



The Parables of Jesus

Lenten Study

Day 1

Read: John 1:1-18

Introduction

There was never a picture of Jesus. Sure, there are museums filled with paintings and artistic renditions of what people imagined Jesus looked like. There was never any recorded message that Jesus left. It is hard to imagine his voice and yet countless people down through the ages have heard him calling.

As much biblical archeology and excavations and research that have taken place over the centuries no one—as of this date—has discovered anything that Jesus ever wrote. He never wrote an autobiography, or a manual for becoming a Christian, nor were we even left with his signature. Yet the Bible continues to outsell the publishing industry every year and more people read about Jesus than anyone else.

Jesus was considered to be a teacher. He was referred to as “Rabbi.” And there was emphasis that was placed on his preaching. Although Matthew wrote down the Sermon on the Mount, few scholars believe that this section of writing was delivered as one talk, but more likely a collection of certain elements of his teaching and preaching.

With all this said, the gospel writers still devote a large, significant portion of the Good News to a type of communication referred to as a *parable*. A parable, like a painting or piece of music, requires the imagination. The speaker literally throws out a parable (*para* = along, *bole* = throw) alongside the listener to catch. By its design the parable is not teaching or preaching new information, but setting alongside us the everyday, ordinary in life so that we might catch the truth we have overlooked.

Lent is upon us. We will set aside these next forty days and examine the parables by trying to catch hold of the truth we missed when they were thrown to us in the past. It is an important exercise. A parable, after all, is the Word of the Lord.

R&D “I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word” (BCP p.265). Are you ready for Lent?

Prayer: Be with us, dear Lord, as we enter into this season of Lent and face the many temptations that are now before us. Help to not only guard our minds but fill our minds with Your Word. Keep our hearts with the peace that passes all understanding and restore our souls so that we may renounce all sinful desires that draw us from You.

Day 2

Read: Luke 10:25-37

The Good Samaritan

Our Lenten study begins today on familiar ground with a lawyer testing the Teacher, Jesus. If Jesus is as important as people claim, and if he is leading followers into a whole new way of thinking, then by all means the lawyer is certainly justified by testing Jesus. After all, if Jesus is starting some kind of new movement, if he is a political zealot, if he does have messianic tendencies, then the lawyer has every reason to put Jesus on trial. The lawyer starts naturally by asking a question about the Law and what he must do to inherit eternal life. What is surprising is how quickly Jesus turns the question back on the lawyer and suddenly it is the lawyer who is on trial and being tested.

This is no Ping-Pong match. It is not a debate. Jesus and the lawyer are not trying to score points. This is serious business. The Gospel of Luke lets us in on a very important discussion that moves the lawyer—and all who reflect upon this parable—the opportunity to focus on the question: “Who is my neighbor?”

What follows, of course, is the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Do you remember back in Genesis chapter 4 when Cain killed Abel and the eternal question of Cain surfaced: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Today’s parable is reminiscent of the same ethical impulse that is reflective of this age-old biblical worldview.

The priest and the Levite are not far removed from Cain as they walk by the man beaten and left in the ditch to die. What is different is that when Jesus tells the story we are not left to wallow in guilt. No, Jesus uses the parable to help us reflect on mercy. Mercy and grace work together. Sometimes in order to offer mercy we need grace. Where there is grace, mercy is not far behind. Don’t ask; go and do likewise.

R&D When was the last time you extended mercy to someone in need? Can you recall the thoughts and feelings and the motivating reason that prompted your action? If you have not extended mercy to someone do you know what is blocking and preventing you from reaching out? Use this Lent to examine the place of mercy in your life.

Prayer: Lord, be with us this day as we walk the road to Jericho and help us become aware of our neighbor so that we, following the example of the Samaritan, might extend Your mercy to those who are in need. This we ask in Christ’s Name.

Day 3

Read: Luke 11:5-13

Prayer and Faith

It was apparent to the disciples that there was something about prayer that gave Jesus a supernatural power. They ask Jesus at the beginning of chapter 11 to “teach us to pray.” What follows is specific instruction and the majestic words revealed in the Lord’s Prayer. The words of prayer are important.

But the instruction in prayer is not over. As important as the words of prayer are, what is more important is the faith that accompanies the words. Jesus moves from teaching the disciples the Lord’s Prayer to another parable. This one is about a friend who comes to you at midnight and bangs on your door and wakes you up by asking for bread. With persistence, the friend stands

outside and knocks until the owner of the household gets up and opens the door and attends to the request.

