

"LIVING PARABLES"
Matthew 9:35-38 Luke 10:25-37
Annual Conference Sunday
August 5, 2018
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Who likes a good story? Who is your favorite storyteller? What is it that you like about how they tell a story? I appreciate richly developed characters, a compelling plot, sparkling dialogue, a specific sense of place, and one thing I really like is a surprise- something or someone I wasn't expecting that turns the whole story upside down- or at least sideways. If I can figure out the whole plot from the first chapter it really isn't much fun and I often lose interest. I have to say, that's what I like about a good sermon too.

I think that is what made Jesus such a good storyteller- he always added a zinger that no one was expecting. His stories are called parables- and they were sneaky little stories that lulled people into a sense of complacency with their ordinariness:

- A man had two sons.
- A woman lost a coin.
- A farmer went out to plant.
- Weeds and wheat and mustard seeds.

His listeners would think, "Hey, I have two sons," or "I lost a coin just

yesterday" and then, before they knew what was happening, Jesus was taking their ordinary, everyday stories and leading them in a direction they could never have expected- or even wanted to go- turning the message into a lens focused on the reign of God. These homespun little stories would suddenly take on immense cosmic meaning that caught the listeners by surprise. And what happens when we are surprised? Hopefully, we pay attention and we listen more closely.

In his introduction to the Annual Conference theme, Moderator Samuel Sarpiya wrote, *"Part of Jesus' genius lies in the ways he took things that already existed and used them in a fresh and new way. Sometimes the parable or stories*

might seem familiar- the listeners might think they already know the story. But reading and reflecting on it again brings to light new ways of understanding."

Samuel chose this theme because he believes "Jesus' life and actions provide a template for Brethren today. Being a Living Parable is the foundational call to be involved with the ministries of Jesus, to work for peace, reconciliation, and transformation of all things visible and invisible. As Living Parables, Christ calls us to learn how to share our lives in grace with others.

This isn't about just giving information, but being present in a world that so desperately needs to see Christ in action."

At Annual Conference Samuel called the Church back to the basic foundation of our foremothers and fathers who said that the Brethren should be known by the manner of their living.

Matthew's text in chapter nine shows us how Jesus made the reign of God visible for the people- he went out into the villages and he taught and proclaimed the good news. He healed and he had compassion. Then he called his disciples to do the same. He saw such great need- and he knew he couldn't- and shouldn't- do it all by himself so he called on his inner circle and he sent them out. He told them, "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." Chapter ten tells us that he gave his disciples authority over unclean spirits and power to cure every disease and sickness.

He sent them out to be stories of God's reign- not just **storytellers-** but **stories** themselves that point to Jesus in unexpected ways. And in pointing to Jesus, they are pointing to the dawning new reign of God. Jesus' ministry is now their ministry and their ministry is now the church's ministry.

They have been following Jesus, watching him, and now it is time for them to put what they have learned from him into action. He showed them what the reign of God looks like. He didn't just describe it or lecture them about it- he showed them what it looks like. They are called to go forth and do as he did- using their own gifts and graces, their own personalities and quirks. They are not sent out to **be** Jesus.

They are sent out to share his message, to point people in his direction. That's what it means to be Living Parables- we are not the story- we are the storytellers.

They, and we, are called to be a part of the movement that will usher in a new way of being in the world and in relationship with God. Jesus' use of the metaphor of a harvest makes it clear that the timing is urgent. If you have had any experience as a gardener or a farmer you know that when the harvest is ready, when the produce is ripe, when the hay is dry- that is the time to get moving. That is the time you call as many people as possible and you work day and night to pick it or cut it and get it into the barn. You could work all year to raise a crop and one day of delay could ruin the whole thing.

Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that the need is great and the time is **now**. The gracious invasion of God's mercy is happening right in front of them and Jesus needs their help to carry out his mission. He needs **our** help because his mission continues even today and the need is as great, if not greater, than ever.

It is a mission that cannot wait for a more opportune time- when the church is stronger or richer or more confident. We cannot wait until the church is larger or more prepared or more theologically sound. The laborers cannot wait until they have all of the doctrinal ducks in a row or all of their Annual Conference statements properly amended and passed unanimously. God's people are in need right now- right this very moment. We are not allowed to delay.

