any figure of speech that is *not* a metaphor or a simile—especially allegory, which, as we saw in the last chapter, is a literary form that was important to the early church but which parables scholars since Jülicher, including Dodd, have been trying to eradicate like smallpox. So, when Dodd hits an inconvenient parable like the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–8), which is so clearly not simply a metaphor or a simile but an allegory, he has to twist himself into a pretzel to get to the weird place where he can see this parable, which involves exaggerated violence, a vineyard owner sending his "beloved son" into the blood-soaked terrain of the vineyard, and the murder of the owner's son, whose body is thrown out of the vineyard, as "natural and realistic in every way."[5]

John Dominic Crossan, in his exploration of the definition of a parable, narrows the range even more. He begins by declaring that understanding Jesus' parables as "poetic metaphor' is "a definite step in the right direction."[6] But not all metaphors work the same way, so Crossan needs to make a further distinction. Some metaphors, Crossan says, are merely teaching devices that an instructor might use with a pupil to illustrate a concept. In these cases, the teacher is employing a metaphor to illustrate useful information *outside* the metaphor. So, if the metaphor works and the student grasps this information, then the metaphor has served its purpose and can be thrown away. There are, however, other metaphors that are not about information outside of them but are referring to a world "so new or so alien to consciousness that [their] referent can only be grasped within the metaphor itself."[7] This is not a metaphor pointing to something outside; this is metaphor as essential, metaphor as an arena of discovery in which its meaning can "only be received *after* one has participated through the metaphor in its new and alien referential world."[8] In this case, the metaphor is not a classroom teaching tool; it's the classroom itself.[9] Jesus' parables, at least the ones that count, claims Crossan, are this latter sort of metaphor.

Crossan deserves (and has received from others) a longer response, but I will simply point out that the parables of Jesus we actually have in the New Testament seem to slide along a scale from mysteriously provocative ("so new or so alien to consciousness") to more straightforward and didactic expressions. Crossan knows this, of course, and his solution is simply to take the parables off the map that don't pass his metaphoric test. But a good definition of parables ought, it seems to me, to be a basket big enough to hold the parables actually given to us in the New Testament, not a filter to screen out what is unacceptable to the interpreter.

## 2. WHICH PARABLE TO PREACH OR TEACH?

Before the advent of modern historical biblical criticism, this question did not exist. But along with such criticism came the discovery that the parables we have in the New Testament are not, word for word, the parables spoken by Jesus. A full description of the textual issues involved is beyond our scope, but suffice it to say, many if not all of the parables in Matthew, Mark, and Luke show signs that they have been modified by the process of transmission through the decades between Jesus' ministry and the composition of the Gospels and by the editorial hand of the Gospel writers themselves. It may even be that some of the parables in the New Testament are entirely creations of the early church or the Gospel writers, composed in the spirit of what they understood of Jesus. We can still say, "Hear now Jesus' Parable of the Sower," but it would be more accurate to say, "This is, at least to some extent, the early church's preaching of Jesus' Parable of the Sower."

That would be merely an interesting thought, were it not for one other gift of modern biblical scholarship: the development of tools to peel back the layers and to reconstruct something close to Jesus' original parables. In the 1940s, Joachim Jeremias developed a list of what he called "laws of transformation," ways that the early church typically changed Jesus' parables,[10] and Jeremias and those who came after have used these "laws" as tools to boil the parables we have down to something like the parables that Jesus would have originally spoken.

For example, Jeremias said that the Gospel authors tended to embellish stories. So in Luke's "Parable of the Pounds" (or, as we will call it later, the Parable of the Minas [Luke 19:11–27] servants are each given a mina, a sum of money that amounts to a few month's wages, but in Matthew's similar parable (Matt. 25:14–30), each servant is given at least one talent, which is a lot more money, about fifteen years of wages. In Matthew's parable, there are only three servants involved, but in Luke's ten servants make an appearance. So, based on the principle of embellishment, Jeremias confidently states, "Luke, then, has increased the number of the servants, while Matthew has immensely magnified the amounts involved."[11]

Another of Jeremias's "laws of transformation" is that the early church often changed Jesus' parables to fit new circumstances in the life of the church. For example, by the time the Gospels were written, several decades had gone by since Jesus' death, and there was anxiety over the fact that Jesus had not yet returned as he promised. This later concern of the church about the delay of Jesus makes its way into some of the parables,[12] as when, in the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, "the bridegroom was delayed" (Matt. 25:5). For Jeremias, it was Matthew's church, not Jesus, that worried about a delayed Lord and talked about a delayed bridegroom.

