

## **Provoked by the Parables**

### **The Purpose of the Parables**

**January 2, 2011**

**Psalm 147:12-20 & Mark 4:10-12  
(Hymns – 348, 499, 476. 625)**

If we really want to be grasped by the mind of Christ,  
we have to take a serious look at the parables he told.

Fully 52% of Luke's gospel is made up of them.  
For Matthew, it's 43%.

In Mark, the parables play a less prominent role,  
comprising only 16% of the earliest and shortest of the gospels.

Jesus told the parables to provoke faithful discipleship.  
They are focused on what life is like  
in the kingdom of God.  
They are told to teach what life with God looks like and feels like.  
They are told to provoke us to see things differently  
and act accordingly.

They are acts of speech  
designed to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience,  
and move people to action.

The most familiar of the parables –  
the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Sowing of the Seeds –  
are well known to most people in Western culture  
with a smattering of Christian memory.

They are almost too familiar,  
no longer having the shock value that a good parable had  
when first told,  
setting the way things are up against the way things could be.

In addition to being too well known,  
many of the parables have been domesticated.  
They have been interpreted and misinterpreted  
to convey comfortable truths  
that confirm the way we want things to be.  
The challenging edge of living a new life with and for God  
has been dulled.  
The parables have been tamed by conventional cultural morality.

Over the next year here at Brentwood Presbyterian,  
we will invite the Holy Spirit to open us  
to being provoked afresh by the parables.  
We will explore 34 parables told by Jesus  
and recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The spirit in which we will approach the parables this year  
is well expressed in one of my favourite scripture passages.

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,  
for he who has promised is faithful.  
And let us consider how to provoke one another  
to love and good deeds, ...  
(Hebrews 10:23-24)*

This is for me one of the most seminal summaries of the faith.  
It conveys the power of God' faithfulness  
to generate steadfast hope  
and call forth the best of human beings  
in acts of goodness and love.

I have a vivid memory of when the passage first came to my attention.  
It was in worship at West Vancouver Presbyterian Church,  
where I was serving as Minister-in-Association  
with Ian Victor, now at St. Andrew's in Victoria.  
He was preaching that morning on this passage.  
I honestly can't remember anything about the sermon  
other than the passage.  
But it has stuck with me and provoked me every since.

So, when I speak of being provoked by the parables,  
that is the sense in which I am using the word.

As we will see, the parables are more than stories.  
They are really exanded analogies.  
An analogy is a comparison that establishes similarity.

In the case of the parables,  
the primary analogy is to the kingdom or reign of God.  
This is the context and presupposition for all of Jesus' teaching.  
As he says at the beginning of his ministry as Mark records it,  
*"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand;  
repent, and believe in the good news."*  
(Mark 1:15)

And Luke, recording some of his sermon in Nazareth

at the beginning of his public ministry, wrote,  
“... the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.  
He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:  
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”  
And he rolled up the scroll,  
gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.  
The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.  
Then he began to say to them,  
“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”  
(Luke 4:17-21)

So, in the Son (Jesus Christ), the Father began the final phase  
of establishing his rule on earth,  
working through the Spirit to convert his beloved humans  
to lives that flourishing with love and good works.

This is the kingdom or reign of God,  
foretold in the prophets and fulfilled in Jesus Christ,  
that forms the context for all the parables.

They are attractive and compelling teaching tools used by Jesus  
to entertain, inform, involve, and motivate his followers  
to join him in this alternative reality,  
this realm of being into which God is inviting us live in Christ.  
The parables are designed to get us to stop, reconsider, and change.  
They are both works of art and weapons of conflict,  
placing before their hearers a choice.  
In the end, it’s the choice between life and death,  
the same choice God has been putting before his beloved humans  
since creation and the early covenants.  
As Moses said in his final sermon recorded in Deuteronomy,  
“See, I have set before you today  
life and prosperity, death and adversity.  
If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God  
that I am commanding you today,  
by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways,  
and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances,  
then you shall live and become numerous,  
and the Lord your God will bless you  
in the land that you are entering to possess. ...

If we are to deeply and truly experience  
the flourishing life that the Father offers in the Son  
through the tender workings of the Holy Spirit,  
we will do well to listen afresh to the parables  
and consider anew their challenging lessons  
on what kind of God came to us in Jesus Christ  
and what kind of human beings we should and may become.

I am looking forward to this journey of discovery with you.  
I am confident it will enrich the life of this congregation  
and the lives of all those whose souls are nourished to flourish here  
in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Next Sunday, we will begin with the parable of the Growing Seed,  
found in Mark's gospel in 4:26-29.

Written and preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser  
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church  
Burnaby, BC  
[www.brentwoodpc.ca](http://www.brentwoodpc.ca)