Jesus makes the point that “persistence,” like the friend at midnight, is vital to prayer. Notice, however, persistence is not simply sheer grit and determination and strong will. Jesus, at the end of the parable, recognizes it is the Holy Spirit who shapes and forms our persistence. When the Holy Spirit gets involved, it is apparent that such persistence—like prayer—is born out of faith.

As we continue on our journey during Lent, prayer becomes less a matter of correct words and more a matter of working with God—together. In other words, begin your day by asking what you and God will be doing together. Ask God for help. Go ahead. Spend some time in prayer asking God for specific help to meet your need.

Rather than fix or control certain situations today, seek God in all the daily activities. Watch for God at work in your daily life and join Him. Don’t stop; knock. Let prayer and faith open the door to communion with God.

R&D Have you ever thought about the relationship between prayer and faith? Can you recall a time when your faith gave you persistence to keep on praying? What happened?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, and infuse my soul with your power so that my prayers today may reflect the faith not for just a minute but for all of eternity.

Day 4

Read: Luke 11:33-36

The Light

Today’s reading is a simple parable that brings with it profound insight: “If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light” (v.34). The eye is the organ that manages and operates one of the five senses. The eye is like a window and it is one way into the heart and into the sixth sense of our spiritual life.

Yet the eye does not always see God. Today I picked up a weekly magazine with countless advertisements featuring attractive women promoting various products. I see commercials and television shows and movies that promote gluttony and pride and violence of all degrees and sizes and shapes. What I see is taken into the brain where it forms and processes images and ideas and thoughts. Often what I see is stored away, or denied, or repressed. I do not always dwell on what I see.

The eye is simply a window. It lets in beauty but it also allows pictures that are not only harmful to our soul but darken our emotions and weaken our will so that the eye sometimes gets the better of us. “If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light.” Light represents energy and power and glory. Light helps with awareness and light brings insight; light shines in the darkness. Light keeps the eye healthy.

Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). It is a reminder for us that our life in Jesus helps us see even when our vision is sometimes blurred and we stumble and fall. During this season of Lent, as we become aware of darkness and our ability to see is compromised because of sin, focus today on this parable.

Jesus brings light. His light is another gift of grace that shines in our darkness so that we do not have to bear the burden of spiritual blindness. Jesus wants us to see, and by “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2) our whole body, mind, and spirit is filled with light that shines like a lamp on a hill.

R&D Have you seen something beautiful recently? Look at a painting. Focus on a flower. Concentrate on someone you love. Become aware of the light that you are letting into your soul. Now take a moment and look for Jesus today.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world. You bring light and glory and honor to all of our world. Shine, dear Lord, shine on. May we worship you, obey you, and follow you as we look for your guidance in all that we do and all that we say.

Day 5

Read: Luke 12:13-21

A Misguided Soul

One of the questions we often ask ourselves is “How much is enough?” There seems to be a compulsive drive within us for more or better. When it comes to something like medication, there are countless labels that advertise: extra-strength, fast-acting, maximum, advanced, and so forth.

This drive for accumulating all the gusto in the world is a reflection of the emptiness or impoverishment within. Beneath the feelings and thoughts, there is the soul that guides and directs our very being. The soul is like a river that runs through our life, and it is from the soul we draw our strength and nourishment and life—with-God. The soul houses our prayer life and it reflects our spiritual being.

When the soul is polluted, like a river, we find ourselves often misguided and in need of help, and look only to the external world and the drive to grab and cling for more. All of this is a backdrop for the parable of the rich farmer who built bigger barns and stored more and more crops as a result of his insatiable greed.

One night his greed got to him and he said: “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’” (v.19). Although full on the outside with barns and crops aplenty, on the inside the farmer was empty and his soul was barren. No wonder then he favored the external world and abandoned his soul, and was left not only out of balance but misguided and unaware.

Evidence of this ruined soul comes at the end of the parable when we see the rich farmer had laid up only treasures for himself and did not practice generosity and was “not rich toward God” (v.21). Once again a simple parable, but as we let it speak to us and sink into our lives this Lent we see the importance of acknowledging the soul at work in our lives right now. Reflecting on the parables is good for the soul!

R&D As you reflect on the rich farmer, have you seen greed at work in your life this Lent? How can grace help you overcome greed and identify some ways you can care for your soul this Lent?