Jeremias developed ten of these "laws of transformation," and they were immensely useful in recovering the original parables of Jesus. If the early church changed Jesus' parables in these ten ways, then logically all we have to do is reverse engineer the parables to disclose the originals. The ability to do this poses a serious challenge to preachers and teachers: do we present the parable we have in the Bible or the parable we think Jesus originally spoke? No longer is the question "which parable?" simply a matter of whether we present the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. If we present, say, the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, now the question is whether we preach Matthew's version or a reconstructed "original" version? Do we preach and teach the Scripture we have in the Bible, or do we concentrate on what we think Jesus *really* said?

Parables scholars have divided over this issue. Some, like Jeremias and Crossan, attempt to recover the parables of the historical Jesus, but others, like John Drury and John Donahue, focus on the parables in their canonical context.

In my view, the preferred choice is to go with Drury and Donahue and to preach and teach the parables as they appear in the biblical canon, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, for three reasons:

1. Theologically, the parables as they appear in the canon are the church's Scripture, the Scripture we have been given, as opposed to the speculative proto-Scripture we imagine we can construct.

2. The scholars who do attempt to recover the parables as Jesus actually told them have had, at best, mixed results. When they get around to saying what this or that parable was when Jesus spoke it, and before it was altered by the church, they are notoriously all over the map. If Jeremias's "laws of transformation" (and other attempts like his) were truly sharp scalpels to separate out the originals, then why do the scholars differ so widely on their reconstructions of the parables?

Part of the reason is that Jeremias's so-called laws of transformation aren't really laws at all. At most they are probabilities. Imagine a historic Presbyterian church in North Carolina that desires to restore its 1850 building to the "original." They hire a restoration architect, but unfortunately there are no photographs, paintings, or drawings of the original building. So the architect is going to have to do a lot of guesswork, but it will be educated guesswork.

She knows, for example, that there was a trend in Presbyterian churches in the 1930s through the 1960s to remove center pulpits and to install split chancels, with a pulpit on one side and a lectern on the other. This would be an architectural version of a "law of transformation," and since this Presbyterian church does, in fact, have just such a split chancel, what the architect has to do is to get rid of it. So she removes the present chancel and restores the center pulpit, using furniture characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century.

"I have restored the original," she confidently tells the church officers. But has she? What if this church was one of the (few) Presbyterian buildings to have a split chancel in 1850? What if the architect is correct, the split chancel was added later, but the original building had the pulpit in the corner or on the side wall? She would have restored an "original" building that never was. My point is that smart people can use sound and logical principles to restore originals and be badly wrong. So it is with the parables.

3. There is often, among those scholars who are eager to strip away the churchly accretions and to recover the original parables of Jesus, an assumption, basically mistaken in my view, that the Gospel writers did damage to Jesus' original message. Either they misunderstood what Jesus said or, for reasons of ideology and self-preservation, intentionally distorted Jesus' message. The Gospel writers, in other words, weren't faithful transmitters of the gospel, but manglers of it. This view seems both cynical and historically improbable. Yes, they preached the parables to their own context, but that preaching showed natural, and mostly healthy, evolution from Jesus' preaching, not sabotage.

This is not to say that efforts to distinguish between the parables we have in the Gospels and what those parables may have been in the mouth of Jesus are not useful. To be able to say, for example, that behind Matthew's Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt. 22:1–14) there was likely a simpler, less allegorical parable that Jesus spoke allows us to plot the homiletical trajectory of that parable. That is, we make an educated guess about what Jesus' original parable was like, and then we see what that parable became when it was preached to Matthew's community. Plot that forward on the graph, and we might see where the parable may be heading in our own preaching. The parables as recorded in the Gospels were preaching, and they want to be preaching again.

