

Pat Conover: Parables and the Basilea

p>Sermon for Seekers Church

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Pat Conover

Parables and the Basilea

I did a little extended biblical preparation for the sermon today, looking at alternate scriptures also selected for the lectionary for today as well as Judith, a story found in the apocrypha, and the Gospel of Mary, a fragmentary gospel with a feminist twist in it, probably from the second century. I was aiming at getting a little more feel for the climate of thought in the era around Jesus, both the myths and stories that were reference for the disciples when they heard Jesus, and the kinds of concerns that the disciples brought to the telling of the Jesus story when it was their turn to preach.

Here are a few references for the sermon I offer you today.

- The Wisdom of Solomon was written by an Alexandrian Jew in the century before Jesus and deals with the meeting of Jewish and Greek culture, just as Jesus did. It is a sermon in favor of justice, piety and truthfulness. It opposes the idea that life is meaningless, sharply attacks greed and the notion that might makes right. All of these are themes to be found in the words of Jesus and in the interpretive additions added by the disciples of Jesus.
- Judith is a story, comparable to the story of Esther, which is more familiar to some of you. Judea is threatened by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. The strategy of the defenders is to hold the mountain passes to stop

the armies from getting into the valleys around Jerusalem. Holofernes, the Babylonian general, decides on a siege, against the Jewish defenders. The defenders suffer mightily, and something must be done. Judith dresses up to beguile Holofernes, tells a bunch of lies, lures him to bed and cuts off his head and escapes. The army flees in terror. This is one of several "wily peasant" stories in the Bible and in non-biblical literature of that day, with many more examples since biblical times. It is a story of the weak defeating the strong by craftiness, in the biblical stories like Judith – with the help of God.

- Without a story line, the third chapter of Lamentations, written a century or two before Jesus, is a cry of lament, a prayer of petition for delivery from enemies, a citing of injustice, a claiming of special relationship and a call to God for revenge. We find this theme in many of the psalms that have been part of recent lectionary readings, though not the sections included in the lectionary assigned parts of these psalms.

Judith, Lamentation and many psalms all are examples of a common theme in Hebrew scripture. All of them attempt to trade on the feeling of a close or special relationship with God to get what is wanted politically: release and revenge against oppressors followed by the restoration of political dominance as in the time of the kingdoms of David and Solomon. You can see this theme in the synoptic gospels in the stories of birth and the passion stories that Matthew and Luke added to the narrative of Mark. This kind of thinking led the Roman authorities to think of Jesus as a dangerous revolutionary, worth of crucifixion. It guided the Zealots of the time of Jesus, including a couple of the named disciples of Jesus. It is the story line that fits with the stories of cleansing of the temple, with words ascribed to Jesus to buy a sword, and the saying, "I come to bring not peace, but fire."

The Gospel of Mary, like the ends to the stories of Daniel, of Job, of several of the minor prophets, of several of the books in the apocrypha, of the latter chapters of the synoptic gospels, of the Gospel of John, found also in the writings of Paul and of the Revelation of John and of numerous apocalyptic writings that did not make it into the biblical canon, move this anger and revenge theme from the realm of guerilla warfare and political maneuvering into a spiritual realm with the payoff either after death or after the end-of-the-world. This apocryphal transition solves the emotional problem of deep disappointment from the death of Jesus through the official shame of the cross and the genocide of Jerusalem that ended the growing revolt against the Romans.

This kind of rebellious spirit was well known to Jesus. The major city of Sepphoris, just a few miles from Nazareth, the town where Joseph and Jesus probably worked as tektons, as construction laborers, was submitted to genocide and massive enslavement just a few years before the birth of Jesus.

I have gone through this long introduction to set up the context for understanding what Jesus was talking about when he preached about the coming Basilea, usually translated as the "Kingdom of God," better translated as the "Empire of God" that stands in sharp contrast to the "Empire of Caesar." It is pretty hard to separate out just what Jesus most likely said from the added interpretations of the disciples who were merely doing what all good preachers do – trying to tell the gospel story in ways that fit with the hunger and categories of thought in their audiences. Nevertheless, if one thing stands out, it is that Jesus pointed to the Basilea as the great gift of God, good news for the most oppressed, for the expendables of that day of time. Jesus was following in the footsteps of his mentor, John the Baptist, another Galilean rebel who challenged the temple with the forgiveness of sins through baptism rather than sacrifice in the temple of Jerusalem, who challenged the Roman authorities with unwelcome

political commentary during his preaching against sin.