Prayer: Lord, like a deer my soul longs for the flowing streams of water, so my soul longs for You, O God. My soul thirsts for the living God and I pray that You will help me care for my soul this Lent with the gift of Your grace.

Day 6

Read: Luke 12:35-48

Be Ready

I often compare Lent to spring training in baseball. Others compare it to spring cleaning! My preference for spring training is not that it is less work but that it implies discipline. Developing a discipline is work. It takes time. It requires the exercise of the soul. You never know when you will need a particular discipline at a certain time.

The discipline of the spiritual life is not simply a “how to” program that helps a believer advance and grow. It is a movement within the soul that identifies certain practices and exercises that position the person to be at the right place at the right time, so that the right action is necessary.

Again, to use the sports analogy, when playing tennis I had a horrible backhand. I would spend most of my energy and attention on the court running around my backhand. Opponents would soon see this weakness and play on it all the more. It wasn't until I began to work on my backhand and train myself to stroke the ball and get myself in position, that I was able to move to a new level of play.

As we enter the world of this parable today, the servants are expected to “be ready” for the return of the Master of the household. If the servants are not disciplined and are not ready and are not in position, a thief could break in at any time. The movies, the media, and the music today can be like “thieves” who everyday are trying to break-in and shape the mind and imagination and eventually capture our very soul. A good discipline helps us to “be ready” when it is necessary to put our faith into action.

Take a moment and examine the disciplines of your soul. Daily reading and reflecting of Scripture is helpful, and use of *The Journey* is a discipline that over the years will feed and strengthen faith. In addition to Scripture, prayer invites the Son of Man to return because the practice of spiritual disciplines helps us to “be ready.”

R&D Take some time during this Lent to identify the spiritual disciplines that you are currently practicing. Some examples are: daily Bible reading, study of Scripture, prayer, solitude, service, simplicity, worship. Identify the disciplines that help you to “be ready.”

Prayer: Strengthen us with Your grace, dear Lord, and find in our soul the mansion that you have prepared for us.

Day 7

Read: Romans 6:1-14

Grace Interlude

At this point in our study of Jesus' parables, let's pause for a moment and catch our breath and think about grace. For some, there is a real tug-of-war between grace and sin. There is a deep and abiding question in the soul that asks: which force holds greater power over my life—grace or sin?

If we choose grace does that mean we can go ahead and sin all the more because grace will always win out over sin?

On the other hand, if we choose sin and conclude that sin holds great power over our lives and continues to wreak havoc and separate us from God, does that mean the gift of grace is rendered useless?

“By no means!” Paul writes (v.2). “How can we who died in sin go on living in it?” By living *in* Christ, God has solved the sin problem. We are no longer separated from God. As a result of God’s grace, we are no longer under the rule of the law but we now live under the rule of grace.

In fact, Paul writes nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Nothing—not even sin. As we make our way through these forty days and forty nights, no doubt sin will keep popping-up its ugly head. But remember we are under the rule of grace. Grace is our ruler.

I remember once seeing a church sign that read: “If you give the devil an inch he will become the ruler!” The strength in grace is that we have changed because we have died to sin and we are alive to Christ, which is an act of grace. Sin is strong; grace is stronger. Sin is less interesting; grace is more interesting. As grace rules we focus on the Kingdom and our minds on “things that are above” (Colossians 3:2).

R&D Have you ever considered what it is like to be under the rule of grace? How does this rule and dominion differ from that of the rule of sin?

Prayer: Dear Lord, grant that as we have become divided by sin may we find ways to be brought together through Your rule of grace.

Day 8

Read: Luke 13:6-9

The Tree of Grace

Bearing fruit is the name of the game. We are in the business of making disciples. We need more members. We need a larger budget. Go. Don’t stop. These are the kinds of demands that are placed on the church every day. I set these voice within the context of today’s parable on the withered fig tree and it makes me laugh.

Yes, it is important that the church grow and be healthy. But let’s define growth. Are we talking numerical growth or spiritual growth? The same thing is true with health. How do we define the health of the church? Is it the size of the building or the budget? Getting involved in the church and helping it grow often requires action and personal engagement; but there are also days when getting involved requires restraint.

Again, think of today’s parable and the fig tree that did not produce. There is a temptation to cut it down. Listen to the farmer’s exasperation: “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” Sound familiar?

