

Genre Sensitive Preaching of Parables

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Abstract:

By examining the literary/rhetorical features of Jesus' parables, preachers are better equipped to communicate not only what the text says, but what the text does. This essay describes how three features common to the genre of parables—realism, folk story, and analogy—influence readers, and then suggests and illustrates six ways to reproduce the impact of those features when preaching.

Jesus spoke 50 to 70 parables, depending how you define the term, so that approximately 43% of his words in Matthew, 16% of his words in Mark, and 52% of his words in Luke are parables (Lewis and Lewis, p. 86). To expound the Savior's message, we must preach the parables, but the task can be daunting because a tsunami of scholarship, perhaps the most extensive in the vast ocean of New Testament studies, has confused and frightened many preachers; however, the critical attention lavished on parables attests to their hidden depths. We are fascinated by them. They are deep wells, and we have not come to the bottom yet.

Definition

The term *parabole* means literally to “throw alongside,” and that's what parables do. They make comparisons, aligning one thing with another to clarify the second thing. They portray scenes from everyday life—kneading, sowing, fishing, traveling—which morph into spiritual lessons. *Parabole* is closely linked to the Hebrew term *mashal* (“to be like”), the characteristic term for “proverb,” but Old Testament *mashalim* and New Testament *parabolai* are broad categories which do not have exact parallels in English literature. They include riddles, allegories, and sayings.

Here is a simple classification of parables, from shortest to longest:

- Figure of speech: “A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matt. 5:14b)
- Similitude: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.” (Luke 13:20-21)
- Parable proper: The Parable of the Tenants. (Matt. 21: 33-44)

This paper centers on the “parable proper,” a *parabole* with at least minimal narrative elements of plot, character, and setting. David Buttrick estimates that 33 parables fall into this category (p. 4), but parts of the paper apply to the shorter forms as well.

The old saw says that a parable is “an earthly story with heavenly meaning.” The cyclone of scholarship has simply unfolded and unfurled that definition. A parable is a “picture that becomes a mirror and then a window” (Wiersbe, p. 164). As we gaze at the scene in the parable, we see ourselves; then we see truth.

C. H. Dodd’s classic definition has stood the test of time: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (p. 5). With admirable succinctness, Dodd not only summarizes the content of the parables—analogy “drawn from common life”—he also hints at their rhetorical power—they “arrest the hearer” and “tease the mind into active thought.” Ryken’s definition echoes these themes: “Realistic stories, simple in construction and didactic in purpose, that convey religious truth and in which the details often have a significance beyond their literal narrative meaning” (p. 202).

Rhetorical Features

The communication dynamics parables engender are so complex that they can seem inscrutable, but we can get a handle on them by exploring three qualities: their realism—what some scholars call “verisimilitude”; their folktale qualities—they are simple narratives; and their nature as analogies—they compare one thing to another.

Realism

Jesus’ parables amble through everyday life in the ancient Near East depicting characters and actions seen in every town and village. We meet homemakers, widows, virgins, servants, tenants, fathers, and sons. We see them light lamps, sow seed, invest money, and invite to weddings. The stories are realistic. The stories sometimes exaggerate (mustard plants don’t *really* grow as large as trees), but there are no talking animals, dragons, or haunted forests. Parables are not fairy tales. They are concrete stories that use the secular world to communicate spiritual truths. For fascinating insight into the parables’ realism see the works of Kenneth Bailey who lived in the Mid-east for many years.

Because the parables plant their feet in the soil of the ancient Near East, it goes without saying that preachers must plow that soil. We must exegete Jesus’ stories to hear them the way his original hearers did. For example, modern Western interpretation tends to read the parable of the Good Shepherd (Luke 15) through an individualistic worldview, so we focus on the shepherd’s affection for the lost sheep. While this is a valid insight, plowing the soil of Middle Eastern culture reveals another insight. The shepherd throws a party not primarily to rejoice in the rescue of the little lost sheep, but to celebrate his own integrity. The shepherd says in essence, “I labored to carry this animal (weighing between 50 and 70 pounds). I walked far in the wilderness. I have fulfilled my calling! Celebrate this testimony to my strength, courage, and character! I haven’t lost a single sheep!” We Westerners have been socialized to view such boasting as the puffs of a blowhard. Not so in Jesus’ day where people took innocent joy in being responsible adults who exemplify their values (Bailey, 1992, pp. 61-92).

