

Parables

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, July 16th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 13:10-17

Hey, did you hear the one about the traveling salesman going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who was mugged, beaten, stripped naked, and left to die like a dog in a ditch? Now, comes a priest, a man of God - and passes by on the other side. Then comes down the road an ordinary United Church guy, like me, who - passes by on the other side. Now, imagine you are the man in the ditch. You've lost a lot of blood. Time is running out. With your last ounce of energy you look down that hot, dusty road and see coming toward you - a racially suspicious, theologically uninformed Samaritan. Your last best hope is a man whom you hate. "It's only a flesh wound. I'm OK, I'm OK"- but this Samaritan rips up his designer suit, he lays your bleeding body on the fine leather seats of his Porsche, takes you to the hospital, he shells out his credit cards, and tells them to spare no expense. "Go and do likewise," says Jesus. Is this a joke? Jesus explained God with unexplained stories, most of which lack neat endings or immediately apparent points. God is rarely self-evident. In parables, the joke is on us.

What is God like? A net is thrown into the sea. When the net is hauled in, it bristles with all sorts of creatures, a few good fish but lots of trash as well. The servants ask, "Master, do you want us to sort the good from the bad?" "No, we can do that another time. What a huge haul!" God is like that. Any other questions? Don't be troubled if you can't figure out that story; because the disciples who first heard it, didn't get it either. "Why do you talk in parables?" his disciples asked.

There was a time when people thought that Jesus told lots of these stories because he was attempting to put difficult ideas into simple, everyday rural idiom. But that doesn't do justice to the complex, disorienting quality of most of these parables. Their surprise endings, or lack of endings, their cryptic, enigmatic quality, the way they delight in making heroes out of scoundrels and Samaritans suggest that parables are meant to dislodge more than to explain. Story by story, Jesus is moving us from our boxed-up safe, secure world we thought we knew to another world beyond our comfort zone where all is strange and things don't turn out as expected, and something's mysteriously afoot.

I've spent my whole adult life studying the parabolic teachings of Jesus. And yet I confess that, to this day, I really don't know for sure why Jesus told the parable of the dishonest manager who swindled his boss and who, in turn, was goofily praised by his boss. What is God like? Well, a man had two sons. (It is known by us as "*The Prodigal Son*," although Jesus doesn't give his parables titles.) The younger son says, "Dad, give me my inheritance." In other words, "I'm out of here!". Out in the "far country," Jesus says this boy engages in "loose living." Now, I want you to pause just a moment to allow your imagination to work with that phrase, "loose living." I want you to feel free to supply whatever forms of "loose living" appeal to you - loose girls, loose boys, a chocolate cake. With all the money wasted on loose living, the young man is reduced to the level of a pig. Imagine him in rags, swilling the pig slop to his porcine comrades. Eventually, it was hangover, empty pockets, wake-up time, Monday morning. The boy "comes to himself," and says, "Wait a minute. I don't have to starve out here. I've got a father, I've got a home."

And so, he turns back toward home. He has written a little speech for the occasion. "Now look, Dad. Before you start yelling, let me explain why she answered the phone when you called my room," or "Dad, er, uh, I mean, Father, I have sinned. I am unworthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." But the father isn't interested in speeches. The father. "Save the flowery speeches for your application to law school. Come on in. I'll show you a real party." Which is why this story has always been a shocker. It isn't what we expect. We want the father to be gracious, but not

overly gracious. Those of you who are outraged over an undeserved amount of money given as a gift: listen up. Our question is the same as that of the older brother, "Is it fitting to throw a party for a prodigal?"

"Yes!" Jesus tells them all. God loves to party with sinners, tells them parables of a party when a woman found a lost coin, and a bash after a shepherd found one lost sheep, followed by the biggest party of all - a party for a prodigal son. So, "they began to make merry." Music! Dancing! Levity! And on a Wednesday! What are you dressed up for?" the older brother asks the servant. "Well, your kid brother's home. The old man has given everybody the night off, and there is a party." "A party! He expects me to keep down overhead then he goes and blows two grand on a party to welcome home this son of his who blew his hard-earned money on prostitutes?"

Wait a second. When Jesus was telling this story earlier, did he say anything about prostitutes? All he said was that the younger son blew his money in the far country on "loose living." Perhaps "loose living" just means that he slept in late and ate pizza every day.

The older brother has his own issue, "See what a good boy am I," is always, "See what this son of yours, this brother of mine, has done . . . taking us with harlots! And there is never a party for me." The older son was angry; he wouldn't go to the party. Dad comes out into the darkness and begs him to come in and party with him.

As it turns out the story is not about the prodigal son or even the stuffy older brother. And it's not about you and it's not about me. It's the father. It's about God, who looks like an old man who meets us when we drag in from the far country after good times go bad and who comes out to the lonely dark of our self-righteousness and begs us, "Come, come in and party with me."

"Thy kingdom come," Well, how does it come? What are we to do? The kingdom of God is like a man who scattered seed on the earth who just doesn't care where, then goes home and goes to sleep. While he slept, the seed germinated, a stalk, then the kernels of grain appeared. Miraculous harvest! Sorry, all you conscientious, spiritually high-minded religious eager beavers. God's realm is not of your making. It is something God does. An extravagant gift. Unfathomable Grace.

The Bible never questions: "Is there a God?" Nobody had ever seen God until - we met the one who told these parables, who simply wants us to know one thing, that, we, who were lost, have been found.

Let us pray: O Lord, teller of the stories of our salvation, call us out of our lonely darkness and bring us to God's great party. Amen.