Remember Jesus came to save and redeem and heal, not to cut down and destroy. So the parable is a quick reminder of, again, the importance to take care of the work going on beneath the soil and down to the roots and not just evaluate the tree based on the fruit and the produce. So the fertilizer—though not a pretty image—is a reminder of the way God uses grace to give us another chance.

One other thought: if God is not in a hurry, but is patient, then maybe we should slow down and put on the brakes. We just read a parable about watching and waiting. Patience is a word that is not very popular in our microwave culture that asks only: “What have you done for me lately?” One thing we can do, as the church, is to be quiet and wait and watch and extend a little grace. And then come back to the tree next year.

R&D *Grace is not a quick fix. What are you waiting for right now?*

Prayer: *Lord, You are the source of patience; and rather than ask You to hurry, I pray to take a deep breath and remember that You are God and in Your time and through Your grace it will all work out.*

Day 9

Read: Luke 13:18-21

Spiritual Growth

As we continue on our journey through Lent, it is literally tempting to wonder if all this study makes any difference. We question whether or not we have changed. Are we any different as a result of Lent? These are natural questions that surface, especially for those of us who are results-oriented. We want to see some impact. The spiritual life, however, is organic. As a result, spiritual growth is not an external measurement. It begins first within.

In today's reading, Jesus talks about growth in his Kingdom, comparing it to a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. When planted, we are uncertain as to what has happened or what difference this little seed can make. The last thing we want to do is to dig up the plant and inspect the roots to examine what is happening. No, once the seed has been planted the growth that takes place is often at first unseen.

We also read today of yeast and how when mixed with flour the bread will rise. Again, it doesn't take much yeast to make a big difference. Inner growth often begins in insignificant ways and is seemingly small compared to the big, exciting events and headlines that are swirling around outside of us.

What is apparent is that the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Hopefully, this Lent, we have already taken that one step—made one change: a thought, habit, or prayer.

Spiritual growth is not something we measure with a ruler; it is about change. We experience growth not by looking in a mirror nor by having somehow arrived at a goal we set. Spiritual growth is about God who is at work in all aspects of our lives, and as a result our transformation is an eternal project that goes on forever. The important thing for today is that the seed has been planted and the yeast is in the mix.

R&D *Take some time today and reflect on your expectations for Lent this year. What did you expect to happen? When did you expect it to take place? Are these expectations realistic; that is, do they rely upon God?*

Prayer: *Lord, how often do I want to grow into my own image and the way I imagine my life should be. Help me during this season of Lent to rely on You and to look to You for growth, so that when I notice a difference it will be to Your honor and glory.*

Day 10

Read: Luke 14:7-14

Hospitality

The parable that Jesus tells today at first glance appears as if it is about minding your manners. Again, Jesus is more concerned with our spiritual growth and so this parable has to do with the yeast and the mustard seed that has been mixed and planted with in our souls.

Yes, the parable speaks about outer social relations. But what needs to take place is first a change of heart, and this is where the seed of hospitality is planted in our lives. In one sense, the hospitality of Jesus and his openness to eat and drink with sinners is what got him into trouble. In another sense, the lack of hospitality on the part of the scribes and Pharisees is what prompted our reading today.

What happens when we lack hospitality is often a deeper concern, a lack of compassion and concern for our neighbors. When we lack hospitality it is also a sign that we have—for whatever reason—resented and denied all that has been “given” to us. A hospitable person is simply making available and sharing blessings. A person who is not hospitable is unable to share because they have yet to recognize all the many ways that God has blessed them.

I can remember being on a mission to the Dominican Republic in one of the poorest regions. Time and again these church people opened their homes and their belongings and their food to us. It was hospitality. It wasn't about what we could do for them. It was about their way of reaching out to us. I think the parables Jesus tells often open us to an understanding or impression of what God's Kingdom is like. God's Kingdom is hospitable and as we follow Jesus during this Lent it is apparent that the joy we experience is in his ongoing welcome. With hospitality there is humility. When there is no hospitality, only pride remains.

R&D What is easier for you, being a guest or being a host? Why? How hospitable is your church when guests arrive? How hospitable are we to one another?

Prayer: Dear Lord, You have blessed us over and over again. We are grateful for all that has been given to us. Instill in us a heart that is not only filled with gratitude but, by Your grace, help us to become generous and extend Your spirit of hospitality in all that we say and all that we do.

