

# You have to listen to hear

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William Mc D Tully, Rector, at the nine o'clock service, July 10, 2011, The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Based on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.*

“We wouldn’t be so concerned about what people say about us if we realized how seldom they do.” That is called an aphorism, uttered, along with many others of that caliber, by Oscar Wilde.

An aphorism is a very tightly wound piece of wisdom that sets expectation or conventional wisdom on its head. Proverbs, by contrast, a beloved form in the Bible, encapsulate conventional wisdom—things that everybody believes, things that more than one culture have come to know and record.

Flannery O’ Connor was asked once whether she thinks universities stifle writers? “Probably,” she said, “but they don’t stifle them enough.”

Another aphorism. The famous professor of homiletics (that’s the science, so called, of preaching) at Yale, Halford Luckock, was asked how many points a sermon should have. “At least one.” That’s about as tightly wound as an aphorism can get.

Subverting expectations was what Jesus was about. And the most original and authentic voice of Jesus, preserved in the New Testament, tends to come out sounding like that.

Aphorisms, and then of course, parables—and of all of this, you will not be surprised to hear—is a set up to today’s gospel reading, one of Jesus’ parables.

When Jesus used aphorisms, they were tightly wound: “Let the dead bury the dead.” That really did upset conventional wisdom for a culture with so much solemnity surrounding the duties to the dead.

“It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to get into the Kingdom of God.” Another aphorism. “Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is up to.” Yet another, and another overturning of expectations.

A parable can also be quite brief. sometimes just a sentence or two. Or it can be a kind of extended aphorism—a kind of illustration. Or it might even be a story with scenes and actors like two quite famous parables: the Good Samaritan, and the the Prodigal Son. In these and many others, we really hear the voice of Jesus, not the voice of the crowds, not the voice of the subsequent Christian church as it wrestled with what to do with this kind of upturned expectation. We just hear the voice of Jesus.

Some say the key parable in the gospels is this: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven in which a woman hid fifty pounds of flour until it was all leavened.” That’s it—one tight sentence. It surprises and subverts at the same time. And when I tell you how, you will realize why these parables are so hard for us. Not just hard on the surface, but hard because they were written to be heard two thousand years ago by people living under very different conditions from ours.

Before we get to the parable of the Sower, look again: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven in which a woman hid fifty pounds of flour until it was all leavened.” It was very surprising to talk about *hiding* leaven. There’s no recorded instance of anyone talking about hiding leaven. What you do with leaven when you want to make bread? You *mix* it. That’s conventional thinking. When Jesus said *hiding*, people asked, “What is he talking about?”

And, *fifty* pounds of flour? There’s not a commercial bakery we’re talking about. An absurdly large amount for a woman at home baking enough bread for the day. It also happens to be the amount that Sarah, the wife of Abraham, used to make the cakes to entertain the angels who came to tell that dried up old couple that they were going to have a baby. That also got people’s attention.

But what was really offensive about this simple one line parable was that Jesus seemed to equate the presence of God with *leavened* bread. And everyone knew that the real liberation and presence of God comes from eating the *unleavened* bread. An audience of devout people—or at least people who knew what the words meant—could easily be scandalized.

When you have to tease out those observations, you see how reading, hearing, experiencing a parable is a challenge. It’s almost insurmountable in some cases. We need so many footnotes. The trouble is that if we don’t know what those footnotes might teach us about the original meaning of the parable, then we tend to make it up.

Or more commonly, we tend to read into the parable what we think, or have been told, the whole Christian story means. There’s a lot of that around, isn’t there? What I urge you to do is to let the parables stand on their own, speak to you, trouble you, challenge you to the point where you might be able to *reimagine your reality*.

In contrast to these tight aphorisms, and that famous one line parable, there are the more extended parables like the one we have today.

