



“He did not speak to
them except in parables.”



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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Ezekiel 17:22-24
2 Corinthians 5:6-17
Mark 4:26-34

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“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it...” May I speak to you in the name of God, who was and who is and who is to come. Amen.

My sister and her family live in Perth, Australia. They moved to there for my sister’s job and have lived there for a little over six years. Since moving to Australia, my sister and her husband have had two children, my 5 year-old nephew Andy, and my almost 3 year-old niece, Rose. I try to FaceTime with them at least once a month. Earlier this week was one of those times.

I sat at my kitchen table, my iPad poised on a stack of newspapers as my nephew Andy amiably showed me a Lego space shuttle he had just finished constructing. He happily pointed out the rocket boosters and operational shuttle doors. In the background of the screen I could see my niece, Rose chatting with her father who was asking her to clean up some of her toys. While trying to stay attentive to Andy’s proud display of his space shuttle, I couldn’t help but hear Rosie peppering her dad with a one-word question about every 40 seconds. Any thoughts on what that question was? That’s right, “why?”!

If you’ve been around a toddler for an extended amount of time, this scenario may sound familiar. Between the ages of 2 and 3, children develop the cognitive ability to make logical connections between things. It’s at this age that they begin to understand why things happen. This is a critical skill that helps them gain a much more complex understanding of how the world works. When they ask, “why?” they are showing a thirst for knowledge. They want more information. The more they ask, “why?”, the more they learn.

That thirst for knowledge first manifests itself when we’re young but it doesn’t go away. Though not in the same rapid-fire style as a toddler, most of us continue to ask “why” questions about the world around us daily. We’re eager to know the meaning of things, to expand our knowledge and possess as much insight and comprehension about our natural world as possible. We’re curious. The why questions of toddlerhood morph into the why questions of childhood, then develop into the questions of adolescence and the more mature questions of adulthood. Naturally, as our comprehension grows, so do the depths of our questions and our ability to seek and find answers.

It is in our nature to be curious. God created us with an innate desire to explore and question, to seek and learn, to make sense of the world around us. Jesus, the teacher from Nazareth, knew this well. But instead of straightforward descriptive answers to questions, those kinds of answers we most crave, Jesus often provided a different kind of answer in his teachings. Jesus' favorite response to why questions was the parable. Scripture scholar C.H. Dodd defines a parable as "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." Jesus used these metaphorical stories to convey deep meaning, which he purposely left open for interpretation.

There is an old saying that if you must explain a story, its point has been lost. Jesus, the great storyteller, did not usually interpret the stories he told. He would upon occasion assist his listeners in fleshing out the meanings of certain stories that he would pose to them. However, more often than not, Jesus used stories to help people learn to think for themselves. He turns our why questions upside down and invites us to explore what we think the answers might be. He employed parables to encourage people to use their minds and hearts in forming their own interpretations about God's character and the nature of God's Kingdom. Through his parables Jesus empowered people to embrace the understanding that God is something like what we can think, feel, imagine, or intuit. God's character can be known through human stories. God's Reign can be realized through creation.

Rather than simply providing a definitive answer to the big questions posed to him, Jesus invited those asking the questions into dialogue through his parables. Rather than saying, "the kingdom of God is expansive," Jesus said, "it is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all." This difference invites the listener to interpret Jesus' words. It allows us to engage in the story and to use our imagination. Rather than a passive answer, Jesus gives an active answer that invites our participation. Like a work of art, Jesus' parables confront us with power and implications and demand a response from us.

However, "There is no easy take-home message for us in the parables we hear this morning," Professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary Sharon H. Ringe explains.

"Rather, they ask that we engage our imaginations to follow the possibilities and incongruities that we distinguish between a world where everything is planned, linear, and logical, to one filled with mysteries and surprises into which a sovereign God invites us." Parabolic answers to our questions often leave us with more questions. And that's the point.

Jesus tells parables not for explanation but for exploration. Not for easy answers but to engage the imagination. This is how Jesus responded to questions. It's not clear-cut. It's not black and white. There's a lot of grey. And yet, Jesus' ability to poke and prod our imagination empowers us to seek and claim the answers we desire. This ability lies within us and Jesus helps us to find it. As Jesus says in Luke's gospel, "the kingdom of God is within you." All we must do is

choose to employ our innate desire for knowledge, that desire that first manifests itself when we're toddlers, and explore the depths of that Kingdom in order to know God and ourselves more fully. The power is ours. Let's get to work. Amen.