In terms of intellectual formula, I believe that Jesus spoke in eschatological terms, but not apocalyptic terms. That is, I believe Jesus saw the end of the Roman Empire and the end of all oppression that makes false claims of divine sanction to cover up the basis of power in brute strength, in economic domination and military might. Jesus saw the Basilea not merely in some future of the imagination, after death or after the end-of-the-world, but now. Jesus came to tell us that oppression and death are not the last words in the quest for meaning and that meaningful life can begin right now before any authority gives permission. If we enter the Basilea right now, we contribute to its ongoing emergence in our here-and-now lives and in the here-and-now lives of our children. Just as the authors of Samuel and Isaiah challenge the divine rights of Kings and laid the seeds for a rule of law that protects the rights of the poor, so Jesus challenged the empire of Caesar, the self-serving claims of divinity, and the inadequacy of the emerging concept of citizenship which Greece and Rome helped to create and which the Caesars of the times just before, during, and after Jesus were steadily eroding.

The bits of story that are the preservation of the words most likely to represent the actual words of Jesus are found in the recorded parables. The parables are often not in pure form but are changed by the allegorical additions of Mark, Matthew and Luke. However, by comparing the parables found in Mark, Matthew and Luke, as well as in the Gospel of Thomas, a sayings gospel that includes about half of the parables found in Mark, Matthew and Luke, one can work back to the simplest story that is most likely to reflect what Jesus said.

Before turning to a few of these parables, I want to complete two more lines of preparation.

Parables serve the opposite function of myths. Myths are stories that combine several elements to make sense of life,

to the creation of intellectual wholes, to the creation of worldviews, the envelopes of meaning where we store the relevant facts of daily existence. Rationalism, apocalypticism, magic, the divine right of kings, materialism, scientism, the Greek pantheon of gods, the "wily peasant stories" echoed in the Horatio Alger myths of our society, the concept of manifest destiny, are all examples of such myths. Our great contemporary hunger for a theology of story is asking for such myths, a fresh remythologizing that gives relevance and context to our experienced lives. We cannot get along without myth but we also do well to recognize the limitations of the myths we live by. Science can help with that. Jesus can help more.

Parables are brief vivid stories, based in common experienced truths, that take a twist to open up questions that challenge myths. It is the living out of such questions that open doors into the Basilea, that make entry into a life aligned with the eternal something that is possible right now. Parables work when they speak to a silenced hunger that opens up possibilities that are desperately desired but that seemed impossible. The Basilea is, among other things, the realm of justice and peace, a present possibility that is not daunted by the inequalities of power, unfazed by the lies and manipulations of political authorities and the public relations machines of those who can pay the penny and the pound to be well thought of in popular culture.

The second preparatory point is that the Basilea releases power, transformative power, healing power. We see an echo of that power in lectionary scripture for today, Mark 5:21-43, two stories of Jesus as healer. Jesus was able to help the woman with the hemorrhage and the daughter of Jairus just by being who he was, because who he was calls out for healing and transformation, because Jesus calls us out to be healthy and whole, whatever our limitations and restrictions, so that we can live with what we have and who we are, so that we can make

our own contributions to life in the Basilea. Jesus makes us feel precious to ourselves and precious to each other, because when you are in the Basilea you know how much each one is needed. This is how I feel about each one of you, especially those of you who have put your weight down in this small expression of the Basilea, this treasure held in earthen vessels.

