

“Purposeful Puzzling Profundity”

Mark 4:1-34

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

The title of my sermon - Purposeful Puzzling Profundity - is actually me making fun of myself for my of alliteration and also kind of poking fun at myself for just how confusing and confounding this passage of scripture is to me.

Presumably from Jesus' point of view, parables are purposeful. To us, often parables are often puzzling. However, “if we have ears to hear,” they can be profound.

Parables provoke and poke. That is, they punch our buttons because they are usually more confrontational than comforting, and they get us thinking and questioning. And that's the point. The more straightforward a parable seems to us, the more we need to look again at it to see if we might be missing something.

The power of this passage does not depend upon our understanding of it, just as the power of God's kin-dom does

not depend upon our belief in it. But if we can seek to understand what this text is saying, maybe in the seeking, we will find. (I think I've heard that somewhere before...)

The thing is, parables usually have a basic layer of meaning and understanding that's easily accessible and they can speak powerfully into our lives if we let them.

For example, in the Parable of the Sower we can read it to see ourselves as the Sower and realize that as we evangelize and share our faith - tossing the seed out into the world - we are doing all that we can...and that it's not up to us whether or not the seed grows; we can't change someone's soil or how the seed lands. The farmer can put the seed into the ground; the farmer can't yank or force a sprout out of the ground. Some things just aren't up to us. OR, we can read this parable to see ourselves as either the path, the rocky ground, the thorns, or the

fertile soil and evaluate how receptive we are at this point in our lives to spiritual growth and think about what changes we need to make to be more receptive to God's word, etc. Either way the point is to pay attention to our environment and who and what we are surrounding ourselves with or where we are throwing out God's word and spending our time. (Although, if you think about it, soil has no choice in what type of soil it is. Soil types are entrenched in their own ways"¹ and they can't make themselves fertile. They are either rocky or rich; they are either under shade or out in the sun, near a water source or out in the desert.) It begs the question - to what extent can we change the soil of our lives (aka: circumstances) and to what extent can we change how a seed lands and grows...or to what extent can we evaluate where and when we are throwing out seeds. Any way you look at this parable, it invites deep questions on human agency and free will and God's involvement in our lives.

¹ Micah D. Kiel, "Commentary on Mark 4:1-34," *Working Preacher* (15 Jan. 2012), accessed on Jan. 19, 2020 at

In the Parable of the Lamp - it seems (quite obviously) to be saying that we need not hide our faith but rather put it on display and let it shine for that is what a lamp is meant to do and that is what our faith is meant to do. Maybe the point is to pay attention to our purpose and not hide who we are or who God is. We can't hide the illuminating truth of God. Even if we try...the light will leak out from under the bushel basket, so we might as well put it up high on display for all to see.

In the Parable of the Scattered Seed the lesson also seems to be quite straightforward; God is always at work despite or in spite of our efforts. "*The Kingdom of God is like someone who scatters seed and goes to bed, then wakes up shocked at the growth that has occurred without [their] human cultivation. The Kingdom of God surprises [and shocks and defies our expectations]. It does its own thing.*"²

And in the Parable of the Mustard Seed it seems that the

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1186.

² Kiel, *ibid*.

simplest meaning is the most profound; great things can come in small packages and we never know how God will work in and through us no matter how small or insignificant we think we are. God can use anyone or anything. *“The kingdom of God [may seem] small and insignificant, [and] it might be missed or overlooked. Once full grown, however, its true significance becomes known.”*³

That’s a quick run down of all four parables. Any and all of these parables have more complex meanings and nuances and whole books have been written on how we can interpret them in different ways. So a great lunchtime/dinnertime conversation for you could be just to pick one of these four parables and talk about what you think it means for your life.

But what I want to talk about today is not necessarily the parables themselves, but the comments before and after the parables’ main illustrations.

Comments like, *“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”* (4:9)

Veiled references like, *“To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables, in order that [and Jesus quotes Isaiah here] ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand...’* (4:11-12)

Questions like, *“Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?”* (4:13)

Statements like, *“For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.”* (4:22)

Urgent declarations like, *“Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get... For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”* (4:24-25)

What is up with all of that?!?!