What is the sermonic payoff of such plowing? Theology. Jesus used this parable to reveal himself. Specifically, he used it to defend himself against the Pharisees who sneered at his “inclusive policy” of eating with sinners. He implies that his calling, his responsibility, is to shepherd the people of Israel. If a sheep strays, he seeks and saves it, though this costs him dearly. The incarnation hides in the wings of this parable as God comes to earth to re-gather His flock. The atonement casts its shadow across this “simple” story since re-gathering demands self-sacrifice. The magnificent but paradoxical glory of God, that glory displayed in humility, flashes around the corner of this realistic narrative. The Pharisees may criticize Jesus for consorting with sinners, but the Pharisees are dead wrong. He calls them to recognize his compassionate courage and celebrate with him. The kingdom is arriving! The shepherd is re-gathering his flock!

Take another example, also from Luke 15, of how concrete details function in parables (Bailey, 1992, pp. 97-107). We have the rare picture of a *woman* entrusted with the household “cash box.” Jesus compared himself to this woman, a move even more startling than comparing himself to a lowly shepherd as in the previous parable. Why did he do so? To teach the same theology. Just as the shepherd took responsibility to seek and save the lost, so does this woman. In fact, she takes *full* responsibility. The coin is not a perambulating sheep with a mind of its own. It is inanimate. She calls it “the coin which I lost.” In first-century Palestine, homes were dark with windows little more than slits high in the walls. The floors often had large cracks because they were paved with irregular stones, and into one of those cracks it seems the small silver coin fell, so the woman lights a lamp and sweeps the floor, devoting herself to the task, and she celebrates when the task is well done.

Parables teach theology; they also prompt us to respond to that theology. I see three rhetorical implications of parables’ realism. The first is **identification**. For example, by depicting himself as a woman and a lowly shepherd, Jesus blasted the conventions of his day, but his apprentices include women, not just men, and the lowly, not just the mighty. He identifies with them. He deliberately but indirectly honors them by representing himself as one of them.

The second rhetorical implication is **imagination**. Realism sparks our imaginations. Vivid and concrete stories transport us to the rugged wilderness and a dark home. The original hearers would have visualized the landscape and felt the cool floor. Stories prompt vicarious experience as they express truth concretely, not abstractly.

The third rhetorical implication is **indirection**. They take the mind off the thing they would put the mind on. On the literal level they depict secular, mundane life. Only a few mention the name of God; only one takes place in “church.” Realism prompts listeners to drop their defenses as when I engage you with this story: “I was reading the newspaper this morning and saw a story about some high-powered Wall Street guy who embezzled from his company. You know what that scoundrel did? He went to his boss, gave him a sob story, and . . .” Your imagination is prodded, your feelings are aroused, and you listen with shields lowered, but before you know it, you discover that you are standing on a landmine! Ask the Pharisees and the teacher who wanted to justify himself, not to mention King David, and they will tell you about landmines.

The mundane realism of parables functions to teach theology and prompt response. The second characteristic, narrative form, does the same.

Folk Stories

The parables discussed in this paper are a sub-genre of the larger genre of narrative. Their rhetorical functions are similar to the ones engendered by historical narrative just as the experience of attending a play, one type of narrative, is similar to the experience of reading a novel, another type of narrative. However, parables are a type of narrative, not “pure” narrative. One difference in the genres can be seen in their degrees of detail. “Pure” biblical narrative is laconic, but parables are even more laconic. This is true not only of biblical parables but of parables world wide. Hasidic tales, Sufi stories, and Zen anecdotes, as well as New Testament parables average 150 to 250 words (Kirkwood, p. 60). Parables are sketched with pencil, not painted in oil. They are best thought of as *folk stories*, reflecting their genesis in oral communication. Two qualities of folk stories, simple plots and simple characters, enhance Jesus’ didactic purposes.