Today is the fourth time in a month and a half that I have heard the parable of the Samaritan. It was preached at Annual Conference and at National Youth Conference and again last Sunday in this very pulpit. I have no need to try to "improve" upon any of those fine and thoughtful sermons. All I can offer this morning is my own hearing of it. The problem with this parable and most of the parables is that they are so familiar to us. They are so well- worn and comfortable that they have lost their bite. They no longer surprise or infuriate us but may actually comfort us like a good bedtime story that we request over and over again. But let us not confuse familiarity with understanding. Just because we have heard it often doesn't mean

we totally get it. And the great thing about parables is that the more we hear them, the deeper we can understand them- if we are willing.

A parable basically attempts to answer the question: "What is the reign of God like?" The pictures they paint aren't often ones we want to see because usually the reign of God shows up where we least expect it or want it to. Somewhere along the line this parable was dubbed, "the Parable of the Good Samaritan," although the word "good" does not appear in the biblical account. At National Youth Conference Jarrod McKenna challenged us to recognize that it is not about a Good Samaritan but a Hated Samaritan. For the Jews of Jesus' day there was nothing good about a Samaritan. To say they were enemies of the Jews is an understatement. Their discord was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. *They disagreed about everything that mattered- how to honor God, how to interpret scripture, and where to worship. They practiced their faith in different temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact whenever possible. They hated each other's guts.* (1)

So imagine the surprise of Jesus' Jewish audience when he told this story about a Samaritan who symbolized their God; the one who is camouflaged as those who are hated and despised. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them got up and walked away. Jesus was pushing them to envision of a different way of living. He was describing the reign of God in language they had never even dreamed of. And never wanted to. Think of it in these terms: *An Israeli Jewish man is robbed and a Good Hamas member saves his life. A liberal Democrat is robbed and a Good conservative Republican saves her life. A white supremacist is robbed and a Good black teenager saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed and a Good anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An atheist is robbed and a Good Christian fundamentalist saves his life.* (2)

When Jesus named the Samaritan as the hero of his story he was inviting his listeners to put aside their history and prejudices. He was asking them to consider the value of a person beyond what they thought they knew about them. He was preaching a scandal. He was asking the almost impossible of his Good Jewish audience. He was asking them to believe that a hated Samaritan could not only be their neighbor, but could be a force for good in God's world.

We know a little bit about each person in this story- except for one. We know there is a Samaritan, a Levite, and a priest but we know nothing about the guy in the ditch. We don't know his nationality or his religion. We don't know if he was a good person. For all we know he was a robber too. All we know is that he was beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. He was the broken one in need. When one person came to his aid I doubt that he was in a position to ask for identification. More than likely he was grateful. *"When you're lying bloody in a ditch, what matters most is not whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die."* (3)

This whole thing started because a highly religious and educated person, a lawyer, asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Perhaps he was really asking, "Hey Jesus, who *isn't* my neighbor? Who don't I have to love or help or hang out with?" But Jesus answers him with a story he wasn't expecting. And I hope he was never the same again.

In this story about a Hated Samaritan, Jesus answered the question by saying *"your neighbor is one who scandalizes you with compassion. Your neighbor is the one who upends all the entrenched categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbor is the one who mercifully steps over the ancient, bloodied lines separating 'us' from 'them' and teaches you the real meaning of 'Good.'*

Here is what really grabs me in this parable- Jesus chose a hated Samaritan to act like he, himself, would act. Jesus chose to play the outcast, the despised one. And once again God shows up where we least expect God to be. In his moving sermon the last night of National Youth Conference, Jarrod McKenna said: *"at the cross we see that God is the hated Samaritan, who offers us gratuitous grace."* And then Jarrod prayed and asked God to send us out with tenderness to turn this world upside down with love.

Perhaps stories can change the world.

Go and do likewise as a Living Parable of Jesus.

Amen.

End Notes:

- "Go and Do Likewise," Debie Thomas from Journey with Jesus, July 2, 2016.