Another implication of our counsel to preach the canonical parables is the further encouragement to preach the parables in the literary and theological context where they are found, that is, to preach a Matthew parable as it is set in Matthew, not in Mark or Luke, and so on. That is why, in this book, even when the same parable appears in more than one Gospel, we treat each version separately, hoping to provide nuanced readings of these parables as they appear in the contexts of the Gospels in which they appear.

This is especially important because the several dozen little stories that we call parables, scattered around like Easter eggs in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are not literary clones. Luke's parables and Matthew's parables, for example, all point to the kingdom of God, but Luke tends to see that kingdom manifested in joy, hospitality, and justice, while Matthew emphasizes wisdom and righteousness. Luke wants his readers to experience the crisis that the kingdom is precipitating right now, in the middle of our lives, so he has five parables in which, as we shall see, a character in the middle of a crisis draws in the hearers of the parable by engaging in a soliloquy, asking, "What shall I do?" Matthew tends to be less interested in anguished self-examination over against following the ancient path of wisdom. So Matthew's parables tend to be more straightforward, saying things like, "OK, there were these ten bridesmaids. Five of them were wise, and five of them were fools. Any questions?"

Imagine that musician and songwriter Beyoncé, the poet Ocean Vuong, the dancer and choreographer Twyla Tharp, the former host of "Prairie Home Companion" Garrison Keillor, and a geological engineer from Cleveland take a trip together in a van to the Grand Canyon. As each of them approaches the rim, all of them are astounded by the vast canyon stretching out before them. In their amazement, Beyoncé begins to compose the lyrics to a song, Vuong a poem, Tharp a dance, Keillor a homey story about someone from Lake Wobegon standing on the rim of the canyon, and the engineer writes in his journal, "This is Lake Erie without the water!" That's like Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each has his vocabulary, each has his own style, each has his own medium, but they are all pointing breathlessly at the vastness of God's kingdom.

A full spectrum of proclamation needs all of the Gospel emphases, and thus needs to honor the context of each parable. To approach all parables as if they were versions of the same oyster is like saying that we ought to approach "American Idol" and "Meet the Press" the same because they are both television shows. Indeed, the field of parables interpretation is littered with the wreckage of people who tried and failed to come up with some master strategy for interpreting and understanding all the parables.

As a warning flare about what can happen when preachers and other interpreters of the parables try to jackhammer the parables out of their context in the Gospels, I want to briefly examine William Herzog II's *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed.*[13] This work represents a trend in parables interpretation to see Jesus' parables in the context of an imagined society of Galilean politics and economics.

Herzog is persuaded that "to make sense of specific parables, interpreters need to entertain some larger idea of who Jesus was and what his public activity was about."[14] Fair enough, but what Herzog means to say, of course, is that the context of the Gospels and their pictures of Jesus are unreliable. The parables need some other context, and Herzog intends to find one, namely, the identity and public activity of a reconstructed "historical Jesus." Once he gets that picture of Jesus in place, then he can transfer the parables to this assembled Jesus and imagine what a specific parable would mean coming from his mouth.

This is a neat trick, something like ventriloquism, but where will we get this "larger idea of who Jesus was"? Herzog has read Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and his big takeaway is that, when it comes to Jesus, historians don't follow the customary path. Instead of painstakingly collecting facts and then making historical judgments, a Jesus historian "begins with a theory, not with facts."[15] Aha! To Herzog's mind, Jesus scholars dream up probable Jesuses of their own imagining, and then take the "facts" about Jesus out of the basket one by one and see if they can insert them into this imagined framework. Inspired by this move, Herzog sets out to concoct his own good theory about Jesus' identity and then to see if he can fit the parables into its cubby holes.

We can see Herzog's boat being swept out to sea here, but let's continue with him for a while. Since Jesus scholars make this all up anyway, Herzog proposes to fashion his needed "larger idea of who Jesus was" by viewing him through the lens of the remarkable twentieth-century Brazilian Marxist educator Paulo Freire. If this seems crazy on its face, Herzog honestly admits that he is conducting a highly speculative experiment (sort of like *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*).