The plots are somewhat formulaic, often constructed in three scenes, as with the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. The conflicts which drive the plots are simple: seeds struggle for survival, persistent widows pester judges, and stewards mishandle money. Only in the Prodigal Son, by far the longest parable, is there anything resembling a subplot. The plots are often built on archetypes, and as Amos Wilder observes, “Human nature has always responded to stories about quests and adventures, ups and downs, rags to riches, lost and found, reversals and surprises . . . , masters and servants, the wise and the foolish, rewards and penalties, success and failure” (1982, p. 92).

Besides the simplicity of the plots, consider the simplicity of the characters. They are “types” such as faithful and slothful stewards, and wise and foolish builders. Only one character, Lazarus, has a name. As the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* states, “Never has such immortality been thrust upon anonymity” (p. 623).

The simple plots and characters enhance Jesus’ didactic purpose in four ways. First, parables **disarm resistance**. Narrative form prompts listeners to listen, not resist. In order to follow a story to its end, you have to yield to the form of causally related events and characters: “person x went to town, and then person y followed, and that caused person x to . . .” If you argue that person x did not go to town, you will not get the story. Only at the end, when you realize that the story is also an analogy, do you see that *you* are person x and that you must mend your ways. Rhetorician William Kirkwood contrasts how listeners respond to narrative parables and abstract arguments (which he calls “theories”):

Whereas narratives portray sequences of unique events, theories . . . describe generalizable connections between non-unique events. While one can readily question the validity of each successive, general claim in the development of an argument or explanation and thus defend against its eventual conclusion, it is more difficult to dispute the highly particular events set forth in a parable. [And] if a teaching story makes no pretense at being factual (as many do not), it is still more difficult to deny; one can hardly “refute” an admittedly invented, non-necessary sequence of unique events (68).

While the conclusions Jesus intended could not be avoided, the development of the ideas leading to those conclusions invited reception.

As folk tales, parables also **polarize responses**. Like the good guys wearing white hats and the bad guys wearing black, parables prompt us to take sides. They leave no options. I am not implying that the parables are *simplistic*, just simple. Sometimes we are shocked to see who is under the hat. Priests, Levites, Pharisees, and rich men wear black hats in Jesus' world, while Samaritans and tax collectors wear white! The parable pushes us to take sides, sometimes against our inclination.

A third rhetorical function these simple folk stories engender is **memory**. Like proverbs, the parables were transmitted from person to person through oral communication. To be permanent they had to be simple and brief.

Fourth, the simple plots **focus attention** on Jesus' most important teaching which often materializes at the end of the parable with the last event or speech. This focusing technique is called "end stress": the last group invited is the one that enjoys the banquet, the last soil is most fertile, and the last steward is judged most harshly. At the end of the parable, when attention is most focused, Jesus passes moral judgment. Notice, however, that at the moment of highest listener involvement, he does not always *pronounce* that judgment. Instead, he prompts the listeners to judge themselves. Having aroused feelings and focused attention, he leaves them to ponder the implications of the truth. For example, part of the end stress of the Prodigal Son is joy. Jesus didn't shout to the Pharisees, "You should feel joy, not bitterness, when sinners repent," but he did cause their consciences to whisper that truth. They understood his point, and he left them with a choice about how to respond.

Although these folk stories are simple and realistic, sometimes they possess unrealistic or paradoxical elements such as the preposterous size of the mustard plant and the outlandish pay scale of the workers. The surrealism, what Dodd calls "strangeness," prompts us to look behind the details. It warns the reader, "Beware! Do not take this at face value." The quality of "strangeness" takes us to the final generic characteristic: analogy. As Wilder states, "There is the picture side of the parable, and there is the meaning or application side" (1971, p. 74).

Analogy

The term "analogy" simply and accurately captures the range of meaning of *parabole*. In the LXX, *parabole* is used of an *event* which has become emblematic (1 Sam. 10:12) just as we might say that such-and-such a failure was the leader's "Waterloo." In the LXX the term also describes *persons* who have become emblematic (Jer. 24:9; Job 17:6) as we do when we say he is a "Quisling" or "Machiavelli." The term is also attached to an *allegorical story* (Ezek. 7:1-10). In all of these cases, *parabole* is a figure of speech that compares one thing to another.

Individual parables can be located on a sliding scale between simple simile ("the kingdom of heaven is like . . .") and intentional allegory (the four soils stand for the heart conditions of four hearers). That sliding scale has baffled scholars because we have no parallel literary form.