We still have to resist explaining the parable, the very temptation that the New Testament itself indulges in. Our lectionary actually calls for us to read a second paragraph today. I chose not to read it,

not even to printing it in the bulletin. Though legitimately part of the New Testament, it's really just a first century disciple struggling with the meaning of the parable of the Sower. The paragraph (Matt. 13:18-23) begins, "Tell us now the meaning of the parable." The interpretation given makes our parable an allegory, telling the reader what every character and thing stands for.

And of course you can imagine that this parable is fair game. It has different kinds of soil, standing for the different and troublesome factions of the early community. It has differing results. Ditto. It packages things in threes, which though easier to remember that way, invite pointless speculation.

It would be very easy to do what the interpreter in the first century did. I urge you to stop and not do that.

Jesus didn't preach in allegories, he preached and taught in parables. That's why we took the liberty of lopping off that second half of the reading. This parable, I believe, Jesus reminding his audience that *they won't hear anything important until they decide to listen*. That's it. Period.

That's what a parable is for. Even if there had been someone who said, "Tell us about the parable," it's all but certain that Jesus would have said something like, "That's for me to know and you to find out." Or, "Do the work yourself." Or, before turning on his heel and walking away, "Think about it."

My fantasy is that he sighed, looked directly at the questioner, and then simply moved on to his next point.

Parables always draw from the common elements of life. And life in the first century was animated by everything from baking bread to burying things in the back yard to searching out lost sheep to sowing seed on varying qualities of ground.

"A metaphor or a simile drawn from common life" is the accepted academic description of a parable. What Jesus did was to *intensify* that form. He wanted to arrest—meaning to stop—the listener by vividness or strangeness of speech. He sought to leave, in the mind of the one who is listening—if he or she were listening—doubt about how precisely to apply the saying, how to turn it into active thought.

I know that you probably haven't taken the trouble to get up and to get dressed and to come to church so that you can be given today the "doubt of the day" to take home with you. But if we were really fearless followers of Jesus, here's what we'd say: *Help me to doubt my circumstances. Help me to doubt the prevailing analysis of the world in which I live. Upend me a little bit. Overturn my conventional wisdom. Make a little room in me to be liberated from all the rules and interpretations that I have been taught to believe.*

To make a fresh challenge of this ancient parable is to make you ask questions like, What am I willfully missing? Who am I trying to make listen to me? Do I have the underlying confidence to stop obsessing about getting everything right and persuading everyone of my point of view? Or, the confidence that it's not always my job to be heard perfectly? Or the confidence to believe that God will ultimately be heard on God's own terms, thank you very much?

A wise person observed that the laws of physics prevail in ordinary human relationships. In the emotional field that we all work in, if you are moving away from me, you are moving at the speed of light. All I have is the sound of my voice and the speed of sound which is proven to be remarkably slower than the speed of light. It will never catch up. Anybody that has ever tried to raise a child knows this. Only when someone is coming toward you are they likely to listen to you.

I ask myself why it took seventeen years of a lot of contentiousness and strain on relationships to make people listen to the story of the possibility of these chairs. Why? Because most people are instinctively, understandably, moving away from a destabilizing change like this. It was only after enough of us stopped, and maybe turned around and took a couple of steps in this direction of the idea, saying "Tell us again what's that about," that things began to change. That's a long time to talk about furniture.

Only when we are eager, when we are open-minded, when our hearts have been broken, when we have run out of conventional wisdom, do we turn in the direction of the ultimate mysteries of life.

Jesus was evidently a person in a hurry. And he thought the very best thing he could do was not fill people up with more conventional wisdom, and not just tell them to be orthodox and to believe what their parents and teachers had taught them to believe—but to crack them open a little bit with these odd teachings called parables. To make them think all over again.

There are a lot of ways to describe salvation. But to make you turn in the right direction, to make your heart and mind supple enough to hear the surprising truth of life, that was a beautiful mission. That was the function of this parable and all the parables that were ever taught.

So, when you are ready, move in the direction of the truth that you seek, the parables will be able to work on you.