

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“It’s Like...: Seeing What Sticks”

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Today we begin a new series in the Gospel of Matthew, focusing on just one chapter, chapter 13. The Gospel of Matthew is big on teaching: lots of extended discourses of Jesus simply teaching. In fact, of the four Gospels, Matthew includes the most teaching from Jesus during his public ministry. (The Gospel of John, by the way, actually has more words from Jesus, but most of those are from the Last Supper.)

If we have any teacher sorts out there, you’ll recognize the word “pedagogy,” which in educational theory is a fancy word for how you teach something. Jesus in his ministry implements any number of pedagogies, but one of his favorites, especially in Matthew, is in the use of parables, these short stories or illustrations, sometimes extended, other times just a verse or two, and chapter thirteen of Matthew is chock full of parables.

Over the next few weeks, we’re going to look at all of them, kind of bouncing around a bit, but along the way, we’ll try to ask, well, why does Jesus teach this way? And what is Jesus trying to give us a glimpse of?

Today we start right in the middle of the chapter with just two verses, which speak the confusing, maybe even cryptic reason behind Christ’s use parables in the first place. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden since the foundation.” Matthew 13:35-35

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Twenty-two hundred years ago, a man got into a bathtub. Not that remarkable a thing. But this man was a scholar, a mathematician, and there was something on his mind that he couldn’t quite figure out.

You see, the local king had felt he had gotten swindled. The king had commissioned a new crown from a local goldsmith made of pure gold. The goldsmith returned the finished product, but the king suspected that the goldsmith had made the crown only partially of gold and instead substituted less expensive metal in the mix, but nevertheless was paid for the cost of pure gold.

So the king goes to his scholar, his mathematician, a man named Archimedes. He tells him he needs to know if the goldsmith cheated him, but Archimedes couldn’t damage the crown to find out. (If the crown was indeed made all out of gold, you wouldn’t want to melt it down just to see if it’s legit.) And Archimedes couldn’t figure out to do it. He knew how much the crown weighed, and he knew how dense gold was, but what he didn’t know was how big the crown actually was, that is, how much volume it had. If it were a square, that’s easy to

add up, but the crown wasn't made that way. It had curves and points and divots. So Archimedes couldn't figure out how to do what the king had told him to do.

So he took a bath.

And as he lowered himself down into the tub, he noticed that the level of the water rose, and he suddenly realized that the water would be displaced by the exact volume of an object that was submerged in it—in this case, himself. Now, he knew how to figure out how much volume the crown had, and therefore, how to determine whether the crown was made of pure gold. He exclaimed, “Eureka! Eureka!” And as the story goes, he was so excited, he jumped out of the tub and ran through the streets naked. (And by the way, if you've ever heard someone say “Eureka!” after a great realization or discovery, this story is the reason why.)

Whether you knew that story or not, there's something about that I think resonates with, what shall we call it, the Western mind. For a long time, whether from Greek philosophy to German theology to English political theory to scientific research, there's a heavy emphasis on reason, equations, hypothesis, evidence, and proof. And don't get me wrong, I love reason and evidence and proof. I love it when things add up and when we force ourselves to think logically and critically about the problems we face, and to test assumptions in the cold light of research.

But when there's a long heritage of that kind of, call it, a “thought tradition” or “intellectual tradition,” it means it can be difficult for us to imagine something else. Because when there's something we don't understand, our impulse is to think, well, if we think long enough about it, if we study it enough, if we test it enough, then eventually by sheer force of will and reason, the solution will emerge, and the truth of anything can be determined. At some point, that “Eureka!” moment will come around.

That's simply not how Jesus teaches, and it can be really frustrating.

Among the many hats that Jesus wears in the Gospels, much of his time during his public ministry is spent in the role as a teacher, but not like chalkboards and Powerpoints—he approached it differently than that. It wasn't about an information dump—that was kind of the point as I hope we'll see.

And because we'll be spending a good bit of time in this series talking about Jesus as a teacher, want to offer two points first just on what it means to consider Jesus as a teacher, namely two things we shouldn't do.

First, we shouldn't consider Jesus as *just* a teacher, and this is a common perception. Sounds something like, “You know, I like Jesus and all, I like what he taught, but I'm just not so sure about the whole Lord and Savior stuff.” It's a valid thought, and it's something I would talk with you more about. But it also comes with a bit of a challenge—do you truly like what Jesus taught, or do you just like some of the soundbites you may have come across? It's not like the soundbites are bad; they're great! “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” That's awesome stuff. But that's not all he taught.

A challenge I'll sometimes offer folks is, if you say you “respect Jesus as a teacher” but just aren't on board with the rest of it, then read what Jesus taught. All of it. It's really easy if you get one of those red-letter Bibles, where all the words of Jesus are in red ink. Just go through and only read the words in red ink, what Jesus said. Doesn't take that long. And then at the end of it, try to say that you still respect Jesus *just* as a teacher. You can't do it.