Thomas Long summarizes the long history of the hermeneutics of parables under three terms: “code,” “vessel,” and “metaphor,” which he calls “object of art” (p. 95).

The first hermeneutical approach, “code,” is the earliest and most enduring. For nearly two thousand years interpreters saw parables not just as analogies but as allegories with intricate equivalencies hiding under the surface. Parables are a code that must be cracked. This instinct is not entirely misplaced because Jesus used deliberate allegories at least twice: Matthew 13:1-9 with the allegorical explanation in vv. 36-43; and Mark 12:1-11 where he compares God to the vineyard owner, the Pharisees to the wicked tenants, and himself to the owner’s son whom they killed.

However, having established that some parables are allegories, we must not assume that all are. *Parabole* means more than “allegory,” so we must not *allegorize*, assuming that every parable is a code to be cracked, imposing meaning the author never intended.

I give guidelines below to keep us from such excess, but when allegorical interpretation *is* warranted, what rhetorical effects attend it? It **confirms** what readers already know (Long, p. 97). No new information is imparted, but old truths materialize in the consciousness of the ones who crack the code. Allegory also **unifies** the hearers since they are insiders. They experience bonding and solidarity as does a group of friends with their inside jokes and distinctive vocabulary. Hearers say, “I get it.”

The next development in the history of interpretation saw parables as “vessels.” The person most responsible for this theory was the German scholar Adolph Jülicher whose massive work, *The Parables of Jesus* (1899), taught that parables make one point and one point only. That point is accessible, not hidden, because Jesus did not intend to obscure his ideas. A parable is a “vessel” that contains a theological concept. Parables are like sermon illustrations. Simile replaced allegory as the dominant interpretative framework. In other words, every parable could be paraphrased to say, “This truth is like” While Jülicher undoubtedly overstated the case, his theory was a needed corrective to the excesses of allegorization. Some parables are indeed vessels.

The rhetorical effects of simile are pedagogical. These parables **clarify, illustrate, and convince**. Perhaps this is why Aristotle recommends the use of parables to illustrate propositions (1393b). They move from one “field of experience” to another, as when a teacher tries to explain the color scarlet to a man born blind: “It is like the sound of a trumpet blast.” Parables move from the known (everyday life in the ancient Near East) to the unknown (the kingdom of God).

Vessel parables respond to questions which the hearers ask or which the speaker wants them to ask, such as, “How many will be saved?” The answer? Comparatively few. Many will be lost. The lost will be like a crowd standing outside knocking (Luke 13:22-30). When a hearer transfers the picture to the question, he or she learns something new. The hearer says, “I see!”

The current emphasis in the hermeneutics of parables is that they are “metaphors.” Like the previous schools of interpretation, there is much to commend this one.

Metaphor sparks intuitive perception. Metaphor demands **imagination** and **collaboration**. A metaphorical parable provokes listeners to seek meaning. To “get” a metaphor, you must recognize figurative language, wade in a swarm of interpretive options, and choose the one intended by the author. While this rhetorical function is similar to the functions of allegory and simile, metaphor is often a deeper experience. When metaphor “works,” the reader says, “Oh my!”

So how can we decide if a parable should be read as code, vessel, or metaphor? Most parables contain elements of all three. The key to interpreting parables is the same as interpreting any biblical literature for preaching—we should be guided by authorial intent. But how do you find authorial intent?

