

Lessons from the Field

Mark 4:10-20

When you think of a classic, smooth-talking, romancing lady's man, who first comes to your mind? Show of hands – How many thought of German physicist, Albert Einstein? The following is from an actual note that he wrote to Mileva Maric, the little gal he would one day marry:

“If only you were with me! We understand so well each other's souls, and also drinking coffee and eating sausages, *etc.*”

I never knew Big Al' was such silver-tongued devil. Perhaps, that's why we should leave poetry, romantic songs and love sonnets to the experts, But, when you have an agenda to pursue, is there anything better than the good old straightforward approach? Well ... sometimes there has to be.

Jesus had tried the straightforward approach for announcing that He was *Messiah*, newly arrived to set up His kingdom. Once, when teaching in a synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth, He read a passage from Isaiah that described the *Messiah*. When He finished, He sat down and said, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). That did not go well. His hometown crowd would have thrown Him off a cliff had they gotten their hands on Him.

This direct approach was more successful in other towns throughout Galilee. There was a clamoring among the multitudes that Jesus might indeed be the One for Whom everyone had been waiting, especially, given the miracles He performed. But, taking it upon Himself to “clarify” traditional interpretations of the Law and, especially, to declare people's sins “forgiven” started to infuriate those who opposed Him. So, Jesus began speaking in parables.

One day, a huge crowd appeared to hear Jesus teach. His disciples took Him in a boat out into the lake a short distance. The grassy slopes descending down toward the lake created a natural amphitheater. Matthew, Mark and Luke each describe this occasion of teaching. When we put the three accounts together, we know that Jesus taught at least ten different parables on this day. Literally, a parable is something set beside something else. Jesus would choose some truth about His kingdom and set some story, often from everyday life, alongside that truth to illustrate it.

Parables were designed to be heard, which means their lessons are usually simple and few. Those in the crowd that day did not have the luxury of dissecting a manuscript of Jesus' sermon or poring over commentaries to get to the bottom of what He said. Sometimes, we try to get too much mileage out of parables. I want to zero in on and apply what those who first heard one particular story about the kingdom would have heard, that is, if they were tuned-in to hear Him at all, for many were not tuned in. In fact, some of His dearest friends and disciples were not tuned in.

I. A Parable about a Secret (10-12)

¹⁰When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.
¹¹He 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 ¹²so that,

“ ~ they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” ”

A. Jesus' Own Were Dumbfounded at the Debriefing Session

Jesus' disciples asked Him about these parables when they were alone with Him. This group included the Twelve Apostles and an undisclosed number of others. I hope my imagination is not running wild, but I can almost picture these disciples present while Jesus is teaching, attending to the things they thought they were supposed to be attending to – keeping Jesus from being mobbed as He got in and out of the boat, keeping little children from crawling all over Him, day-dreaming about their own roles in Jesus' kingdom, standing there looking all spiritual and enlightened. But then, as they begin to zero in on His words and hear these strange little stories, bewildered and almost desperate glances are exchanged. Finally, at the end of the day, they are compelled to ask, "Jesus, Lord, what in the world were you talking about out there?"

Given the temperament of the disciples, especially the Twelve that is disclosed throughout the gospels, they may have been expecting to hear Jesus say something more along this line:

"I am Jesus, your *Messiah*, here to set up the kingdom of God. Meet My guys, My posse. Meet Peter, My chief of staff, Andrew, our P.R. man, James and John, My chief counsel and deputy counsel, Judas, our Secretary of the Treasury, Matthew, our parliamentarian. Philip, Nathaneal, Thaddaeus and Thomas, our strategic planners and Simon the Zealot, head of security. Oh, and that's James the younger ... our intern."

Whatever they expected Jesus to say, what they heard were parables and they did not understand.

B. Why *DID* Jesus Speak in Riddles?

One might think that Jesus used parables to communicate more clearly. Preachers are always looking to do that. I ran across a cartoon that depicted one preacher on his knees praying: "And, Father, I ask Thee now for a good Bible text to accompany this great joke I found." Of course, if we read the text, we find that Jesus used parables not to make His teaching "pop," but to veil it.

