“Good Dirt”

Mark 4:1-34

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January 17, 2016

Last week after worship, the Narrative Conversation group met to discuss the text for today.

I told them I would just pick a portion of the selected reading for today.

As I did last week with another long passage.

But the more I sat with it, the more I realized the value in hearing each of these stories.

So, we’ll stick with all 34 verses of the selection.

Hearing a few different parables, plus an explanation of one of them.

In doing so, we’ll take a look at parables from a broader perspective.

Rather than just hash out one of them.

So, let us continue to listen for the Word of God, from Mark chapter 4, starting at verse 1…

As I sat with this text this week, debating over which parable to focus in on,

I couldn’t help but go back to my notes from Seminary.

Our New Testament professor spent a lot of time on parables.

They may seem like simple stories, but if you look deeper, you’ll find they are actually quite complex.

Amy-Jill Levine, New Testament professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, uses the metaphor of Rocky and Bullwinkle.[[1]](#footnote-1)

That old cartoon from the 1960s.

She says, it’s possible to watch that cartoon and just be entertained by it.

Watching a funny show about a moose and a squirrel.

Seems pretty simple.

But Levine talks about the awareness she gained later in life when she learned about the hidden message of the show.

That it was actually a satire.

As an adult, she put the pieces together.

She realized it wasn’t mere coincidence that the bad guys had Russian-sounding names like Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale.

She realized the whole show was a social commentary on the Cold War.

When she was child, all of this was lost on her.

She didn’t have the knowledge and experience to understand all of these hidden meanings in what seemed like a very simple cartoon.

This is a lot like how parables work.

On the surface, they seem like nice stories.

They might come across as fables, stories that offer a moral on how to live.

This is a fine way to read the parables.

It works quite well in Sunday Schools when we teach our children what it means follow Christ.

But there is so much more to these parables, than a surface level morality tale.

There’s a lot going on beneath the surface, if context is taken into consideration.

There’s something to be said for understanding what was going on at the time Jesus told these parables.

To do so, we have to do some digging.

Consult a scholar or two.

When I was in high school, my English teacher actually encouraged us to read the Cliff’s notes for the books we were assigned.

Of course, she wanted us to read the original texts that were assigned.

But she said to keep the Cliff’s notes on hand as we read.

That way we could learn about the context in which the book was written.

We could read up on the culture and politics that the book addresses.

Animal Farm might seem like a cute story about animals, until you realize the connection to Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union.

Like Rocky and Bullwinkle, it has an allegorical thread running through it.

But without this insider knowledge, one would miss the point of the story all together.

Context is important.

Taking a look at the context of the Middle Eastern world in the first century, these parables suddenly make a bit more sense.

If we put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples.

Those 12 men who were closest to Jesus.

We’d be baffled by these parables.

They wouldn’t make any sense as logical tales.

There is always some surprising factor to them.

Like with the parable of the sower.

The disciples would have been baffled at a farmer wasting seeds on rocky soil.

What farmer would do such a thing? They’d ask.

Shouldn’t he know better?

Or with the parable of the mustard seed.

A mustard seed does not grow into the largest of all shrubs.

Not even close!

The disciples would have looked at Jesus like he was crazy!

Why would he tell these nonsensical tales to them?

Was he confused?

Or was he being very smart?

What Jesus does through these parables is very similar to what the creators of Rocky and Bullwinkle did back in the 60s.

Using a very simple, lighthearted means of conveying a much bigger message.

Jesus’ parables are actually subversive messages that are intentionally cryptic.

When the disciples ask him for clarification, he tells them they’ve been given a secret.

That those outside their circle aren’t privy.

It’s like Jesus is dishing good dirt.

Some juicy gossip.

All about the Kingdom of God.

He speaks in these cryptic tales to let them know what the Kingdom of God is like.

That it defies what the world deems valuable.

That is stands in opposition of what those in power wanted.

And so, there were those who were allowed to know it and those who weren’t.

He quotes Isaiah chapter 6, where God is giving Isaiah instructions on what to tell the people.

God says “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.”

Jesus quotes the Old Testament to emphasize his point that the message he tells must be kept secret.