1. Carefully note the **literary context and form**.

- Sometimes the story’s *lead-in* clarifies its meaning as with the Good Samaritan. A religious man asked, “Who is my neighbor,” so Jesus’ intention was to define the term and prompt the man to act like a neighbor. The lead-in establishes a set of expectations in the listener/reader so that we anticipate the illustration of a concept. At the end of the parable, we say, “I see!” and as soon as we say that, we realize that we are standing on a landmine. Our next comment is, “Oh my! Am *I* a compassionate neighbor?” With uncanny economy Jesus teaches and challenges. This parable is part vessel and part metaphor, but it is not an allegory. The lead-in has nothing to do with the fall and redemption of humanity as in Augustine’s famous interpretation.
- Sometimes the *placement* of the parable in the Gospel suggests authorial intent. For example, Jesus tells the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:23-35) following Peter’s question, “How many times shall I forgive?” This parable also functions as a vessel and metaphor as it answers the question and prompts response.
- Sometimes parables use the obvious *language of comparison*: “the kingdom of heaven is like” We know we’re in the arena of simile with a vessel parable.
- Sometimes Jesus *summarizes* the parable’s truth in a maxim. These parables make one point such as, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Jülicher would be proud! Jesus closes the parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (Luke 18:10-14) with the proposition, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” This same parable starts with a lead-in, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable” Both Luke and Jesus are determined that we get the point!
- Remember the rule of “end stress.” The spotlight of authorial intention often falls here. Only at the end of the Good Samaritan do we learn what it means to be a good neighbor.

2. Carefully note the **cultural context**. A parable can only mean what it once meant. See the works of Kenneth Bailey to understand the culture of the Near East.

3. Related to the point above, interpret as the **original audience** would have. For example, the original audience of Mark 12:1-11 would have inferred Jesus' allusions to Isaiah with the vineyard, hedge, pit, and tower. This parable functions as an allegory, and when the hearers cracked the code, they looked for ways to arrest Jesus!
4. Carefully note the **rhetorical effect**. Does it confirm something already known? Does it teach something new? Does it prompt thought and imagination? We know what Jesus intended to do by experiencing what he does do. For instance, the plot of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) prompts us to ponder the economy of the kingdom. What drives it—"fairness" or grace?

Jesus spoke *in* parables, but we speak *on* his parables. Here are some ways to preach the genre.

Homiletical Suggestions

How we communicate, not just *what* we communicate, is crucial, not incidental, to our preaching, just as it was crucial to the preaching of Jesus, Nathan, and other parable-ists. But when we ponder *how* to preach parables, we discover considerable freedom, for this genre uses numerous devices and produces numerous effects. Some parables are simple; some are complex. Some confirm what we know; some startle us. Some make us feel like insiders; others alienate us. Nearly all of them challenge us. Because this genre cannot be reduced to a simple set of rules, select and tailor the suggestions below for each text and each preaching context. Put on the homiletical shoe only if it fits the textual and contextual foot.

1. Translate.

Since many parables speak with the accent of ancient Israel, we will often need to "translate" them for modern listeners. To mix my metaphors, the parables are rooted in the soil of Palestine, so we must "transplant" them to our culture. Ideally, we should not have to interpret a parable. We should simply "get it" like a joke, but "in a fallen world, separated by miles and centuries from Jesus' original milieu, we may not always 'get it,' so we need to be prepared *both* to explain *and* to contemporize the parables" (Blomberg, 2004, pp. 21-22).

For example, the original hearers must have been shocked to hear Jesus make a *tax collector* the exemplar in one of his stories with the Pharisee as the foil. Tax collectors were traitors. They collaborated with the enemy. Modern audiences need to feel the shock. Perhaps we could translate with a story of how the Dutch felt toward collaborators after WWII.

David Wells retells the Persistent Widow with a contemporary "translation":

You will be shocked by the story I am about to relate to you. Appalled, that is, if you have any kind of social conscience.

A poor black, living on Chicago's South Side, sought to have her apartment properly heated during the frigid winter months. Despite city law on the matter, her unscrupulous landlord refused. The woman was a widow, desperately poor, and ignorant of the legal system; but she

took the case to court on her own behalf. . . . It was her ill fortune, however, to appear repeatedly before the same judge who, as it turned out, was an atheist and a bigot. The only principle by which he abode was, as he put it, that “blacks should be kept in their place.” The possibilities of a favorable ruling were, therefore, bleak. They became even bleaker as she realized that she lacked . . . a satisfactory bribe . Nevertheless, she persisted.