Jesus was no Freire and Freire was no Jesus; Herzog knows that. The differences are too great. One man was a first-century rabbi, the other a twentieth-century university professor; one was shaped by the Torah, the other by Karl Marx; and so on. But despite their differences, there are significant overlaps, Herzog insists, between Jesus and Freire. Both men worked "with the illiterate, the marginalized, and the poor, with peasants and villagers in the countryside," both "were considered politically subversive, and both suffered political consequences because of their work." The same could be said, by the way, of Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., and Francis of Assisi. We're going with Freire here, and the reason is yet one more quality that Herzog believes Jesus and Freire have in common: pedagogy. They both aimed through creative teaching to raise the political and social consciousness of their learners.

Now that we have Jesus imagined as a Freire-like figure, we can download the parables into the mouth of this mashup Jesus. What might the parables sound like when we do? Jesus would quite naturally speak in highly politicized speech, coded language designed to slip unnoticed past the oppressive rulers. Forget Jesus the eschatological Jewish prophet who announced the inbreaking of God's reign; think rather of Jesus the raiser of political consciousness. "The parable, then," declares Herzog, "was not primarily a vehicle to communicate theology or ethics but a codification designed to stimulate social analysis."

The untethering is now complete. The parables aren't about the inbreaking of the reign of God's righteousness and peace; they are about social analysis. We can admit that Herzog's experimental Jesus bears, to be sure, a few similarities to the pictures of him in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. After all, it is from the Gospel writers that we learn that Jesus' preaching was indeed threatening to the political establishment and that Jesus suffered the consequences. But this atheological Jesus who glided around Galilee using coded God-talk purely as a device to raise the political awareness of Galilean peasants about the brute facts of Roman imperialism is finally a creature of Herzog's fantasy.

We get an on-the-scene portrait of how Herzog conceives the impact of one parable, the Parable of the Sower, in a 2012 essay in *Review and Expositor*, "Sowing Discord: The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1–9)."[16] Herzog imagines that Jesus told this parable to the people of a tiny Galilean hamlet, and then departed, leaving behind to his peasant audience the task of mulling over the parable's implications. Later, at the request of the villagers, the local storyteller, the griot, recites Jesus' parable, and this retelling generates, Paulo Freire–style, heated and homespun political discussion. The part of the story about the birds eating up the seed on the hard path gets one of the villagers, Miriam, up on a soap box. "Sounds like birds coming down and devouring our seeds." After pausing for a moment, she asks, "Whose scorched-earth policies take our harvest before it can be accounted for? It seems like every harvest just withers away before we get a loaf of bread out of it."[17] "And the thorns," adds Joseph, another villager, "remind us of the master's class who chokes us every year at harvest."[18]

When the peasants hear about the great harvest at the end of the parable, they decide that it doesn't matter because their economic oppressors would just take it away from them anyway. "The master got the lion's share, that's for sure," said James, speaking about the local elite, a Herodian, who controlled their village. "We sow the seed, worry the crop along, and bring in the harvest before the master and his retainers swoop down and devour the harvest of our hard-earned work."[19]

To hear Herzog's village peasants spouting anachronistic liberationist slogans underscores how far away Herzog has wandered from the Markan setting and how his depictions of the villagers run perilously close to the wacky, jargon-spouting, Roman-hating "People's Front of Judea" bused in from the set of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Unfortunately, what gets most oppressed in this fanciful drama is the Markan parable itself, which is both flattened and distorted. The eschatological import of the parable gets washed away in favor of a clumsy lesson on Galilean land reform. What we get is a heavy dose of Herzog's contemporary politics, a light salting of the truly amazing Paulo Freire, and almost nothing of Mark or of the Jewish eschatological prophet known as Jesus of Nazareth.

It is one thing to say that we can hear this parable speaking to the plight of oppressed peasants in Galilee. It does have such implications, just as it can speak to the conditions of poverty and hopelessness in Buenos Aires and Chicago today. But to say that agricultural reform in the Roman Empire is the only horizon of this parable is to fail to see the sky. Jesus' teachings and ministry do indeed put Roman cruelty on the griddle, but Mark's Jesus also has other fish, and bigger fish, to fry than even the Roman Empire. In Mark, this parable is about the breaking in of the kingdom of God, which overturns every form of death and oppression, including, but not limited to, economic duress in ancient Palestine.

