Foreword

One of the best things about working for Jesus is his stories. If you like your gods theoretical or immediately practical, apophatic and aloof, obvious and orderly, direct and straightforward then go worship obviousness and practicality rather than Jesus. On the other hand, if you delight in being teased, cajoled, surprised, jolted, and tossed about, there’s nobody better than Jesus when he’s on a roll with his stories.

“Tell us who God really is,” we asked. “You’re not the god we craved or expected.”

And Jesus replied (as is so typical) not with a lecture or an enunciation of biblical principles but with a story: “A farmer went out to scatter seed….”

Both Mark and Matthew say that Jesus said nothing except in parables (Mark 4:34; Matt 13:44). In word and deed, he was a parable, the storyteller become the story. Just as preachers quickly learn there’s no better way to bore into the brains of our congregations than narrative, our Creator knew that the best way to get to creatures is through stories.

Everything starts with a story, “In the beginning, when God began creating the heaven and the earth, God said ….” (Gen. 1:1).

Sowers

Sowers are people of great faith. To dare to plant a seed is to put oneself at the mercy of the future, to risk farming failure, to hazard your work to factors beyond your control. Harvest is hoped for, never guaranteed.

Still, storytellers keep talking, keep sowing, persist in making something out of nothing but words, all in the faith that someone will listen, that somebody out there is dying to hear your story and make it their own. All the narrator can do is to tell the story, sling the seed, and then wait to be surprised by the soul in which it takes root.

Storytelling in Jesus’ name is done in the faith that God is determined to have the last word, in hope that nothing—our indifference, sin, or idolatry—shall defeat God’s determination to get through to us. Every preacher clings to the hope that the prophet’s words are true: *My word…does not return to me empty* (Isa 55:11)*.*

My preaching life has been an illustration of Paul’s truth: *one sows and another harvests.* It’s rather remarkable that stories Jesus told so long ago, to people so unlike ourselves, amid a culture so different from ours, should have resonance today. Though I’ve made a fairly good living retelling Jesus’s tales, Jesus was crucified, in great part, because people didn’t like the stories he told. I’m a bit ashamed that my retelling of Jesus’ provocative stories has cost me so little. Still, while I’ve got breath I will testify that preaching is a great way to go, experiencing (not as often as I’d like but often enough to keep me at it) Jesus speaking through me so that he might have his say among his gathered people.

Because the gospel is news that you cannot tell yourself, God appoints sowers, people who are willing to risk telling others the gospel truth that was told to them. How will they hear without a preacher (Rom 10:14)—somebody with the guts to tell us a story on Sunday about something we’ve spent all week avoiding? To be Christian is to realize that you are the empty-handed recipient of this faith; we have nothing that we have not received, all of us utterly dependent upon another to tell us a true story about God.

Thus, Jesus not only told stories but called and commissioned others to tell his stories that we can’t make up for ourselves. Down through the ages, the Sower has produced a great company of sowers. Thus Jesus urged his disciples to pray “the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest,” lamenting that “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few” (Luke 10:2).

Though few, there have been enough tellers of Jesus’s tales to get the job done. “Seminary” literally means “seed bed” where novices learn to tell the old, old story in such a way that, by the grace of God, it becomes somebody’s news. No corner of creation has been immune from the words of someone who has been summoned to say, “And God said….”

I’ve watched a pastor stand before a small, rural church and tell people truth they didn’t want to hear, a story that implies that Jesus Christ is Lord (therefore The Donald is not), attempting to weave their narcissistic, deceitful little lives into a grand narrative of God’s redemption. I’m in awe of her obedience to the prophetic command to, *sow the seeds of justice.*

Seeds

Jesus’ seminal stories are not the main thing; they are the way toward the main thing. We don’t worship his tales; we worship the Teller of the Tales. Jesus’s words are seeds that await germination, take time to take root. We must await payoff from the stories, must be patient before the harvest. Sometimes a seed must be buried and wait before it can rise and take root (John 12:24).

As in his story of the sower and the seed, most of what Jesus says is wasted. The majority of the seed falls upon barren ground, is consumed by birds or worldly concerns, squandered, choked by weeds. Hearing we don’t hear, seeing we don’t see. The Sower is recklessly willing to imperil good seed in the confidence that though much is wasted on the likes of us, those few kernels that bear fruit make the risks and loses of sowing worthwhile.

