

Parables as Pastoral Resource

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Luann (a fictitious name) was twenty-five years old. You could see in her face that they had been hard years. Her hair was stringy — unwashed and uncombed. She was overweight. Her clothes were “K-Mart chic,” rumpled, and carelessly arranged. She was nervous and fidgety, incessantly twisting first one and then another finger with the other hand.

Luann had been referred by a local physician who belongs to my congregation. When he called to arrange her first visit with me he described her as deeply depressed, with spells of uncontrolled weeping and periodic suicidal feelings. When he asked her if she would be willing to talk with someone and she agreed, he called me.

During the next several sessions Luann disclosed her story by fits and starts.

She was the next to youngest of five children. As both parents worked the children frequently were unsupervised for extended intervals. When the parents were present they lavished criticism and “correction” on all five children indiscriminately. Over the years the father became overtly more aggressive, physically abusing her and her siblings repeatedly. She wasn’t always sure for what reason.

When Luann was ten her father died. Shortly afterwards her mother remarried. Her stepfather began to abuse her sexually, eventually requiring her to have intercourse with him. The one time Luann tried to tell her mother about it her mother screamed at her and struck her. She wasn’t sure if the stepfather also abused her younger sister (the three older children were boys), but she didn’t think so.

The whole scene became so intolerable that shortly after her fifteenth birthday Luann left home. She moved in with her boyfriend, the older brother of her best friend at school. He made heavy use of both drugs and alcohol and insisted that if she was to stay on with him she become a user, too. In the three and one-half years Luann was with him she had two miscarriages. Their relationship deteriorated and, finally, he threw her out.

For around nine months Luann lived on the streets of a large city (Atlanta), but found that style of life too brutal, insecure, and frightening. She returned to familiar territory, to a smaller city (Knoxville) close to her former home.

She moved in with an older man (around forty) who had picked her up in a bar. She felt unrelievedly used by him. It seemed to her that the only thing he was looking for was cheap help. All he wanted from her was that she keep the place clean, cook his meals, wash his clothes, be sexually available to him, and wait on his friends when they came over (which they did frequently, often staying for extended periods).

Finally Luann had had enough. Just as she had gathered and concentrated enough courage to tell him she was moving out he suddenly announced that he was leaving her to go live with another woman.

Shortly afterward she went to the doctor (she had been to his office twice before to be treated for "nervousness" and general feelings of malaise) and he referred her to me.

Our first sessions were devoted mainly to giving her an opportunity to vent her anger, first against her latest lover who had frustrated her imagined revenge by leaving her before she had a chance to leave him, then against the others in her life who had hurt, used, and abused her. But then she began more and more to speak of how she must have deserved all of the pain in her life. She asked for it. She had it coming to her for being the kind of person that she was. Maybe if she had been different all those things wouldn't have happened to her.

So I told her this story:

There was a family with one child, a girl. This family had always been very close. They went out of their way to do things together.

An important tradition in the family centered around the girl's birthday. Every year on her birthday they devoted the entire day to a celebration, sometimes with just family, sometimes with friends included. No matter what else was going on, on that day everything else was put aside and they spent the day doing special things together.

This year was the daughter's first year away from home. She had graduated from school and taken a job in a distant city. The parents missed her very much. As the date for her birthday drew nearer they called her to make plans for their special day.

In tears she reported that she didn't think that she'd be able to get away. She was new on the job. The training period was only recently completed. She was just beginning to get the hang of her duties but her supervisor was watching her closely to be sure she could handle it. She hadn't worked there long enough yet to have vacation time due her.

When her parents protested she agreed to try and do her best to come home. If, somehow, she could get away, she would fly home just for the day, be with them for her birthday celebration, and then take the late flight back to the city that night. She couldn't guarantee that she'd be able to arrange it but she would do her very best.

Her parents were convinced that she would be there. It just meant too much for all of them. So her father arranged his work to take the day off. Her mother invited her ten closest friends to come to the house and be there when she arrived. She did tell them of the difficulties which made it uncertain whether the daughter would actually make it home.

