**Parables and Wisdom**

**What are parables?**

“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” (C.H. Dodd).

Parables are meant to provoke listeners to lean in and wonder, to ask questions about ourselves, how we have come to see the world, and how life in the kingdom of God might be different. They spark our imaginations to see ourselves, others, God, and the world through new lenses.

Some parables are short sayings, and others are longer stories. Parables also function differently in each of the Gospels. In Matthew and Luke, they’re largely depictions of what life is like in the kingdom of God (“The kingdom of God is like…”), and they are sort of illustrations of what Jesus is teaching about in those Gospels.

In Mark’s Gospel, parables function differently in that they largely relate to what’s happening in the Gospel of Mark itself. They are guides to what you should be seeing in Mark.

An example:

In Mark 8:22-26, Jesus heals a blind man in two stages. This is a performed parable—or, parabolic action. The first time Jesus puts his hands on the man, he sees a bit, but his vision is distorted. Jesus touches him again, and he comes to see clearly. By itself, this episode is confusing.

But it sheds light on and points to what is happening right afterward, in 8:27-33. Jesus asks his disciples who he is, and Peter identifies him as the Christ. When Jesus begins to speak about his upcoming suffering, Peter rebukes him, and Jesus tells him to get back behind him.

The point here is that the performed parable sheds light on what is happening with Peter and the disciples. They are beginning to see something, but their vision is distorted and stands in need of being clarified. They have an idea that Jesus is the Messiah, but their conception of what that looks like must be transformed.

**How are parables related to wisdom?**

Wisdom is much more than knowledge or data. It involves deep understanding and an overall approach to life with God as king. Wise people seek ongoing and life-long transformation by renewing their imaginations and cultivating the behaviors, speech patterns, habits, postures toward self and others that embody life within the kingdom of God.

That’s the space within which parables operate—the imagination. Parables invite us to cultivate deep wisdom as we imagine ourselves ever-deeper into kingdom of God patterns of life.

**Mark 4:1-20**

**The parable (4:1-9):**

1 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. 2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” 9 Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

**The purpose of the parable(s) (4:10-12):**

10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11 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 12 so that, “‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”

Why does Jesus say that he is speaking in parables in order to *prevent* understanding?

There’s a dynamic that unfolds in the subsequent section of Mark, running through 8:14-21, that turns everything on its head.

“Outsider” characters consistently “see” and “hear” Jesus, manifesting that they are the ones to whom the kingdom of God has been given. “Insider” characters—the disciples—consistently fail to understand or perceive what Jesus is saying, and they grow in confusion. That raises the question of is in and who is out, and our assumptions about insiders and outsiders, and everything we assume about the kingdom of God is challenged.

Jesus asks in the episode that brackets 4:1-8:21, “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?”

**The parable, and Jesus’ explanation, point ahead to the entire rest of Mark’s Gospel. It’s a guide to what readers are going to encounter as they proceed through the narrative and meet various characters.**

**The explanation of the parable (4:13-20):**

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word. 15 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. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 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. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 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. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

The farmer sowing the seed depicts Jesus as he travels from Galilee to Jerusalem, proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom and teaching about his mission as the Christ. He is a cross-directed and cross-shaped Messiah, who gives himself for others, and ultimately submits to torture and death in the hope that God will raise him from the dead.

The **first soil** recalls the seed that lands on the path. It stays on the surface of the ground and birds eat it up.

What should we be thinking of when we read, “As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.”

Jesus’ words to Peter in Mark 8:33. Peter does indeed want Jesus to be the Christ, but he wants a powerful figure who will go to the nation’s capital and fight for the downtrodden Jewish people. He wants a military leader who will drive out the Romans.

The second soil point to hearers of the word who immediately grow excited, but have no deep and firm roots in the soil. “When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”

This points to the conduct of the disciples in chapters 14-15, as Jesus is arrested, on trial, tortured, and put to death.

Jesus predicts this in 14:27—“You will all fall away.”

When Jesus says, “because of the word,” he is referring to the message (and the reality) about a cross-shaped Messiah, one who serves, suffers, and dies.

When Jesus is arrested, his disciples all flee, and when he dies, the disciples are completely gone.

The **third soil** refers to characters who respond to the word, but other things enter in—"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.”

The disciples behave in this way throughout Mark.

“The worries of this age” 🡪 The disciples worrying about the apparently meager resources (8:4)

“The deceitfulness of wealth” 🡪 Judas betraying Jesus for silver (14:10-11)

“The desires for other things” 🡪 The disciples arguing about who of them is the greatest (9:34); James and John requesting positions of prestige (10:35-45)

The **fourth soil** refers to those characters throughout Mark who respond to Jesus. Routinely, they “see” and “hear” Jesus, and they reveal that they have “perception” and “understanding.” That is, they have wisdom and insight, and they respond to Jesus appropriately. What is surprising is that they are “outsider” characters.

* The demon-possessed man (5:1-20)
* The woman with the bleeding issue (5:24-34)
* Jairus and his daughter (5:21-43) (Jairus is not an outsider so much, but his dead daughter represents uncleanness, so when Jesus touches her he is breaking a cultural boundary)
* The Syrian-Phoenician woman (7:24-30)
* The woman who broke the jar of nard (14:1-11)

**Cultivating wisdom:**

The disciples saw Jesus through their cultural hopes and fears, their desires for Jesus to conquer their enemies. Their imagination had been distorted through mindsets that had been passed down through the generations. In what ways do we see Jesus through our cultural hopes and fears, our desires for Jesus to be the kind of Messiah we want him to be?

The disciples longed for prestige, social honor, and positions of power and privilege. In what ways do these longings within us affect how we inhabit this church community. Do we want to appear that we have it all together so that others don’t see our struggles? Do we seek service and ministry opportunities to receive praise and approval from others?

How have the worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things crept into Redemption’s imagination so that the word is being choked? What lies does money tell us—about what we can accomplish if we had more of it? About why we don’t have enough of it? About why we can accomplish so much for God because we have a lot of it? What desires for other things are at work in Redemption’s imagination so that we’re being distracted from becoming a cross-shaped community, and opening our eyes to who Jesus really is?

Our culture shapes us to see certain people—or kinds of people—as obvious “insiders” to the kingdom, and other people as obvious “outsiders” to the kingdom. The Gospel of Mark wants to turn that completely upside-down. How does gender, race/ethnicity, and social class (among other realities) affect our imagination regarding who is “in” and who is “outside” the kingdom? How can we do the work to transform our conceptions of ourselves and others with regard to the kingdom?