When you listen to one of his stories and reply, “Sorry, I just don’t get it,” Jesus’ typical response is, “Try this: There was a woman who hid a little yeast in a huge lump of dough….” Not helpful? Here’s another: “There was a father who had two sons….”

Why are so many of my stories humorous? Blame it on Jesus. I don’t get how some can listen to Jesus and not get his humor. Rather than judge us as we deserve, how gracious of God to enjoy having a laugh at our expense. Sensing the gap between God and we servants of God, we can either laugh or cry. Jesus, it appears from his stories, votes for laughter.

What can you say about a God who, in response to our stuff-shirt self-righteousness, “Told another joke about people who think they are righteous and look down on everybody else,” (Luke 19). You can say God was in Christ, blissfully reconciling us laughable, silly, so silly sinners unto himself (2 Cor 5:19).

Senses

As a preacher I marvel that Jesus doesn’t mind wasting his best stories on us. I like my sermons to be effective, pray for my listeners to go forth muttering, “Never have I had God explained so clearly and memorably as in your sermon.”

Jesus is astoundingly free of the compulsion to put his truth on the bottom shelf, to beat you over the head with obvious meaning. Never asks us to write anything down. Rarely explains or ties up his stories with a bow whereby you can say triumphantly, “I got it!”

More typically, his parables lead us to say, “It got me.”

Jesus risks misunderstanding, as if getting the point, figuring him out, fully grasping the intent of his telling is not the point. Many’s the time I’ve retold one of Jesus’s more outrageous parables (and there are many), and have been forced rhetorically to ask the congregation, “Are you sure you want to follow a Savior who dares tell stories like this to people like us?”

In twenty years as preacher at Duke, when some student emerged from the Chapel scratching his head and complaining, “I just didn’t get the point,” I’ve responded, “How high did you score on the SAT?

“1350? Well, that’s just average around here. I’ll tell Jesus that his story succeeded in befuddling and stupefying an oh-so-smart Duke sophomore. He’ll be thrilled!”

Most of those who first heard Jesus’ parables were confused by them. So are we. His exasperated first disciples complained, “Why must you speak in these riddles?” (Matt 13:13)

Jesus replied by quoting Isaiah that people have shut their eyes and closed their ears; looking they don’t see; listening they don’t hear. Our intellectual defenses against him are well-developed. Fortunately for us, Jesus liked nothing better than healing the blind or opening the ears of the deaf. No better way to do that than through a story that begins, “God’s realm is like….”

Parables conceal and reveal. In Matthew, Jesus says that he tells parables so people can better understand the realm of God. Stories open our eyes, unstop our ears.

In Mark 4:12, Jesus says just the opposite: the purpose of parables is “so that they can look and see but have no insight, and they can hear but not understand. Otherwise, they might turn their lives around and be forgiven.” They thought they were spiritually perceptive until I smack ‘em with my stories. My parables strike them deaf and blind and rob them of their damnable certitude.

Again, sorry if you must have your Saviors obvious. Don’t ask Jesus not to be sly or obtuse.

A good parable’s ambiguity and thickness begs interpretation. Few can sit by passively when Jesus aims a parable at us. Our interpretive devices immediately go into action. We try to find the hero of the story, hoping that the hero will look like us. We attempt a sorting of the good from the bad (a notoriously difficult task when it comes to Jesus’s stories). He loves antiheroes, which is maybe one reason why we, the unheroic, so often exclaim, “Hey, you’re talking about me!”

Parables must be unpacked, pondered, argued, chewed, and interpreted. In telling his truth parabolicaly, Jesus requires us to accept some of the responsibility for the making of meaning.

Figuring out a story of Jesus is also training in humility, being forced to go hat-in-hand to the Holy Spirit pleading, “Sorry, I just don’t get it. Mind helping me with some of the hermeneutical lifting?”

I’ve been preaching for nearly fifty years, but Jesus still manages to shock me with a text. Sharing my surprise with a congregation can make for an interesting sermon. It also means that I’ve got to toss out the last two sermons I earlier preached on that story—my beloved previous interpretation trashed by Jesus.

