

The Story: Learn From Me
By Jason Huff
Psalm 25:4-9, Colossians 2:6-10, Mark 4:1-20

This morning's final Scripture reading comes from Mark 4:1-20. Listen now to God's Word. "Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop -- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

Who was your favorite teacher? We all had one, even if we didn't like school...somebody memorable. I still remember Mr. Lawson, my high school English teacher who always said, "You've got to earn the right to your own opinion." My church choir director Barbara Kane taught me that we glorify God when we give the very best of ourselves to Him, whether in music or any other endeavor. But my favorite teacher of all time was my second grade teacher, Miss McNeely. She wasn't the kind of woman who stood in a crowd, but she treated us with love. She encouraged me to write stories that she would put up on the blackboard so anybody could read them during breaks or recess. It inspired me so much that I've kept writing – half a dozen pages a week that hopefully draw us closer to God. A great teacher helps us see who God has created us to be so we can be used for His glory.

These days, it's politically correct to say that Jesus was one of the world's great teachers, but many are starting to question it, wondering whether any religion holds the truth. To say that Jesus was not just *a* great teacher but *the* great teacher, the one who must be followed for salvation...that doesn't fly at all. In *The Story* this week, we see Jesus teaching and healing. On the surface, His actions and words raise more questions than answers. We have to do some hard work to understand Jesus' teachings, but when we do, the heart of God is revealed to us.

Jesus was like no teacher His followers had ever heard. The rabbis and the Pharisees taught their own complex theories of obedience to the Law. They were much like modern lawyers, arguing their positions based on precedents set by rabbis who had come before them. It became difficult, if not impossible, for average Joe Israel to understand. What Joe Israel did get was that the Pharisees had created a system of works righteousness – a way of practicing the Law that guaranteed God's favor. Follow the Pharisees, pay your money to the synagogue, behave yourself...that was the key to godliness. The problem was, their system was corrupt. The rich and powerful and the spiritual leaders, they were seen as blessed and had special access to God; for them the rules could be bent or broken.

Jesus taught something totally different. At times, He was startlingly direct. Jesus taught that a person's thought life made a person guilty before God even if they never physically committed a sin. He distinctly told the crowds how to give, how to pray, and how to fast. He taught them that God dearly loved them, and that because of that love, they didn't need to spend their lives worrying about food and clothing but going about the business of their heavenly Father. The crowds were amazed by these teachings. Jesus didn't cite other rabbis or hide behind a cloud of legalese. He spoke with authority. He spoke of a God who was deeply displeased with the false righteousness of the Pharisees but who sought to bring people into real relationship with Himself.

As we heard in our Scripture reading this morning, Jesus also taught in parables and riddles. They were His favorite form of teaching; Scripture says He never taught the crowds without using a parable. They were sometimes baffling. His followers listened because because they were also catchy, earthy, and moving. They spoke to life in the trenches of Jewish society, using everyday settings like a woman searching for a lost coin or a father waiting for his son's return. Jesus was a masterful storyteller, and His stories captured the imaginations of His listeners in a way that instruction could not.

Jesus also taught the truth regardless of how difficult it was to hear. He condemned the sin and judgment of the self-righteous Pharisees, but He didn't make it easy on His followers either. He told them, "Be perfect as I am perfect." And He wouldn't back down when His language became offensive. Jesus told His followers in John 6, "If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." This was a metaphor about how He would give His life on the cross for His followers, who would partake in His sacrificial life and death and resurrection. We celebrate this even today as we take communion. Yet He repulsed those who took Him literally. We're told that many who had been loyal to Him up to that point left. But Jesus was not willing to make it easier; He didn't suddenly say, "I didn't mean it that way." He was not a man of compromise.

That's why it's so interesting to read His teachings side by side with His miracles. Jesus fed thousands; He healed the sick; He even raised the dead. He calmed the storm and walked on the seas. It's as if the miracles were an assurance from God the Father Himself that these teachings – simple yet profound, impossible to accept but impossible to ignore, hard to understand but harder to ever forget – were the very words of His own Son. Amidst the backdrop of these difficult teachings are the miracles that point to their authenticity.

This morning, I'm not interested in taking us through a lot of things we can learn from Jesus' teachings. There are so many, and they are so uniquely complicated, that we would be here all week and barely even be started. Instead, I want us to confront Jesus as a teacher head-on and battle through the questions that inevitably spring up if we take Jesus seriously.