It is essential in preaching to recognize the political and social implications of Jesus' parables, but Herzog seems to think that the parables are only coded, atheological expressions of immediate political conditions. Burning away the eschatological framework of Jesus in Mark turns him into merely a local activist whose goals look a whole lot like the small span of our own watered-down, suburbanized self-righteous politics. It is but one more way to attempt to domesticate the wild and unmanageable claims of this and all Jesus' other parables.

## 3. TO EXPLAIN OR TO PROCLAIM

As listener-friendly as parables may seem, they still have many elements that are strange to our ears. For example, few contemporary hearers have attended weddings where the bridesmaids run around at midnight fretting because the groom is so far a no-show, or a wedding where the wedding party frets about their oil lamps. Few contemporary listeners have seen a king burn down a whole city because some people blew off his son's wedding party. Not only are there culturally strange and narratively odd bits in the parables like those, which need to be elucidated, but the parables themselves come across somewhat like puzzles needing to be solved.

An almost irresistible temptation arises for preachers to *explain* parables rather than to *proclaim* them. If we can explain what it meant that the prodigal son "came to himself," or make it clear how enormous was that batch of flour that the woman supplied with yeast, or demystify the allegorical code in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, or lay out plank by plank the correct answer to Jesus' question, "Which of these three . . . was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (Luke 10:36), then we can sit down in the pulpit chair with the satisfaction of a high school student who has just solved a quadratic equation. After all, Mark says that Jesus explained the parables to his disciples (Mark 4:34); shouldn't we do the same?

I do think that many good sermons on the parables will of necessity include some teaching, some explaining. For instance, as we will discuss later in regard to the Parable of the Minas (or Pounds, Luke 19:11–27), hearers will need some kind of scorecard to know the players. They will need to be taught, probably, what a "mina" is as a unit of money, and they may well need to hear the story that may lurk in the background of this parable, the story of Archelaus, the son of Herod who tried to talk Caesar into making him a king, but we should not stop with these explanations.

The problem with substituting explanation for proclamation is twofold. First, there is plenty of evidence that when Jesus spoke parables they landed with a punch. The crowds not only heard Jesus' parables; they were moved to follow the one who had spoken the parables (Matt. 19:1–2). One of Jesus' parables so irritated the Pharisees that they broke out in jeers of public ridicule (Luke 16:14), and another parable caused such a stir that Jesus came within a hair of being arrested on the spot (Mark 12:12). Somehow people shouting, "Lock him up!" after Jesus told a parable seems quite different from a parishioner pausing at the church door to say, "I really appreciated how you explained that business about the seed and those different soils. Never thought of it that way before."

Second, we have been making the case that the purpose of parables is not merely to *talk about* the kingdom of God but instead to take us to those places all around us where the inbreaking of God's kingdom can be perceived and *experienced*. The parables are to take us to places where, as we said in the previous chapter, we can be "*on* hand for [the kingdom] which is *at* hand but not *in* hand." The kingdom of God is not an idea but an *event*, and so should be preaching on the parables.

## 4. THE KINGDOM OF GOD, NOW OR IN THE FUTURE?

Jesus inaugurated his ministry with a stunning announcement: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14). The NRSV doesn't put an exclamation point after Jesus' proclamation, but I am not sure why not. How could Jesus have walked into a Galilean village with the news that the long-awaited reign of God was knocking on the door, that the angel army of liberation was at long last on the outskirts of history, ready to liberate the death camp, without his voice rising in urgency?

But the question is, How near is the kingdom of God? C. H. Dodd, in his groundbreaking work on Jesus' parables, famously argued that, in Jesus, the kingdom had already arrived. He called this "realized eschatology," the claim that "the Kingdom of God is realized in experience."[20] How can this be, given the fact that the world still rocks on, broken and unredeemed? For Dodd, the church celebrates the coming of God's kingdom every time it gathers at the Eucharist:

> Above all, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist the Church recapitulates the historic crisis in which Christ lived, died and rose again, and finds in it the "efficacious sign" of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. In its origin and in its governing ideas it may be described as a sacrament of realized eschatology. The Church prays, "The Kingdom come"; "Come, Lord Jesus." As it prays, it remembers that the Lord did come, and with him came the Kingdom of God.[21]

But as powerful as the Eucharist is, surely when Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory" (Luke 21:25–27), he meant more than Christians gathered around the Lord's table. What is implied here is a redemption of the whole cosmos, a public shaking of the powers and acknowledgment of the glory of Christ, who reigns as king.