And then Mark tops it off by explaining, *“With many such*

³ Kiel, *ibid.*

parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” (4:33-34).

Great. So essentially Jesus speaks in code. But the disciples get private tutoring on the side so they can crack the code. And, don't get me wrong, I'm happy for them...but what about the rest of us? Why is everything so secretive? Why do some get to hear and understand and others not? And in what world is it fair where those who already have get more and those who have not get less?

What is Jesus talking about and even more pressing, *why* is he talking this way? Does he want us to be confused and confounded and outraged?

Well, there are all kinds of theories as to why Mark's Jesus is so secretive...and one of these theories has a name - the Messianic Secret - and part of this thinking is that Jesus was being secretive because he knew what was at stake and that he'd be in trouble politically and didn't want to be

killed before his time had come. He wanted to lay low and spread the message a bit more. Others say the Messianic Secret proves the point that even when you try to keep the gospel a secret, you can't. It will spread. Jesus is case in point. You can try to put the message under a bushel basket, but even Jesus himself, trying his hardest to be cryptic and warning people not to tell anyone, but he fails at this (he must not have known that the fastest way for people to share something is to tell them not to tell anyone!)

Whatever the reason, the point is, there is something secretive in these pages that is unsettling. You know that childhood rhyme, "Secrets, secrets are no fun. Secrets, secrets hurt someone." Well, whenever there are "insiders" and "outsiders" it hurts. But maybe all this talk of secrets really isn't about hiding a truth as much as it is revealing that Truth is not as simple as it seems...and neither is understanding. (And one important point is that the word secret in this passage can also

be translated as ‘mystery.’⁴) Sometimes it is when we ultimately realize that we don’t know something, that we finally begin to understand. And understanding is a varied process, different for all of us. So maybe some are ready and some are not. We can never really get inside Jesus’ head and know why he was separating out some as ready and some as not. That will remain a mystery for us.

Scholar Angela Hancock gets at the heart of this tension when she writes, “*Transparency is something we value. In government, in our institutions, in our relationships. We want to know what is going on and why. We deserve to know. While we don’t usually use the language of transparency when we talk about our hopes for growth as Christian disciples, many of us have an expectation that we can and will know more than we do [now] about the things of God [in the future]. [if we just try harder and study more and listen to more*

sermons and read more books and pray more.] We expect that there will be learning, development, maturation. We expect that we will be able to see more clearly what God [and God’s kin-dom] is like, day by day. We trust that when faith seeks understanding, it finds it, at least to some degree. What is the incarnation — God with us — if not (among other things) divine transparency?”⁵

And it’s because of this expectation - that spiritual growth progresses logically and linearly on an upward trajectory just like say math does (first we learn numbers, then addition, then multiplication, then algebra, then geometry, then calculus, etc.) - that we get frustrated with passages like this and realize that spiritual growth is not linear and neither is the growth of God’s kin-dom.

We want to understand our faith and Jesus, but we are left with questions so much of the time. Just seeds. Not answers or

⁴ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, “#392 - Parables in Mark,” *I Love to Tell the Story Podcast* (11 Jan. 2020), accessed on Jan. 19, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1221.

⁵ Angela Dienhart Hancock, “Commentary on Mark 4:1-34,” *Working Preacher* (19 Jan. 2020), accessed on Jan. 19, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4228.

fully blossomed flowers of explanations. Just inklings and images. And maybe that should not come as a surprise. It's my experience that the longer I grapple with Scripture the less confident I am in knowing exactly what it all means. And yet, the longer I sit with Scripture and let it wrestle with my heart the more I realize the vastness of God's Word and the mystery of God's ways.

As the Apostle Paul says, we still see through a glass dimly about so many things, including, the teachings of Jesus. So too the first disciples, (although they saw him face to face)! What hope do we have in our quest for divine transparency, if they needed help?"⁶ It seems we are not meant to understand the kingdom of God like we do a math problem...otherwise Jesus would have taught in PowerPoint and not in parables.