Day 11

Read: Luke 14:15-24

A Full House

What happens when we reject hospitality or turn our back on God's grace seems at first glance like the focus of this parable. It does not seem necessarily morally edifying. It probably is not listed as one of our favorite parables. It is a difficult parable to preach. Even though the temptation is to deny the meaning of this parable, the truth is still there waiting for us.

The story opens with a king who gave a great dinner and invited many. All the preparations had been made, the food had been cooked, and the king was ready to receive his guests. Unfortunately, one by one each guest made a lame excuse as to why they could not attend at the last minute. Notice then, the king became angry and told his servant to go out into the streets and invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Even after the servant went out through the city he reported back to the king and said “Sir, there is still room for more!” Then the king said to his servant, “Go out into the roads and lanes and find more to invite so that my house may be full.” Can you imagine the party?

In one respect, this parable sets us up for the story in the next chapter of the prodigal son and the banquet which follows his return. But in another sense, it is a reminder for all of us who are not “hungry” for God's Kingdom and are more satisfied with our own world. It helps us remember why Jesus said, “It will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven.” God wants a full house. He wants to throw a great banquet. But it is not a matter of when it is convenient for us, or if we choose to go. Belief comes

as God's gift and His invitation is like a mustard seed or yeast. It will grow and His house will be full.

R&D The rejection of the king's invitation is not simply embarrassing but revealing. Give some thought as to what it reveals about arrogance and pride and using religion only when it is convenient.

Prayer: Lord, I am grateful that You are not the kind of God I can order around or call on only when it is convenient. Help me always to remember that from You no secrets are hid. Cleanse now the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit so that I may perfectly love You and worthily glorify Your Name.

Day 12

Read: Luke 15:3-7

Lost Sheep

As we continue on our Lenten study we need to start where we are—not where we necessarily want to be. Often, New Year's resolutions and Lenten disciplines and Weight Watcher programs all start with a goal in mind and when the goal is not reached the program fails.

This Lent may we begin not with our attention on a program or a law, but with a good look in the mirror. We begin with a realistic assessment. We start by becoming aware of sin and the reality of how sin has damaged our life. Sin has separated us from God. We have been hurt by this alienation. We are estranged. Our Lenten study opens with parables about being "lost" or being separated from God.

You know what it means to be lost. At a personal level, it means our lives are helpless, we are out-of-control, we are missing, and we are out of sight. This is an apt description for a person who is caught in the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23). It is death. In fact, the New Testament often referred to the place of the lost as "Gehenna" or a cosmic dump for those who died and are now considered useless.

In some respects this is a tough way to begin Lent, but when Jesus tells this parable about the lost sheep he is appealing to this dynamic of sin and the experience of being separated from a loving God who—like the shepherd—will look for us in the wilderness until we are found. It is a parable that speaks to us not simply about bad news, but the good news that comes with being found. It is a parable of grace.

Imagine being lost. Imagine being found. The difference between lost and found begins with our ability to repent. Repent is not necessarily doom and gloom and the world is coming to an end. Rather the word "repent" (*metanoia*) is a word that is used to encourage us to think again about our thinking. Lent is a good time to re-think.

R&D Can you recall a time when you lost something like a set of car keys or a credit card? Do you remember the feelings and thoughts that raced through your head? Now imagine being lost from God. Once again, imagine some of the thoughts and feelings that such an image sets loose. Turn your attention to being found.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I pray that my mind will not be simply conformed to the ways of the world but, through this study of your parables, I pray that my mind will be transformed and I may discern what is good and acceptable and, above all, your perfect will for my life.

Day 13

Read: Luke 15:8-10

The Lost Coin

Here again is a parable. We read it. Hear again the parable. We listen to it. So few words. It is short and simple. No doubt it can be memorized today on your way out the door. The structure is designed so that the story can be told and remembered.

A woman loses a coin. She lights a lamp. She sweeps the floor. She looks all around. She finds the coin. She is happy and even calls her neighbors in to rejoice with her. The end.

Not really. Remember, Jesus tells this story so we can imagine it. We know what it is like to lose something. Losing one coin may not seem like that big a deal, but ten was a complete number—just like one hundred sheep was a complete number of sheep. Lose one of anything and we are no longer complete. So now the question becomes: what do we need to restore our completeness? Can we be made whole? Is it possible to be healed from our loss?

So the woman lights a lamp? A lamp represents the “light of the world.” By taking hold of the “light which shines in the darkness” we now have a chance to find what is lost. We sweep. Again, this action has to do with being made clean.