For the time being, at the beginning of his ministry, it had to remain within that small group of people following him around.

This isn’t the only time in Mark when we see Jesus tell the disciples to keep a secret.

It’s a theme that runs throughout the book.

If the meaning of these parables got out, it would be trouble.

The Roman Empire would have seen Jesus as a threat to their power.

All of his teachings went against what they proclaimed to be true.

What he was saying would turn the world on its head.

Had this message gotten out too early, Jesus’ life would have been threatened.

He wouldn’t have had the chance to minister for as long as he did.

They would have crucified him as soon as they got the chance.

This is why the stories had to be cryptic.

This is why he had to make them confusing and odd.

To protect himself and his message and his disciples until the time was right.

The parables were intentionally confusing and bizarre.

That way they hid the real message they contained.

At the time when he spoke these parables, it wasn’t safe to proclaim the message of the Kingdom in public.

The threat was too real.

But today, we have the freedom to spread the word about the Kingdom of God.

It is much safer than it was during the Roman rule.

Although the need for secrecy and encryption is no more, the parables are still just as powerful as they were when Jesus first spoke them.

They still hold a bounty of truths about the Kingdom of God.

We now read them after Jesus’ ministry on earth.

We now read them in light of the resurrection.

That event which turned the world on its head.

We now see that all the evil forces of the world couldn’t keep Jesus down, couldn’t keep him in the grave.

Likewise, no evil force in this world can keep the Kingdom of God down.

And so we read these parables, unlocking the truths they contain.

And they are still just as baffling to us as they were to the disciples.

Each of them can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

There’s not just one right answer.

They’re like a rich cornucopia of ideas about the Kingdom of God.

We saw evidence of this in our Narrative Conversation last week, when we heard various interpretations of the parable of the sower.

For some, God is the sower and the seed is us.

For others, God is the sower and the seed is God’s Word.

But the interpretations don’t have to stop there.

What if we saw the sower as us?

And the task of sowing as our task to tell others about the Word of God.

Suddenly this parable takes on a whole new meaning.

Suddenly we’re challenged with considering how it is we approach evangelism and spreading the Good News.

Or take the parable of the mustard seed.

We could read it to mean that small things can lead to great things.

Like faith.

Or we could focus in on the symbolism of the mustard, or the tree, or the birds.

Suddenly this parable doesn’t seem so simple.

Is your head spinning from thinking about all of this?

Mine sure is!

I like to have neat and tidy answers to things.

I like to have logical conclusions.

But the parables don’t offer any.

What we have to realize about parables is that they are not simple.

They are not straightforward morality tales which offer simple meanings.

They are layered with complex meanings, which can change over time.

Or can change depending on who is reading them.

Ultimately, they always contain an understanding about the Kingdom of God.

They always guide us to ask those big questions we ought to be asking.

Like how do we live the lives God wants us to live?

Or, what is it that Jesus wants us to do?

These parables teach us how to live, by guiding us back to the basic knowledge buried within us.

The knowledge that we try to suppress by making the world more complicated than it needs to be.

These parables shake things up for us.

Causing us to question what we thought to be true and helping us to look at the world from a different perspective.

These parables offer us a challenge.

Forcing us to think and reflect, rather than be spoon-fed answers.

The beauty of these parables is that they stand the test of time.

They still reveal truths to us today, still shake us like they shook the disciples.

The way to know that they are doing what they are supposed to, is if they make us uncomfortable.

If they are pushing our limits, getting under our skin, they are still doing their job.

The parables push us to think of the world differently, and think of our role in it differently.

If we think we have the parables all figured out, we’d better sit with them again, realizing we missed something.

These parables speak of the kingdom of God.

Their foundational truth is that God’s Kingdom has come near.

We’re called to change our hearts and lives, and trust this good news!

These parables are like a piece of clothing that never goes out of fashion.

They are reinvented with each generation, bringing new understanding and meaning.

God speaks through these parables, giving us guidance and assurance.

As we continue to wrestle with these parables, let our hearts be open to what God reveals through them.

Let us continue to be challenged by the Good News of the Kingdom of God!

Amen.

1. Levine, Amy-Jill. “Short Stories by Jesus” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)