Author and theologian Brian McClaren also asks this question: "*Why did Jesus speak in parables? Why was he subtle, indirect, and secretive? Because his message wasn't*

merely aimed at conveying information. It sought to precipitate something more important: the spiritual transformation of the hearers. The form of a parable helps to shape a heart that is willing to enter an ongoing, interactive, persistent relationship of trust in the teacher. It beckons the hearer to explore new territory. [The perplexities and paradoxes of parables] help form a heart that is humble enough to [always] ask questions. In other words, a parable renders its hearers not as experts, not as know-it-alls, not as scholars ... but as children." Which is to say, as lifelong learners, who love questions and never get tired of them - no matter how many times they ask them or what answers they get.

*"Mommy, why is the sky blue?"
(Mommy gives her answer)
"What makes blue blue?
Is the blue you see the same
blue I see?
If the sky is blue why is it
sometimes pink?
Why...
Why...
Why...?"*

⁶ Hancock, *ibid.*

(once Mommy hits her breaking point...)
*“Because. Because. Because!
Because it just is! That’s just
the way things are”*

The joy of children is their unknowing. Their curiosity. Their questions. Which, at times, are unending. At some point we grow up and stop asking these same kind of questions about our faith and our world. We just assume things are as they are and that they cannot change. We feel helpless instead of curious; apathetic instead of actively engaged.

You see the very form of a parable describes the heart of the God’s kin-dom; it’s always revealing, always prompting. It’s not something that is simply an idea that one analyzes but it’s a reality in which one participates and imagines. And what Jesus is doing through the use of parables is challenging us to another way of seeing.

You can’t parse out a parable. It has to sit with you and work on you and speak to your life and context and where you are now, today. It’s not like one of those

timeless wisdom sayings in proverbs; it’s message for you today won’t be the same as it’s message for you tomorrow. It’s malleable. Just like God’s Spirit.

Parables invite us to consider this: Do we allow ourselves to play along in the parable until we see differently OR do we just let how we already see things dictate how we play? How open are we to not understanding everything while exploring anything?

Parables discloses divine reality...a different reality...a different way of seeing...that we may not understand at first.

In verse 22 we read, *“For there is nothing hidden except to be disclosed.”* The word “disclose” is key here. To disclose is the opposite of close. It means to open up. Explanations are for the point of grasping something, so that a mind would “close” in on an idea, which is important for straightforward science and facts. But that’s not what parables do. Parables dis-close (aka: reveal) God’s kingdom by “opening us up” to God and to power and presence of God in

people and ideas beyond our own...into the mystery of it.⁷

Disclosure as “opening, as revealing, as truth.” Trust me. I know we all want closure. We want answers. We want things not to be complicated. We want life to be easy. And yet the reality is; life isn’t easy. Closure is often a myth of convenience...whereas disclosure...unveiling, investigating, surfacing, opening up...that is far more transformational even if inconvenient.

How open are we to being disclosed to things and people and ideas that push all of our buttons and don’t make any sense to us? And when the truth is disclosed to us, when we actually do get a glimpse of the kin-dom of God and some divine truth is disclosed to us, are we open enough to it to let it change our lives and not just our beliefs? Our actions and not just our words?

We celebrate the birthday of a man tomorrow who had strong beliefs and convictions and even stronger actions. Martin

Luther King, Jr. He was eloquent and powerful in his speaking. Even more than his words though, he put his body and life on the line for the poor, for the discriminated against, for those who were underpaid and unemployed, he called out systems of injustice and systemic racism and he worked for systems that included rather than excluded that liberated rather than limited.

It seems that this year, more than in years past, I have read more about and heard more about how we need to change the way we are honoring and remembering Dr. King.

Because his life had integrity. That is to say, his words had the weight of action and change behind them. They were not just nice ideas or lofty prayers. They weren’t virtual; they were incarnational.

And yet, we have put his words on monuments of remembrance while not using them to mount up resistance against systems of injustice. And when we just merely recite Dr. King’s words and talk about the dream he had

⁷ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

for America, without changing policies and changing our actions to proactively make our reality into that dream - then we are just appropriating his vision into a pep talk instead of imparting them as a transformational tool for our society.

