

There are over 36 different parables in the New Testament, and one third of Jesus' teachings are told in story format. The themes of these stories range from loss and redemption, to forgiveness, to the end times. There are parables of grace, parables of judgment, and parables of the kingdom

Some stories use simple everyday things to connect people with a message: like the stories last week of losing something of value, and the great joy upon finding it. Some parables swirl around metaphor: comparing the kingdom to a mustard seed, or leaven in baking bread. Some are meant to teach us how to treat each other and how NOT to treat each other as in the story of the Good Samaritan.

Over the centuries the church has sometimes approached these parables as allegory; That's one way to read them: to pick them apart piece by piece assigning parts to different people and assigning meaning to every action or prop: this character must be God, and clearly here's the bad guy and here's the good guy, who of course, represents ME. In order to read parables like that, we put on our glasses for a closer look to see details of the story, and squeeze every ounce of wisdom from those details.

But not all parables are meant to be read like this. In fact a few parables should probably be approached by taking our reading glasses **off**, allowing the story to be a little fuzzy, and look at a big picture -- without the details, without assigning parts or inserting ourselves into the story. Today's parable is one we might learn from by NOT looking so closely.

This story is *not* a parable of the kingdom. It's *not* a parable of judgment. This is a parable of **crisis and opportunity** and the question before the main character in the story (when he loses his job) is: **Now** what I am supposed to do?

Some parables are for anyone who happens to be listening. Others are directed at the religious leaders. This time Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He's still on his way to Jerusalem and preparing them for the difficult times ahead. He tells how a man lost his job because he was dishonest, and how he decided to trick his boss out of money *now*, so that *later* he'd have some people who owed him favors.

I'll bet the disciples thought they knew what's going to happen next. "Oh man, is he going to get it when the boss finds out!" Jesus pulls a fast one of them: he tells them the master is actually impressed by this dishonest man's shrewdness. They didn't see that one coming at all.

Everyone is impressed by how hard this man worked to make something happen in the future. He cared **so much** about his future that he finagled his way into relationships that would serve him well later. Forget for a moment about whether he was dishonest or unethical. I don't think That's the point of the story. The point of the story is

that the he acted shrewdly regarding what he cared most about: himself. Even if iwhat he cared most about was himself.

Parables are intended to spark questions about our own lives and our relationship with God and God's kingdom: Here are some questions which come to my mind:

What would happen if we as God's people cared as much about our relationship with God as greedy people care about money? what would happen if we worked as hard to bring good news to a broken world as we do to train for a 5K or lose 30 pounds or make a decent living? Taking it a step further, what good might come about it if we DON'T rely only on ourselves and our own shrewdness to figure out what we are to do next? What if we were to listen to what God wants us to do? And then ask him to help us figure out how to make that happen?

It seems at first that Jesus found something admirable in a crook. Another question the story sparked in me: if the master who was being fleeced by his dishonest steward could find something commendable in this man; if Jesus could find a message in a flawed character such as this steward, maybe, just maybe God can find something in me that God can use to serve his kingdom. And maybe I need to use every resource available to me to on building relationships which point others to God. My flaws hold ME back, but they don't present a problem to God. God will work with imperfect people. God DOES work with imperfect people. It's our lack of vision, love of comfort, our resistance to asking and receiving direction from God that is the problem. Thinking we know our way, and the way God would have us go without even consulting God will surely get us lost.

Yes, God has given us skills and gifts and brains to think our way through this life. But we are reminded in a familiar passage in Isaiah that God, says to us "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways."¹ We need to be open to what God is saying to us, so that we may cooperate with what He is doing and what he would have us do; which means we need to be in relationship with him. We must always test our thinking and align it with God's thinking or we may lose our way.

How can we hear what God is saying to us? God has given us many ways to hear him. First, we have scripture – the teachings and examples and stories through which God outlines the direction he has laid out. He brings us together in community, to discern and pray together, that together we might more clearly understand his will and his way forward. And he has promised to hear us when we pray for guidance which may come in the form of a conversation with someone, a sudden brilliant idea, a dream.

Immersing ourselves in scripture, prayer, discernment: s God's faithful friends, these belong in our lives. These are tools to align ourselves with God's mission, and not simply create our own or go down our own familiar paths.

¹ Isaiah 55:8

So how are you doing on that assignment? Consider how God is speaking to you through scripture, prayer, and your everyday experiences. How are we as a congregation doing on that assignment?

Our continuing engagement with the community is a response to God's mission here in Davis County. This week we hosted our 106th community dinner in which all are welcome and all are fed. These dinners have been a blessing in this community and a blessing to all who have participated. Our ever-growing – (pun intended) community garden is an invitation to cooperate with God's creative endeavors as well as to strengthen relationships with the neighborhood. Our Solar panels witness to this neighborhood that we are good stewards of God's gift of sunshine. Our support of an Elementary school to support the staff and children is another way in which we can be proof of God's love. The Altar Guild lovingly prepared this space for worship and our music director has offered beautiful music to help lift our joyful voices in praise.

Our world is hungry for God and when, as the Body of Christ, we listen to what God is calling us to do, and obey that call to meet people at their places of hunger, we will find opportunities which build God's kingdom. We find ourselves as the Body of Christ living out a parable of crisis and opportunity: What are we supposed to do? Always we ask: what are we to do now?

We ask that the Spirit would open our hearts and open our ears to hear God's voice. And then expect God to speak in any number of ways. Pay attention, and God will make himself and his purpose known to us. We can count on that. And, the third thing? when we hear God asking us if we're ready to align ourselves with his thoughts and walk in his ways rather than our own, I pray that we are willing to say yes.