On the day of the birthday celebration the ten friends gathered at the family's home. Some were more confident than others that the daughter would show up. But even if she couldn't be there it would be fun for them to get together again. So five came bringing presents to celebrate the daughter's birthday, and the other five, doubting that she'd be able to get away, came, but without presents.

While they were waiting at the family home the telephone rang. It was the daughter, calling from the airport to ask her parents to come out there for her. The father, the mother, and the five friends with presents piled into cars and headed out to the airport. The five friends without presents decided to go into town, buy the neglected presents, and meet everyone at the house when they returned from the airport.

When the party arrived at the airport, however, the daughter reported that she had not been able to negotiate a whole day off. She could only be with them a couple of hours and then would have to take the next flight back to the city. So they decided that instead of returning to the house they would simply commandeer the back section of the airport restaurant and have their festive meal and celebration there. There was no way to contact the five friends left behind and let them know, so they missed the party.

As Luann and I explored the story with reference to her situation it was at first all by contrast. *Her* parents weren't anything like those parents. They never celebrated with her like the family in the story. She didn't even have — never had had — ten friends who cared enough about her to come whether they brought presents or not. Everybody she wanted to be close to demanded that *she* give *them* presents all the time. "No one gave me a damned thing, except grief."

As helpful as that additional venting was, I felt that we really began to make some progress when I invited Luann to try on some of the other roles in the story.

It helped her to recognize that she thought of herself as one of the friends in the story who didn't bring a gift. She didn't believe in herself; she didn't trust herself; she didn't value herself. Instead of giving herself gifts she treated herself in much the same way as all of the other important people in her life treated her. She didn't like herself. She had no pride in herself. She regularly beat up on herself. Increasingly, in our conversations, she had blamed herself for all of the pain and grief she had experienced.

I encouraged her to think of herself, instead, as one of the friends who brought a present. She needed to begin believing in herself, and liking herself. She was not trash. She should quit thinking and acting as if she were trash. She was no longer to allow others to demean her, use her, treat her as trash.

Given her situation Luann could not count on her family for support. She should become "parents" to herself. She had a right to celebrate herself as someone special. At the moment she was the only one who could arrange those celebrations. Only as she perceived others clearly bearing gifts that affirmed her, showed her that they valued her, and loved her, would she permit them to have a part in her celebration of herself.

I have given this extended illustration as an example of an attempt to appropriate the parabolic tradition of Jesus as a resource for the practice of pastoral ministry. Unfortunately those stories are not readily available for that purpose.

Paradoxically the very instruments which have preserved those stories for us impede our use of those stories in the way I have suggested in my

illustration. The stories come to us as components of large literary works, the Gospels of the New Testament.

Historically the parables of Jesus have been valued and retold because of an authority with which they have been invested extrinsic to the parable as creative story.

The authority which parables have carried and still carry in popular piety is lodged in the conviction that these are stories Jesus told during the course of his public ministry. Because of who Jesus was and is believed still to be these stories have a persuasive worth other than their power as stories. They continue to capture our interest not in the first order because of what they say but because of who said them. Because Jesus told them we are interested in hearing them and in discovering what they have to say.

More formally, the parables of Jesus carry for the church authority which derives from their being integral parts of specific documents, the Gospels of Matthew, of Mark, of Luke. The church experienced these documents as having an enduring worth and function which transcended the situation and occasion for which each document was originally composed.

Subsequently the church selectively designated certain documents produced out of its own past history, including the four Gospels, as canonical. (It is well known that a much larger number of "Gospels" were excluded from the canon of Scripture.) With this definition the Gospels including their (sometimes multiple) versions of the parables of Jesus were commended to the church from then on as uniquely normative and authoritative for its faith, worship, work, and theological reflection.

Both kinds of external authority, that assigned by popular piety and that invested by ecclesiastical canonicity, inhibit our access to the parables of Jesus as stories in their own right. We hear them first of all not as stories but as stories of *Jesus*, as authoritative texts. The tremendous impact of extrinsic authority diverts our attention away from interacting with the parables as creative stories.