And why can't you do it? Because you don't agree with "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you"? No, of course not. That's still great. But that's not the only thing he taught. He also taught, pretty regularly, that he as the "Son of Man" would die but would rise again on the third day and would ascend to the Father and one day return into his kingdom in power. So if you respect Jesus *just* as an ethical teacher, just how reliable of a teacher would a person be who went around saying things like that, when in reality that was not true at all. That person would either be completely delusional or a pathological liar. In either case, probably not the best source of ethical teaching. He's either a teacher *and* all those other things he claimed to be, or he was not of sound mind or morals.

But then the second thing we shouldn't do when considering Jesus as a teacher is to lessen the importance of his teaching. Seems kind of an obvious thing to say. If you claim to follow Jesus, of course what he taught would be important, but in practice, in belief, sometimes we can put his teaching on a lower level, and this has been done for a long time. It's like his teaching gets skipped over. Take the Apostles' Creed for example. We say it a lot together (we're doing something a bit different in this series, but a lot of weeks that's what we say together as an Affirmation of Faith), but it says about Jesus, he was "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried," etc. Did you notice what got no mention at all? His ministry. His teaching. His healing. It goes right from his birth to his suffering and crucifixion, skipping over everything in between. Whereas, in contrast, the Gospels, when they tell Jesus' story, they spend a whole lot of time talking about what Jesus did, where he went, what he said, who he healed, much more time talking about that than about his birth, death, and resurrection.

And sometimes in practice, we can get caught into skipping over all that too. We can put so much focus on the cross and the empty tomb—and please don't misunderstand me, it's a good thing to focus on the cross and the empty tomb—but what Jesus was doing during his ministry was teaching his disciples so that they might come to understand what would happen at the cross and what would happen at the empty tomb and how important it was. What Jesus was teaching wasn't just some helpful maxims for an ethical life. It was much more than that. He was preparing his followers to understand what was about to happen.

And doing so was pretty hard for the disciples to understand. Over and over the disciples are dumbfounded by some teaching, or some healing, or some miracle that Jesus performs. It's like the disciples were all puppies when they hear a new noise. You know what I'm talking about. A puppy hears a noise it hasn't heard before; what does it do? Kind of tilts its head to the side in confusion. That's the disciples all the time, trying to understand what Jesus is teaching, and the reason is because what Jesus is trying to convey, a message of good news, a message of a new kingdom coming into the world, is impossible for us to fully understand.

So Jesus used other methods, just to try to give glimpses of this new reality, a heavenly reality, a heavenly kingdom breaking forth into the world, a kingdom that would in fact be inaugurated by his death and resurrection.

And to give these glimpses, one of his favorite methods was using these things called parables. In v. 34, "Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.'" He's not trying to convey platitudes or sound bites about being nice to other people. He's trying to teach eternal, heavenly truths, truths from the very foundation of the world, and spoiler alert, such things are hard for us grasp.

So he uses parables. You know what a parable actually means? Sometimes we might think it means just a story or something, or maybe even something like a fable. You know, like Aesop's fables. Short stories, usually with animals, always with a "moral of the story." The tortoise and the hare. The tortoise and the hare are in a foot race. The hare, being very confident, races out quickly and gets way ahead. The hare was so cocky, it takes a nap along the racetrack, while the tortoise kept on going and going. The hare didn't wake up from its nap, and the tortoise ends up winning the race. And the moral of the story is, "Slow and steady wins the race." That's a fable. That's not a parable.

You know what a parable actually means? The word itself if you break it down comes from the words for hurled alongside. "Para," meaning alongside, and then the "-ble" comes from an old Greek word for fling or throw or hurl. So literally a parable is something hurled alongside something else, and then you see what sticks. It's a story used for the sake of comparison, but they're usually not clean and tidy. It's like when Jesus is telling a parable, especially a parable about the kingdom of heaven, which is what he does over and over in this chapter, he's saying, "Yeah, it's kind of like *this*, but it's hard to explain. So I'm going to tell this story, or offer this image to get you thinking about it."

And sometimes, that can be really frustrating for us. We want that "Eureka!" moment. But that's not how Jesus teaches. His subject matter is too grand for us to grasp, so he says, "It's like *this*," or "It's like *that*."

Is that how your faith works? Willing to grapple with "It's like *this*," or "It's like *that*"? For some it is, for others not so much. It's hard for me. I want things to be laid out and logical and neat and tidy. That's a big reason I'm a Presbyterian. For all our faults as a theological tradition, there is a heritage of thinking critically in our theology. If Scripture says *this* about God, then also *that* and *this* and *that* must be true. And also how do we consider what Scripture says in light of, say, new scientific research or archeological findings? Constant examination and consideration about what we say we believe. And I like that. Maybe some of you do too.

But if we do it too much, we lose something of what Jesus is getting at here, in his use of parables. That there is and should be a healthy dose of mystery and humility in the way we approach our thought about God, about Christ, about his kingdom, that these are not matters we will ever fully grasp until the end, and until then, it's glimpses of what is in store.

If doing that, if embracing a bit of mystery in the life of faith, feels like a challenge to you, maybe try it yourself a little bit this week. Try to describe what you imagine a life lived in the presence of the living God would be like. Don't just think about it. Actually try to write it down. And see if you find yourself writing a bit of a parable along the way.

My hope is that this week, or during this whole series, we'll catch more glimpses of the glorious life and reality into God is inviting us. It has a name: the kingdom of heaven.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.