I’ve had the embarrassing experience of preaching at least five sermons on the Dishonest Steward (my title; Jesus doesn’t entitle his stories), Luke 16:1-15, and have ended by confessing, “I can read this in the original Greek, have got at least twenty books on my shelf that purport to explain this parable and, God help me, I still am unsure why Jesus told it.”

After battering them all day with a barrage of parables Jesus asked his disciples, “Have you understood all these things?” (Matt 13:51)

They gleefully responded, “Sure! We get it.”

They lied.

Secrets

Still, the meaning of “metaphor” is to shine light on something, to promote understanding. I can’t believe Jesus’s purpose in telling stories was to make us look stupid; we don’t need his stories for that. Mark’s favorite designation for Jesus was “rabbi,” teacher. Jesus really wants to share the mysteries of the kingdom (Mark 4:11). Trouble is, the subject matter Jesus taught required a willingness to endure pedagogical failure. His stories are no more obscure and difficult than they need to be, considering Jesus’s peculiar way, truth, and life.

Jesus responds to his disciples’ plea, “How come you tell so many stories?” not only by reminding them that Isaiah warned that most hearers would be clueless but also by charitably congratulating them for having received “the secrets of the kingdom.”

Refusing to waste time speculating on why many did not understand his parabolic teaching (everybody knows that human stupidity is ubiquitous), Jesus congratulates his gaggle of followers by saying, “Happy are your eyes because they see. Happy are your ears because they hear. I assure you that many prophets and righteous people wanted to see what you see and hear what you hear, but they didn’t” (Matt 13:16-17).

We disciples of Jesus may not be the brightest candles in the box, but at least we happy few know a true story when we hear one. It’s encouraging that Jesus entrusts us with divine mysteries that are unknown to nine-out-of-ten average Americans.

While I don’t believe that Jesus was parabolic in order to dumb down for the agrarian rubes of Galilee—if that was his intention, the vast misunderstanding and outright hostility that he received prove it didn’t work— I do believe that his parables offer unique access to the mysteries of God.

When questioned about his relentless storytelling, Jesus said that he told stories for the same reason as Isaiah, “*I’ll declare what has been hidden since the beginning of the world.”* The primary purpose of Jesus’ stories is not to make us feel fatuous but to reveal to us the truth about God. In Jesus and his stories, God loves us enough to go public with God’s secrets. Refusing to be coy or ethereal, a hazy blur or vague feeling, God in Christ lets us in on the public secret of who God is and what God is up to, alluring us, turning narration into vocation: Now that you know who God really is, don’t you want to hitch on to God’s vast retake of what belongs to God? Follow me!

Somebody named Mark, sometime during the first century, somewhere in Asia Minor had to invent a literary form previously unknown in order to tell the whole truth about Jesus. Biography, sort of, travel saga, in a way, Mark’s Gospel is an extended story, a distinctively narrative way of presenting the meaning of a unique sort of Messiah. Something about Jesus—who he was and what he was up to—just couldn’t be conveyed any other way than through this rambling travelogue replete with excursions like, “He told a parable to those who trusted in their own righteousness and despised everybody else….” or, “Once there was a rich man who….”

In my ministry, God moved me from first-rate frat party fabulist, to southern storyteller, to seminarian raconteur, to pulpit wit. Not all have approved of God’s gift of narrative to me. “You told one story too many today,” groused a grande dame post sermon. “I need your advice but I don’t have time for all the damn stories,” said an anxious undergraduate at the beginning of our pastoral counseling session. Some random student dismissed my class at Duke Divinity as no more than “story time with Will.” Ungrateful wretches.

My late friend Stuart Henry said of my work, “Give Will a wilted daisy, a faded larkspur, and when he gets done with his story, it’s ‘a riot of delphinium.’”

Some of my tendency to tell stories is due to my having been raised by a storytelling people who managed poverty, misfortune, and mortality by telling tales. Even the worst luck could be improved with a good story. Nothing is lost among a tribe of narrators. Good times were made better if there was someone to tell a story that, in the telling, transformed drab, prosaic Southern reality into fantastic fairytale and fable.

It’s time for me to get to my point:

*I tell so many stories because of Jesus.*