At first, the judge did not so much as even look up from reading the novel on his lap before dismissing her. But then he began to notice her. Just another black, he thought, stupid enough to think she could get justice. Then her persistence made him self-conscious. This turned to guilt and anger. Finally, raging and embarrassed, he granted her petition and enforced the law. Here was a massive victory over “the system”—at least as it functioned in his corrupted courtroom. (Wells, p. 1465)

2. Don’t be afraid to make a “point.”

True, Jülicher overstated his case, but he had a case! Jesus told parables to communicate truth. They are fiction recruited to battle false ideas. “In a sense, the parable has the character of an argument; it invites the hearers to choose [an] alternative view of reality” (Bailey and Vander Broek, p. 110). Adapting to the needs of the listeners, Jesus often spelled out the point of the argument. We can too. I stress this in case you have been unduly influenced by the current trend in interpretation, namely that parables are works of art which cannot or should not be reduced to propositions. As with Jülicher, this too is an overstatement. Jesus used this genre to communicate ideas. Parables may be more than ideas, but they are not less. Do not be afraid to explain, summarize, and make “points” (see Blomberg, 1990). For example, you could state the main idea of your sermon in the conclusion just as Jesus concluded the parable of the Unmerciful Servant: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35).

3. Don’t be afraid to *not* make “a point.”

As Dodd says, a parable leaves “the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” I am not implying that our preaching should be aimless. It should still be controlled by a central truth; however, the method of conveying that truth can use induction and subtlety. Sometimes Jesus left his stories open-ended, and if we would preach like Jesus, there are times when we should do so. This is the genre’s brilliance, but most preachers have a hard time leaving things unsaid. I certainly do.

My point about not making a point is especially pointed when we preach to postmodern listeners since they value mystery, imagination, narrative, and silence. They recoil from pat answers and formulas. As actor Sean Penn stated, “When everything gets answered, it’s fake. The mystery is the truth” (in Bell, “Subversive Preaching”). As early as the mid-70s, theologian Sallie TeSelle argued this point:

For many of us the language of the Christian tradition is no longer authoritative Much of it has become tired clichés, one-dimensional, univocal language. When this happens, it means that theological reflection is faced with an enormous task—the task of embodying it

anew. This will not happen, I believe, through systematic theology, for systematic theology is second-level language, language which orders, arranges, explicates, makes precise the first-order revelatory, metaphorical language. [Renovation will take place through] poems, stories, even lives—which will image [truth] to us, in our total existential unity. (p. 23)

Open-ended preaching demands faith—faith in the sovereign Spirit to apply the truth, and faith in the capability of the listeners to ponder the truth.

Tolstoy knew the power of leaving things unsaid, even when he wanted to communicate something vital. In “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” Tolstoy tells a story to warn about the sorrows of greed. A peasant named Pahom who covets land:

“If only I had plenty of land, I shouldn’t fear the Devil himself.” But the Devil had been sitting behind the stove, and had heard all that was said. The Tempter takes up the challenge and gives Pahom land. The one-time peasant becomes a wealthy landlord. He breaks tenants, gobbling their land when they cannot make their payments. His farms and pastures spread wide. He moves again and again, always searching for greener grass, finally venturing to the outskirts of the kingdom where the people are “as simple as sheep” and the land “can be got for almost nothing.” The people reciprocate Pahom’s “generous” gifts by allowing him to take as much land as he is able to walk upon in one day. The only condition is that he must return to the starting spot by sundown. At dawn Pahom climbs a hill to survey the vista. His “eyes glistened: it was all virgin soil, as flat as the palm of your hand, as black as the seed of a poppy, and in the hollows different kinds of grasses grew breast high.” He chooses his route, and begins walking. Using a spade, Pahom occasionally digs turf to mark the boundaries of his new realm. He walks all morning, eating and drinking on the march. He walks all afternoon, growing wearing, and discarding all encumbrances. As the sun begins to set, he realizes that he has walked too far and must now hurry to the hill where he started: “It was very hard walking, but he went quicker and quicker. He pressed on, but was still far from the place. He began running,” and the fear makes him more breathless. “His breast was working like a blacksmith’s bellows, his heart was beating like a hammer, and his legs were giving way.” In despair Pahom sees the sun dip below the horizon just as he reaches the foot of the hill, but then he hears the tribesmen shout to him from the top of the hill because the sun has not yet set up there. In a final burst of determination, Pahom crests the hill, claims his prize, and falls forward. The Chief exclaims, “Ahh, that’s a fine fellow! He has gained much land!” But Pahom is dead, blood flowing from his mouth. “His servant picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for Pahom to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.”