My first question is this: if Jesus was really a good teacher, why does He hide the meaning of His messages? When I think back to my best teachers, they were masters at explaining the material. By the time they were done, not only could I do the work, I could tutor someone else at how to do it. Whether it was English literature or calculus we were studying, they made it make sense. Great teachers want everyone to get an A in their class, even if they are teaching really difficult subjects.

In comparison, Jesus doesn't seem at all worried whether anyone understands Him or not. In this morning's passage, Jesus lectures His disciples. He says, "Don't you understand this parable? Then how will you understand any parable?" He makes it sound like this is one of His easiest teachings. Are these the marks of a good teacher? If God desires all people to turn away from sin and turn towards His love, wouldn't He make it as simple as possible to grasp?

But there's more here than meets the eye. Jesus' teachings were so memorable that His disciples were able to remember them long after His resurrection. They wrote them down in the gospels and taught them to new believers. They have been repeated over and over again throughout the centuries. Jesus may not have been straightforward, but His teachings capture the spark of human imagination. His messages have stood the test of time.

I believe Jesus taught in parables not to confuse His faithful students or to keep us away from God. Not at all! But parables reveal something about our nature and the nature of God. God did not send Jesus as His only word to us. God gave the Law 1400 years before Jesus – a straightforward account of God's expectations of righteous living. Jesus said that His teachings were not to replace the Law. Instead, Jesus' teachings are all about drawing us closer into relationship with God.

So why all the mystery and confusion? It's this: God doesn't want superficial relationships with His sons and daughters. He wants for us to be close to Him, dedicated to Him, aware of all His grace and compassion and justice. But that sort of relationship takes the work of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus told His parables, it left His students with a choice: am I going to turn away in confusion or anger because I don't get it, or am I going to ask God for the answers and follow Him ever deeper into the mystery? Am I going to keep playing at faith, or am I going to lay down my life and take up my cross and follow God wherever He leads?

God is still asking us those questions today. Matthew tells us that Jesus unpacked all the parables for His disciples...but the gospels explain only a few of them. That tells me that there's some other reason for Jesus speaking in parables. It's to draw us in just as those who first heard Jesus were drawn in to His stories and His words. It's OK not to get it all the first time you hear one of Jesus' teachings. Are you willing to struggle with His words and try to learn their real meaning and come closer to Him as a result? Are you willing to be a part of the Christian community that has studied His teachings for generations and listens to His voice even now? That's what He is calling us to do.

My next question of Jesus as a good teacher is this: why is the Kingdom of God the central focus of His teachings rather than living a good earthly life? Most of Jesus' tales are metaphors about the Kingdom. He'd say, "What is the Kingdom of God like? The Kingdom of Heaven is like this..." That's all well and good, but what does it have to do with us? I don't think any of us come to church week after week thinking that we're just here to prepare for life after death and that's it. We believe faith has to do with the here and now. We want our faith to speak to our morals, our ethics, our society and our politics, our marriages and our children – the whole of who we are.

The Old Testament does precisely that. The Old Testament presented this life as primary. There was little promise of an afterlife. The heavens were the dwelling place of God, not people. And the Old Testament law showed the Jewish people how God expected them to live day by day. So is Jesus doing something completely different, focusing on the afterlife rather than this one? Why is His teaching so interested in the Kingdom of God? Is this life not as important as we've made it out to be?

It's when we begin to comprehend Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God that we realize why they are such a huge part of His ministry. Here's the truth: the Kingdom of God is in our midst. Jesus' arrival heralded the breaking in of God's Kingdom into our earthly realm. While God had always been involved in human history, Jesus' coming signaled a paradigm shift. God was no longer far away but established His reign over us through His Son. Now if I were to tell you that the Kingdom of God had already come in the midst of earthquakes and tsunamis and terrorist attacks, you'd probably think I'm a loony. Yet that's exactly what Jesus said. In Luke 17:20-21, Jesus tells the Pharisees that no one can observe the Kingdom of God coming and point to it saying, "There it is," because the Kingdom of God is in our midst. It's already here!