The book of Revelation looks forward to the time when there will be "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1). This coming time will be one of the banishment of all that claws at and oppresses human life. A loud voice from the throne of God proclaims:

> "See, the home of God is among mortals.
> He will dwell with them;
> they will be his peoples,
> and God himself will be with them and be their God;
> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
> Death will be no more;
> mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
> for the first things have passed away."
> Rev. 21:3–4

When will these things be? As anyone who has stood at graveside to grieve someone loved well knows, we have not come to the time when death is no more. No wonder the book of Revelation, at its close, hears Jesus saying, "Surely I am coming soon," and then prays the anguished, heartfelt prayer, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 21:20).

So from this perspective the kingdom of God is in the future, and the church cries out for Christ to come and be all in all, healing and redeeming the creation, freeing it from the power of death. But earlier in Revelation, when John, on the Lord's day, was carried by the Spirit into heaven, he heard the heavenly chorus singing an unceasing song, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). Past, present, and future are gathered up in God, and already the chorus can proclaim that the kingdom of God has fully come: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

For the parables preacher, the question is quite practical: when Jesus says in his parables, "The kingdom of God is like . . . ," are we to preach about a kingdom that is here now, or a kingdom that is to come in the future? The answer is complicated, but put simply, we are to preach both.

It is worth noting that the question of time is not only a theological issue, but has become a major concern for contemporary science as well. Philosopher of science Craig Callender writes in *Scientific American,* "Time is an especially hot topic right now in physics."[22] Most people naively assume that time is flowing from past through the present to the future. The past is fixed, over and done, and cannot be changed; the present is what we are experiencing now; and the future is wide open, a field of unlimited possibilities. "Yet as natural as this way of thinking is," writes Callender, "you will not find it reflected in science. The equations of physics do not tell us which events are occurring right now—they are like a map without the 'you are here" symbol."[23] Callender goes on to say that "many in theoretical physics have come to believe that time fundamentally does not even exist."[24]

Scientists disagree, of course, about what time is, or whether there is such a thing as time at all, but there is widespread agreement that, in an Einsteinian universe, time is fluid and malleable. Here's a homespun example: Imagine a train moving down the track. On this train is a boxcar with an open side, exposed to the outside. On this boxcar is a light projector, positioned exactly in the middle of the boxcar, with two lenses, one pointing forward and the other pointing backward. Standing beside this projector is a woman with her fingers grasping the "On" switch. Beside the track is another woman, watching the train go by. At the precise moment that the boxcar passes this second woman beside the track, the woman on the boxcar flips the switch and light projects toward the forward wall of the boxcar and also toward the back wall. The question is, does the light hit the front wall first, or the back wall first, or both at exactly the same time?

The commonsense answer is that, since the projector is in the middle of the boxcar, it hits the front and the back walls simultaneously. And that's true, but only for the woman on the train. Since she's on the train, she is moving with the train and with the projector, and for her, the light hits front and back walls at exactly the same time. But not so for the woman on the ground watching the train go by. For her, the front wall of the boxcar is moving away from the light, and the back wall is moving toward the light, so the light hits the back wall first. We're talking millionths of a nanosecond, and no human being could actually perceive this, of course, but the point remains: for the woman on the train and the woman on the ground, the same event is different in terms of time.

Two events—the light striking the front wall and striking the back wall—can be both simultaneous and not simultaneous. What is future for the woman on the ground, the light hitting the front wall, is already past for the woman standing on the train.

As theoretical physicist Brian Greene says of a similar example, "In other words, things that are simultaneous from the viewpoint of some observers will not be simultaneous from the viewpoint of others, if the two groups are in relative motion."[25] Another way to say this is that, for contemporary science, time is not some stable, universal reality. Time depends upon where one stands.