Because Jesus spoke in parables, the word wields a certain status with us, but "riddle" is a valid translation of the term, and Jesus' words seemed more like riddles than straight talk to these disciples. To answer them, Jesus says something that sounds like He wants to hide His meaning from certain people He calls "those on the outside." Jesus used parables: "so that ..."

... " ~ they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" ~ Mark 4:12

Jesus quoted a prophecy from Isaiah which foretold that some would see and hear Jesus, but never "get Him." When Jesus spoke in unveiled terms, His enemies (the Pharisees, scribes and priests) would try to build a case against Him, but it was not time yet for a final show-down. It is these enemies that He calls "those on the outside." Jesus spoke as though their disbelief was inevitable. In a sense it was, but not because they had no choice, but, rather, because they had no desire to hear any truth that got in the way of their own self-assessments of their own religiosity.

C. What *IS* the Secret of God's Kingdom?

Jesus said to these disciples: "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you." "Secret" is the same Greek word Paul often used that is translated "mystery." Christians in Rome who would read Mark's gospel knew this term. Among the pagans, a mystery was a religious truth that had been hidden for a time, but was now made known to certain initiates. It was not necessarily a profound truth, just one that had been veiled for ages before it was made known.

What was this "secret" or "mystery" that the disciples already knew even though they didn't grasp Jesus' parable? It was not simply the things He taught. The secret was Jesus Himself. In a world filled many expectations for God's *Messiah*, Jesus defied the expectations, but He was still *Messiah*. This is why Peter's confession, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29) remains significant to our very day. Jesus is the King of God's kingdom. This truth is central to everything Christian.

Think about how the Apostle Paul would use this word "secret" or "mystery." What is the basis for people of diverse backgrounds and interests to actually come together in unity? It is:

... the mystery of Christ ... that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. – Ephesians 3:4-6

What can satisfy the seemingly instinctive human yearning for hope in the face of death?

²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.
²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. – Colossians 1:26, 27

Everything the Jewish nation ever hoped for was fulfilled in Jesus. Every truly noble yearning that men at large have ever dreamed about is satisfied in Jesus. The "secret of the kingdom of God" is not a tricky thing. The secret to life, hope, peace, joy and truth has been made known. God is revealed in Jesus. All that remains intangible is this: Who will believe the secret of the kingdom?

II. A Parable about a Sower (13, 14)

¹³Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴The farmer sows the word . . .

A. Ultimately, Jesus Is the Sower

Some writers speculate that Jesus actually looked up from His boat and saw a farmer sowing. Typically, sowing was done in a broadcast fashion so that seed landed everywhere; fertile soil as well as ground not suited to producing fruitful crops. This was the most efficient way to sow and it is an apt picture of how Jesus stepped into His world and sowed the truth about Who He was.

Jesus spoke to multitudes. Some became real disciples. Most did not. Jesus spoke to sinners. These encounters produced His highest rate of success in drawing disciples, because those most acutely aware of personal sinfulness found Jesus the most attractive. This is also why He held so little appeal among the religious elite. His teachings undermined what they believed about their own righteousness. Religious folk tended to despise Him, but there were exceptions. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, and Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, became followers of Jesus.

Through the ages, countless people have embraced the work of Jesus. Some have given their lives to proclaiming the Gospel. Others have faithfully sowed the seed of the truth of Jesus in the workplace, the home and in the daily round of life. However, in the truest sense, all of these have merely been earthen vessels through which Jesus has continued His work, for He is uniquely the One Who came from God "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

B. Still, the Parable Encourages All of Jesus' Under-sowers

When Jesus explained this parable to His disciples, the lesson that would benefit them most was that there would be a harvest. There would be times when it would seem that all the sacrifice, labor and years spent in Jesus' service would prove to be for nothing. Still, they must remain faithful. They must continue preaching the kingdom. The spiritual fruit of their labors might be quite conspicuous at times. In the early days of the church in Jerusalem, thousands came to Christ. But, there may be other times when they might doubt that all the effort and energy was worth it. They would face persecution. They would face poverty. Their own doubts, fears and sins would rise up and torment them. Jesus called them to endure, for a harvest was certain.