Here in Denver we will experience two demonstrations tomorrow. The Parade, the Martin Luther King Jr Parade, has the purpose of “unifying and educate communities, while celebrating the life and work of Dr. King” (as its website states). Tomorrow it will feature Eldrin Bell, who stood guard over Dr. King’s body for 12 hours after he was assassinated. Bell will tell his story and how it impacted him and other civil rights leaders. An important story to be told and for us to hear and bear witness to.

At the same time, activists from the Colorado Poor People’s Campaign (the local chapter of a national movement started by King in 1967) and Black Lives

Matter 5280, the local chapter of the national anti-discrimination movement, will hold a separate MLK event, a protest of the city’s camping ban policy — at City Park. Speakers will call for two things, including a repeal of Denver’s urban camping ban, which prohibits people without homes from sleeping in public areas. Protesters will also demand the city government halt an appeal of the ruling last month that found the camping ban unconstitutional.⁸

Black Lives Matter 5280 co-founder Amy Brown says, *“The reason we are taking this action this year is specifically addressing what we feel is hypocrisy among city officials in spending money, putting pomp and circumstance into a photo op parade about Dr. King, supposedly, while at the same time aggressively and intentionally criminalizing the least among us, which is who Dr. King was fighting for.”*⁹

The words and stories of the man, the life and actions of the

⁸ David Sachs, “What to know about Denver’s 2020 MLK Day parade — and the dueling event from Black Lives Matter and the Poor People’s Campaign,” *Denverite* (17 Jan. 2020), accessed on Jan. 19, 2020 at <https://denverite.com/2020/01/17/what-to-know-about->

[denvers-2020-mlk-day-parade-and-the-dueling-event-from-black-lives-matter-and-the-poor-peoples-campaign/](https://denverite.com/2020/01/17/what-to-know-about-denvers-2020-mlk-day-parade-and-the-dueling-event-from-black-lives-matter-and-the-poor-peoples-campaign/).

⁹ Sachs, *ibid.*

man. In truth, I think both are important. Words inspire hearts. Actions change lives. Maybe the truth is somewhere in between...not settling for just one or the other but realizing that any of us who have ears to hear need to listen to all of the stories and expressions of justice, not just some of them. That any of us who have ears to hear need to listen to *all* of the possibilities and interpretations of how this life is experienced, and not just our own. That maybe the kingdom of God will never be able to be boiled down to one parable or metaphor or one voice or perspective ...and that's why Jesus told so many parables. Because each parable reveals a different facet of the reality of God that is different and important.

And likewise, maybe no one story carries Truth. Maybe it's only when all of our stories are combined that we begin to glimpse the truth. Maybe it's when all of our stories, all of our soils are side by side, that we realize that it's not about whether or not a seed grows in my soil or in your soil...the point is...a seed is growing...and that is a miracle.

One that we should celebrate and rejoice and see as a sign of God. And we should want to be able to figure out how to get seeds to grow in ALL soils...we should want to find ways to change conditions and circumstances so that all soils are fertile and all have the chance for thriving growth.

Jesus knew that some folks did not yet realize that God's kingdom was far greater than ever imagined. And so they couldn't dream the dream with Jesus. They couldn't see all the trees and shrubs that would one day blossom, all they could see was the mustard seed.

What about you? What do you see?

We can all throw out seeds. We can all recite dreams. It takes a different kind of openness to be ready to grow and to be willing to act.

It may be a mystery as to *how* God works; it's not a mystery that God IS at work.

Maybe Jesus is sometimes purposefully puzzling, so that we can be profoundly confused. And therefore humble enough

to listen more deeply and more closely...to keep asking questions.

It seems that THAT would be the profound thing these days...to ask questions and seek truth; together, with humility and love. It's not even that hard to do...to ask questions and seek new perspectives...and yet it's the kin-dom work we're called to do. And we can do it. We can do these things. We can seek. We can ask. We can change our seeing and our being in the world. Wouldn't that be profound? Maybe it would just be God's kin-dom...here on earth...finally...

Amen.