A speculative illustration: I suspect that if I had told Luann the story of the Five Wise and the Five Foolish Maidens in its Matthean form (Matt. 25:1-13) the things she would have heard the clearest were the judgmental observation, "the door was shut," and the judgmental remark, "I do not know you." The story would serve only to confirm and reinforce her own pessimistic self-condemnation. That application would occur because the way the story functions is controlled by its first century contextual setting. The story is not free to conform itself to Luann's context and to function analogically to her story. It is more narrowly and more powerfully perceived as an authoritative biblical saying of Jesus.

The impedimental function of extrinsic authority may very well help to explain (there were other reasons also, of course) why the church was captivated so early and for so long with the allegorical interpretation of parables. The line between metaphorical analogy and allegory is very thin and easily crossed by the incautious. As long as a parable is heard primarily as a teaching of the Lord Jesus, or regarded primarily as an authoritative, normative text, the use of allegory as a hermeneutical tool to permit the story to function

effectively in altered contexts is almost unavoidable.

Allegory restores a creative ambiguity to replace the ambiguity and malleability the story lost when it became authoritative text. Only now the ambiguity is not inherent to the story as story, but is imposed on the story from without by the allegorical method being used to restore its adaptability to changed circumstances. The relevancy of the parable depends on the creative ingenuity with which the interpreter breaks the code of its narrative detail to expose its spiritual meaning.

Once the method of allegorical interpretation is renounced, the interpretive guild is left with two limited, albeit academically fascinating, alternatives. One may attempt the speculative and difficult task of reversing the process which eventually produced our canonical Gospels. This requires that we retrace with informed imaginations the prior uses of those stories in earliest Christianity until we situate them again as instruments employed by Jesus at the service of his mission. Then we try to hear how he expected his parables to work as stories for his audiences. We still have much to learn from Joachim Jeremias and his pupils about this line of inquiry.

The other alternative is to pursue the analytical task of describing the way the individual parable works as part of the connected narrative sequence of a particular Gospel. The recent surge of redactional studies has schooled us to how instructive these efforts can be.

One discovery affirmed by both of these lines of academic inquiry is the recognition that the context within which the parable is told controls how it works. The probability is that when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan he expected his listeners to participate in the story in the figure of the man left half-dead in the ditch. Luke (Lk. 10:25-37), however, clearly expects his readers to imagine themselves as the Samaritan ("Go and do likewise" he has Jesus add, just in case they missed it). This alerts us to the fundamental importance of investigating this issue of context. So do the dual versions we have of the parable of the Lost Sheep (Matt. 18:12-14; Lk. 15:3-7). The differences in detail aside, the two versions of that parable make two clearly different points, demanded by the literary context within which each author has placed the parable. But to do that an evangelist had to be willing to subordinate the prior authority accrued to the tradition and give precedence to the context of his own community's problems and needs. That concern governed the way his entire work functioned and dictated the role any part of that work contributed to the whole.

The evangelist presumed a freedom we have been reluctant to exercise. When the parable is regarded primarily as authoritative text it remains enslaved to its first century context.

Recently scholars studying the parables have encouraged us to recover our appreciation of the parable as story. "Keep the parable 'in solution,'" they urge, which, I take it, means unencumbered by any alien cultural or literary context. Explore the levels of creative ambiguity in the story! Grant to the parable its legitimate aesthetic integrity as a story!

I suppose that's what I was trying to do with that parable for Luann. Those stories are powerful in their own right. That's why Jesus used them,

borrowing and adapting some and making up others. That power is refreshed when we, while remaining as faithful as we can to the essential structure of the story, change the details so parables are released from constricting past contexts and are freed to be encountered once again as stories into which we enter as participants and discover analogically new insights into our faith and life. One caution: we must guard against claiming for these altered versions either dominical or canonical authority.

Perhaps as we retrain ourselves as story-tellers these parables may also become once again integral components of proclamation events rather than objects about which our sermons talk.