The woman with the hemorrhage only had to touch the robe of Jesus to focus her potentials for self-healing, and Jesus had the tactile sensitivity to know that touch and so be able to turn and affirm it, to bless it. Jesus could tell the daughter to wake up, to throw off all that was death affirming and choose life. I read these stories with the special hunger of a transgender person, but I believe they can work for many people. Whether these events actually happened, or whether they are representative stories of the healing capacities of Jesus, they point to a key element of the Basilea, the power of healing and transformation, the power released by the choosing of life, the choosing of life even in the face of oppression and violence, the choosing in the midst of fear and anxiety, the choosing of life before one is ready, before the implications of the choice are clear.

Jesus gives us parables to help us to see the potentials all around us and in us, that are life-giving. We miss these potentials because we want to be polite and tactful, because we are afraid of where they might take us, because our education does not prepare us for them, because bible-based preaching can be distracting, and for many other reasons.

I am going to look at one biblical parable and then share a few of my own.

Luke 13: 20-21 reads as follows.

What does the Basilea remind me of? It is like leaven, which a woman took and concealed in fifty pounds of flour until it

was all leavened. (Scholars translation)

Like mustard seed sewn in a field, leaven was conceived of as impure and destructive. Holy bread for the Jewish festivals was unleavened. Leaven, after all, is a mold. Moreover, fifty pounds is a lot of flour, a whole lot more flour than you need for baking a loaf of bread, or even 10 loaves of bread. Still, using leaven for baking was common because people had learned to like leavened bread just as we do.

The woman *hides* the leaven. She is not baking with it. Of course, while hidden, the leaven spreads, affecting all the flour. Weeds in fields and leaven in flour are homely but surprising images of the Basilea. The word of God spreading mouth-to-mouth, hand-to-hand, in kisses and touch, in words and deeds, traveling below the radar screens of those who control the official power of the day, sprouting up from time-to-time, being nailed to the cross but not overcome.

Healing and helping each other out, the claiming of justice, the building of peace, celebrating the love and life that is present and grieving what is ripped away and destroyed, meeting where it matters and knowing each other's true names. It is not all we want but it is enough. It is available and it can start right now, repeatedly.

As I read this parable and reflect on it, it seems to me that the core wisdom and orientation is far more aligned with the Wisdom of Solomon author and of John the Baptist, than the works of anger and revenge in Judith and Lamentations, and Psalms, in the Minor Prophets, and in the apocalyptic writings of the New Testament. They are eschatological in that they speak to the end of an age, the beginning of a new time, the opening of radical possibility, and of hope. Nevertheless, this is hope for right now, a life to be opened and lived right now, a possibility that needs no additional preparation, the sharing of precious love. It addresses our deepest hungers

and feeds us right now, not in some other time or place after death, or after the end of the physical or political world. Outrage can call us to awareness, but constructive engagement and celebration of emergent relationships and potentials fills our cup, feeds our souls.

Much as I treasure the parables of Jesus, I think it can help to try to think in parables as well as learn from his parables. Thinking in parables can sharpen your readiness and awareness of what God is doing in you and around you. Therefore, here are a few of mine.

The Basilea is like a tick. It waits patiently until the moment comes when life-giving opportunity comes.

[Pause]

The Basilea is like a woman who gave a sermon in a fine old established church. She was the least liked and least prestigious person in the congregation. She only got to preach because it was laity Sunday and no one else volunteered. Many who heard her preach did not like what she was saying and they walked out while she was speaking. Next Sunday when they returned, everyone who had walked out could only reenter if they begged for forgiveness from this woman. Many went away and never came back.

[Pause]

There was a homeless man who approached an investment banker and asked for a \$200 loan so he could start a business selling flowers. The banker turned him down because he did not have a business plan. Instead, the banker gave him \$300 and told him that if his business was successful to give the money to someone else in need.

I invite each of you to include some parable writing in your spiritual disciplines time this next week. Let the parables be short, vivid, grounded in everyday reality, and with a bit of

a twist that opens up a life-giving question.

Whether you write parables or not, I invite you into the Basilea. For those of you already in the Basilea, I invite you to remember where you are, to give thanks, and to live as if you remembered all the time. If you do these things most of you will not worry very much about biblical scholarship because you will be too busy thanking Jesus for opening up life for you, thanking Jesus for pointing to God, to salvation.