Now back to theology. Theologians, as well, recognize the instability of the concept of time. In his *Confessions*, Augustine famously said, "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know."[26] As he wrestled theologically and personally with the nature of time, Augustine came to two large insights. The first is that time is a creature of God; God is not a creature of time. Augustine noted that some people ask, "What was God doing before the creation of the world?" But the question is meaningless, concluded Augustine. It's foolish to ask what God was doing "then," when, since God created time, before God created time "there was not any 'then.'"[27] The key insight is that God doesn't exist "in time," as if God were simply one more time-bound creature as we are. God is time-less.

The second insight of Augustine on time is that, for human beings, time is a perceptual, existential, one might say psychological, experience. How do human beings experience time? There is the past, which cannot be changed, but it also exists only as a person remembers it in the present. And there is the future, which also doesn't exist except as anticipated in the present. So as time is perceived, there is only the present: the present as experienced in the moment, the past present in memory, and the future present in anticipation. But what is the "present"? As soon as one tries to get a footing on the present, it slips into the past. To live in time is to be constantly anxious, with nowhere firm to stand. Our only security is somehow to be delivered from the tyranny of disintegrating time and to be gathered into the timeless, the eternal. "For

Thou hast made us for Thyself," Augustine said of God, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."[28]

Now we are getting close to what we wish to say about the kingdom of God and time. In an even more profound way than theoretical physics, in theology the same event can have a different frame of time depending upon where one stands. What is true always in eternity can be, for us, coming true in history. God's kingdom, like God, has no time. God is eternal, beyond all time. When the book of Revelation speaks of God "who was and is and is to come," the idea is not that God is past, present, and future all wrapped into one. The point, rather, is that "who was and is and is to come" is the way we time-bound creatures have to talk when pointing to the God who is not bound at all by time.

So is the kingdom already here and fulfilled? Yes, in the sense that God is eternally king, beyond all past, present, and future. No, in the sense that we creatures perceive our lives and our history as flowing from the past through the present to the future. For us, we catch glimpses of God's kingdom here and there in our present experience, and the parables point to those moments. And for us, we remember those glimpses; thus we have a faithful past and a testimony to speak. We anticipate a day to come when what we have momentarily glimpsed here and there will become a cosmic and public reality for all to see, and the Son of Man will come as king of all reality, with "power and great glory" (Luke 21:27). But because God is not tied to our perceptual experience of past, present, and future, we must also confess that what we expect, what we anticipate in faith, what we hope for, is already and eternally true.

Theologian Herbert McCabe came up with a fine image to describe the life of the Trinity, which is timeless and eternal, and the relationship of the eternal Trinitarian life to the unfolding historical, time-shaped lives we live. He said,

> The story of Jesus is nothing other than the triune life of God projected onto our history, or enacted sacramentally in our history, so that it becomes story. . . . Now imagine a film projected not on a screen but on a rubbish dump. The story of Jesus—which in its full extent is the entire Bible—is the projection of the trinitarian life of God on the rubbish dump we have made of the world. . . . Watching, so to speak, the story of Jesus, we are watching the processions of the Trinity.[29]

An implication of McCabe's image is that the kingdom of God is without time, because the Trinity is eternal, not embedded in time. But since we are embedded in time, the Gospel story of Jesus comes to us precisely as *story*, a plot unfolding in time. And for us, we proclaim a kingdom of God that shows itself here and there in the present and fully at the end of the story, in the future.

The poet Christian Wiman, who has served as the editor of *Poetry* magazine and as a professor at Yale Divinity School, was raised as a Christian in a small-town Texas home, but lost his faith as a teenager. In his thirties, soon after he was married, he was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, and, in the shock of this life-threatening event, returned to the Christian faith as "the only framework he knows that seems adequate to the extremes of joy and fear he has undergone."[30]

Some have scoffed, of course, that if Wiman hadn't been desperately ill, he wouldn't have reached out to God. Writing about that in *The New Yorker*, Adam Kirsch says,

> Yet why should the immediate cause of the call invalidate the call? "To admit that there may be some psychological need informing your return to faith does not preclude or diminish the spiritual imperative," [Wiman] insists, "any more than acknowledging the chemical aspects of sexual attraction lessens the mystery of enduring human love." Faith, like love, can be clinically described and analyzed from the outside, but it can be known only from the inside. That is why there is something so pitiable about the spectacle of those debates in which a celebrity atheist takes on a clergyman, and always wins. To argue for faith, at least in the twenty-first century, is already to lose the argument. What believers can give nonbelievers is an account of what it means to live in faith—not a polemic but a description, a confession, a kind of poem.[31]