That same word of encouragement still resonates from this parable today. Sow the Word. Trust the power of the Word. There will be a harvest. We still tend to trust ourselves more than we trust the power of the Gospel of Christ. We are still tempted to either abandon the labor or, at least, modify it with a message that people don't find so demanding? God's Word bears fruit. The specific yield is not predictable. It differs from circumstance to circumstance. But, even when your labors don't seem to be producing anything, know that they are. That which endures for all of eternity may or may not be recognizable in this lifetime. There will be a harvest. Don't just believe your eyes. Believe God's promise. Believe the power of God's Word.

III. A Parable about Soil (15-20)

... ¹⁵Some 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. ¹⁶Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop - thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

A. The Lessons of the Soil Explained

Ancient paths were rights-of-way through the fields. Moses allowed a pilgrim to pluck and consume any grain he could reach from these paths. Obviously, traffic rendered these paths harder and harder over time. It was impossible for some seed not to land on these paths, but it could never penetrate them. It was only a matter of time before Satan, like a bird, snatched the seed away. Jesus was talking about people who hear the truth about Jesus but are indifferent to it. There is no sense of personal need, so there is no real point of entry for the Word into their lives.

The rocky place was not soil infested with rocks, but a shallow layer of soil that covered vast limestone stratum. A plant might appear, but it could never take root. Such faith fails in times of trouble because it has no depth from which to draw the resources required to stand.

A plant growing in weed-infested soil shows more promise. It gets taller. It even appears strong until the weeds appear. These weeds represent the things that distract faith, both positive and negative. When worrisome things enter the picture, there always seems to be an instinct in us that wants to rely on our own resources rather than on Christ. For some, wealth gives a false sense of security. Whenever we trust ourselves or our money more than we trust God, we may appear successful to the world, but the unique fruit that is promised to a Christian never comes to pass.

And, of course, finally, there is soil that receives the seed of the Word of Christ and flourishes.

B. The Lessons of the Soil Applied

Away from the crowds, where Jesus explained His parable to His disciples, the effect was to encourage them. “Know that no matter how much bad soil you encounter, there is good soil out there. No matter how discouraging your labor may seem, take joy in knowing that you are doing some real good.” But, what were they to make of the explanation of the assorted types of soil? After all, they themselves *WERE* good soil. It wasn’t a warning to them. Was it, then, just a matter-of-fact disclosure that some people would believe their message and some would not?

Remember, Jesus was explaining to His disciples a parable that He had already told to a crowd. There was another audience, and just because His disciples didn’t understand it on the first try does not mean that no one in the crowd understood it. This is not a fatalistic message that says to the hearer, “You’re either this kind of soil or you’re that kind of soil, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” I believe that this was an invitation for that ancient audience, just as it is an invitation for this morning’s audience, to exercise a choice about what kind of soil we will be.

Are you going to be a pathway? Will you walk away acknowledging that “Jesus is the Christ” was the lesson at church today, but not allow that reality to penetrate any deeper than your mind?

Are you going to be rocky soil, or will you count the cost of getting rooted? Will you commit yourself to developing spiritual resources and reserves, so that at the first sign of resistance from a world system that hates Jesus, your faith will not be immediately scorched and wither away?

Are you going to fall in love with Jesus in a covenant relationship and stay put? Or, will comfort, recreation, leisure, money and the other sundry enticements of the world cause you to forsake your first love as it has so many who have gone before you? Will you resolve to trust Jesus and keep trusting Him? Or, will you allow the little things that agitate you, the little things that distress you and the little things about your brother or sister that irritate you to become big things in your life that loom larger than God’s grace and the goal of who you can be in Jesus?

Or, will you pursue what it means, by the power that Christ provides, to love God with all of your heart, all of your mind and all of your strength. That life of Christ in you is the key to fruit. When Jesus speaks of “thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown,” I understand that to mean that while God’s grace and sovereignty will determine what the yield will look like in this or that circumstance, there *WILL* be a yield and it *WILL* be worth the effort and the wait. The fruit of the abundant life Christ promises to His people is not always measured in the visible results of our efforts, but more often in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control – the very things that the distractions of this world so often steal from us.