4. Prompt meditation with imagination.

If the text prompts meditation by using imagination, biblical preachers should try to do the same. Assuming that we cannot improve on Jesus’ methods of preaching and teaching, we too will prompt our listeners to ponder. David Larsen calls this pondering “inner ignition” which he illustrates with Henri Nouwen’s personal story of viewing Rembrandt’s painting, “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” Nouwen first saw the painting as a poster, and he was so enthralled that he

journeyed to St. Petersburg to see the original. He visited the painting again and again “with no small difficulty,” meditating ever deeper. From that meditation came Nouwen’s profound book on the subject of fathers, sons, and brothers (in Larsen, p. 152).

5. If the parable gives you a shock, pass it on.

Not only do parables prompt meditation; they also tend to explode. One of Jesus’ favorite areas for planting landmines was the garden of materialism. As Blomberg observes, “It is impossible to expound any significant cross section of Jesus’ teaching in parables without having to come to grips repeatedly with money matters—Christian stewardship, to be more precise” (2004, p. 217). The revolutionary teaching of these parables will shake up nearly any North American congregation, not to mention the pastors of those congregations. If preaching is “truth through personality,” you and I will need to do some frank soul searching before we can faithfully re-communicate Jesus’ sobering teaching that “no one can serve two masters” (Luke 16:13, following the parable of the Shrewd Manager).

Other areas strewn with landmines are God’s fearsome justice—the day of judgment is coming; God’s magnificent grace—he forgives freely and loves lavishly; and God’s rigorous demands—he expects his followers to follow. Through all and in all is the theme of the kingdom, the “already but not yet” reign of God. Ultimately, “All the parables of Jesus are kingdom parables” (Buttrick, p. 26), the rule of God in our hearts and in our society.

6. Tell narratives “narratively.”

If the Lord wisely chose to shock, confirm, perplex, and enlighten the crowds with stories, we will do well to follow in his steps. One way to preach parables narratively is by creating a modern equivalent as Wells does with the Persistent Widow. Another way is to compose an original parable, as Sid Buzzell does in a sermon called “The Story of Anna McLeash” (Robinson and Robinson, pp. 99-105). Although this sermon expounds a proverb, “Guard your heart,” it shows what can be done to create a realistic, fictional narrative:

“Anna” is a millionaire who lives on a vast estate in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. With justifiable suspicion, she wisely guards her wealth, but then she falls in love with a fellow named Tony who turns out to be a crook. Claiming to invest Anna’s wealth as her agent, he bilks the heiress of all her money. He charms her and burns her. At the end of the story we discover through the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that “Anna McLeash, daughter of the wealthy and deceased Seamus McLeash, was found dead in the 1700 block of Arch Street, a homeless indigent.”

A third way to preach narratively is by following the parable verse-by-verse in a running commentary. If you do not turn your exegesis into a cadaver, this method can reproduce many of the rhetorical effects the original audience experienced. The key is to react to the story as it unfolds, prompting the congregation to react as well. Much of that reaction will be communicated non-verbally with your voice and face, but we also will use explanation, analogy, and other support material. You could say:

“Jesus then compares himself to a woman. Yes, you heard me: a woman! Or *did* you hear me? Maybe the words simply glided over your ears, but they certainly would *not* have glided over the ears of the Pharisees. The words would have clanged in their ears. A woman? How degrading! How would you like your mighty messiah to picture himself as an illegal alien who picks fruit, a telemarketer who can hardly mumble his script, a cocktail waitress chewing gum and shimmying from table to table, or as an aged, muttering greeter at Wall Mart? Some messiah.”

With the parable of the of the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9), your sermon could develop with your reactions (Buttrick, p. 19):

- “The tree is dead” . . . *Acknowledge* the fact.
- “Cut it down” . . . *Agree* with the logic.
- The gardener requests, “One more year” . . . *Absurd!*
- Application: God gives time for repentance . . . *Wonder* at this absurd, merciful patience.

By carefully studying the rhetorical effects parables engender, preachers gain ideas on how to reproduce those effects in their own sermons. By exegeting “how” Jesus communicated as well as “what” he communicated, we can be faithful expository preachers.

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