After a long year battling his illness, Wiman and his family received the gift of a summer off, when the family could spend time together and recoup. Wiman describes that time:

> When our girls were just two years old, we spent a summer in Seattle, where I had lived for a while many years earlier. It was the first break I had managed to take from my editing job in a decade, and it was only eight months after I had undergone a bone marrow transplant. Time had a texture that summer, an hourly reality that we could taste and see. The girls went to a wonderful little daycare in the mornings so that my wife and I could write, and then we all came together in the afternoons to do something fun in the city. We had the same nightly ritual that we do now. I'd read to the girls and tuck them in before my wife took over, and the last thing I'd say every night was "I love you," and they would always reply promptly, "I love you too, Daddy."
>
> But one night after my declaration, Fiona was silent. She just kept staring at the ceiling.
>
> "Do you love me too, Fiona?" I asked, foolishly. A long moment passed.
>
> "No, Daddy, I don't."
>
> "Oh, Fiona sweetie, I bet you do," I said. Nothing.

> "Well," I said finally, "I love you, Finn, and I'll see you in the morning."
>
> And then as I started to get up, I felt her small hand on my arm and she said dreamily, without looking at me, like a little Lauren Bacall, "I will love you in the summertime, Daddy. I will love you . . . in the summertime."
>
> I have told this to a couple of people who thought it was heartbreaking, but I was so proud, I thought my heart would burst. I will love you in the summertime. What a piercing poetic thing to say—at two years old. And for weeks I thought about it. A year later . . . I even wrote a poem about it. I will love you in the summertime. Which is to say, given the charmed life we were living there in Seattle and all the grace and grief that my wife and I felt ourselves moving through at every second: I will love you in the time where there is time for everything, which is now and always. I will love you in the time when time is no more.
>
> Now, do I think that's what my Athena-eyed and mysteriously interior two-year-old daughter meant by that expression? No, I do not. But do I think that sometimes life and language break each other open to change, that a rupture in one can be a rapture in the other, that sometimes there are, as it were, words underneath the words—even the very Word underneath the words?
>
> Yes, I do.[32]

So there we are, we have an eternal God who, in Christ, loves us in the time when "there is time for everything, which is now and always . . . in the time when time is no more." The kingdom of God is a timeless, eternal kingdom. But we do not yet live in timelessness. We live time-bound. We are born, we live, and we die. History unfolds from episode to episode. We preach the kingdom of God because we believe there are weep holes in history and life when God's eternal kingdom shines through. The parables, with their everyday stories containing unexpected twists, say, "The kingdom of God is like this," and by doing so take us to those weep holes to see for ourselves.

Theologian Katherine Sonderegger, commenting on the conclusion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* stated, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. What cannot be said, however, can be shown. They can manifest themselves, and we can point to them even as we cannot utter them or find them within the facts."[33] The kingdom of God manifests itself, reveals itself, in a town hall meeting here, in a hospital room there, in a broken relationship healed over here, and an unexpected and improbable manifestation of justice over there. The parables take us to those places of manifestation.

But preachers cannot "pass over in silence." We must speak, frail though our words be, and what we speak will be *news*, good news: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe."

If this seems too much for us. If the parables are too opaque and the gospel too elusive. If we stand in the pulpit embarrassed because we do not think we have what we are there to give, God's life-giving Word, we should be comforted by the words of Markus Barth: "The best Easter sermon that I have heard or read in the United States during the past ten years," he wrote,

> was an honest expression of the preacher's complete bafflement by the Resurrection stories. . . . It was a confession of lack of understanding; it revealed want of appropriation, and failure of communication. It was a cry for help and enlightenment: Here it is said that Thou art risen. But where are you now? How can we believe? Help our unbelief!—This preacher did more than take the Resurrection seriously. He could not stand up to it; like John of Patmos he just fell down.[34]

After all, the gospel we are sent to proclaim is to be *on* hand for God's kingdom, which is *at* hand, but also a kingdom that is not *in* hand, not even our hands.

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