So then, *how* is the Kingdom of God in our midst? Here's what Jesus says...it's like a little tiny bit of leaven that spreads throughout the whole loaf of dough. It's like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge tree. It grows here and there, sometimes almost imperceptibly, but it's there. As this morning's reading showed, not everybody gets it. Many people hear the Word of God and reject it outright, or they accept it at first only to fall away when trials come or when the worries of this world choke out their love of God. But those who listen and accept it, who persevere, produce a huge crop.

That's who we are called to be. We are called to be the ambassadors and diplomats of God's Kingdom right now, the fruitbearers whose work creates a harvest and creates even more seeds to be planted. We are called to be God's representatives, standing for Him in the midst of the darkness of this world. When we become faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we become a part of the Kingdom that is emerging in our world. It's not all here yet; God's reign is not total. As this world rebels against Him, we will continue to see the world reflecting the imperfections and tragedies that sin creates. But Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God precisely because it is the Kingdom in which we now live.

We have a choice. Either we can set God aside and live our days as subjects of the sinful, fallen kingdom of earth, becoming the objects of God's eventual wrath, or we can choose to follow God and live as His subjects, accepting salvation in Jesus Christ and obeying the direction of the Holy Spirit. Being a part of the Kingdom of God is about living a life under God's control right here and right now. There's nothing more vital to our life in the present than being a part of God's Kingdom that continues to emerge into our world at this very moment. That's why Jesus taught so much about the Kingdom.

With these two questions answered, there's one more we need to ask: what does it take to be a student of Jesus? We already know the coursework is hard. Time and again, when I ask people about coming to Bible study or reading their Bibles on a daily basis, I'm told, "I don't even know enough to ask the right questions." I'm told, "Studying the Bible is difficult enough that it's got to be for scholars." I've even been told that people like myself who know the Bible well, even if we're good teachers, we're intimidating. Sometimes we just come to church on Sundays because we're afraid that if we get into a small group or a Bible study, it will be like taking calculus when we've never even studied algebra.

But contrary to everybody's expectations, Jesus' words were not best understood by the theologians and scholars of His day. Instead, the people who got Jesus were the laypeople, the average folks that He visited in His journeys. They listened to His words and struggled with them. In doing so, they realized that they needed salvation from their sin and that Jesus was offering exactly what they needed. Jesus' closest friends were not the religious people. His disciples were fishermen and tax collectors, earthy guys whose spiritual education was little more than the training they received as young boys in the synagogue. They didn't need a degree to follow Jesus. All that was required was a willing heart to set everything aside to follow Him and learn at His feet.

The offer still stands, you know. The adventure still awaits. Jesus is still recruiting students...still finding new ambassadors for His Father's Kingdom. He's not looking at your high school GPA or how well you can read or anything else we think of as academics in the modern world. He wants you to spend time with Him every day learning from Him, digesting a bit of the Scripture, praying for His guidance and contemplating it as you go about your business. He wants your time. He's not worried about your skills or your gifts. He just wants you as His student every day.

Other than the rare prodigy, nobody comes into life knowing how to play the guitar or the piano. We sit down with a teacher and we plunk out "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." We try to get our hands to make those weird contortions that make chords and notes. When we hear a great musician performing, we don't see those years of study and practice. All we see is the finished product and we think, "I could never do that." But the masters start out just as we do – a note at a time.

The same is true of studying as a disciple of Jesus. At first, our questions may seem dumb. When we start out, every parable seems to be impenetrable. Even when we do understand Him, we have an even harder time putting the message into action. But God is not worried about all the practice time. In Jesus Christ, God teaches us His ways. Through the salvation Jesus paid for on the cross, God assures us that every person He calls to Himself is going to play perfectly in the symphony that is eternal life. Our life now is the chance to practice the score and learn the harmony and begin playing the chorus of His love that will resound through all of eternity. If it seems like a lot of work, it is, but it is preparation for something far greater. Don't be intimidated. Be excited at being a part of God's Kingdom, a part of the neverending tune of the glory of God's salvation that will play for all time.

Jesus is calling us to be His students. His teachings may be challenging, but He is the master teacher. After one of Jesus' most difficult messages, He asked His disciples if they wanted to leave Him as the crowds did. Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." I encourage you today...seek after Jesus, learn from Him, and He will speak into your life those same words of eternal life He taught His friends so long ago.