And we search. Sometimes, if you are looking for a coin, the search may take only a matter of minutes. But remember this is a parable. The coin represents something of value. The coin completes us. For some, the search for finding completeness can take a lifetime.

The conclusion? It is not really a conclusion, rather an invitation. We are invited into this parable of grace; of being lost and found. Lent is a good time to step into the house of our soul and look for what is lost.

R&D So much of life is spent appearing as if we are independent. Recall a time recently when you depended upon God. Do you consider yourself dependent upon God? How so?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we are reminded today in this parable of the woman and the lost coin that we are the ones who are lost and we are the ones who hold you as the light and we are the ones who repent and sweep away all that keeps us from you. Help us to find you this day so that we may become the ones who rejoice.

Day 14

Read: Romans 6:15-23

Grace Interlude

Let's pause again as we make our way through this season of Lent for a little grace. The parables have been about grace. How about if we experience a little grace? First, Paul writes: “you having once been slaves of sin.” Think about that phrase for a moment: slaves of sin. Have you ever considered yourself enslaved to sin? What would that be like? Certainly, it would be dull and dreary. There would be boredom to such a life that would literally be inescapable. In addition, a slave is held against his or her will. In fact, a slave often loses the will to live a life that has meaning or purpose or value. In the end, a life enslaved to sin is painful emotionally and even physically.

A slave to sin is under the control of a power that is greater than ourselves. It is however, not a good power. It is a dark and destructive power. This loss of control means that we no longer have control over our mind and our emotions and our everyday decisions. Anyone who has battled with addictions can identify with a life of sin. Grace, however, is another matter.

In his book *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald May makes the connection between sin and addiction. The dynamics are similar. The appeal and desire that leads to addiction is a craving for security and freedom. Ironically, the addiction in the end produces only insecurity and inhibits and hinders behavior in ways that one's life becomes increasingly self-destructive and anything but free.

Grace cannot be possessed like a substance but, like the Spirit, is freely given to us by a loving God, and grace in turn frees us from sin and all that separates us from God. Grace empowers us to live a life that is free to love God, which is, after all, what our hearts truly long for. Grace is pretty amazing when you think about it!

R&D Have you had an experience with grace that you can recall? In what ways has grace given you the strength to do what you normally could not have done on your own?

Prayer Lord, grant us grace, we pray, whenever we go astray from Your ways, and bring us back with grateful hearts knowing that if You make us free, we will be free indeed.

Day 15

Read: Luke 15:11-24

The Lost Son

It is a sad story in many respects. I was talking with my Youth Minister the other day about fourteen year olds who have engaged in sexual intercourse. I was stunned. Fourteen year olds are babies in my mind. What must be going on in their minds? Obviously, it is a culture of movies and media and music that has planted these images of a “fun” life, a life of acceptance and pleasure, in the immature minds.

Innocence is lost at an earlier age these days. But when we read the parable of the Prodigal Son today, we read again the age-old story of a lost innocence that was as common then as it is today. In fact, from our biblical perspective we need only go back to the story of Adam and Eve and be reminded of our original story of lost innocence.

Back to the younger son: he insults his father demanding his share of the inheritance while the father is still very much alive. The son goes off to sow his wild oats. It is a story of self-destruction and brokenness. Without dwelling on this aspect of the story, Jesus tells us that the boy “came to himself.” He came to his senses and he became aware, or he had a spiritual awakening. Exactly how we explain this reversal and turn-around is now his story to tell.

What we also learn, however, is how the father was “filled with compassion.” He ran to meet his son. It is a reminder for us today of not only a relationship between a father and a son, but it describes the relationship we have with God. Rather than dwell on it being a story of lost innocence and sadness—which it is—also be reminded of the grace that is found in compassion.

Compassion, like grace, is a gift. Compassion, like grace, is undeserved. And like with grace, a little bit of compassion goes a long, long way.

R&D Picture in your mind today not only the son returning home and what he must have looked like, but imagine the father. Rather than being punitive or judgmental and throwing-the-book at the younger son look at the father's heart and how it is “filled with compassion.” What do you know about compassion?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to look with compassion upon those who are lost as you have looked upon us with your compassion. Help us to welcome home those who have left your love and, through the grace of your compassion, may we welcome them back to your saving embrace.

Day 16

Read: Luke 15:25-32

The Other Lost Son

As we continue with the parable of the Prodigal Son, we are well aware of another son in the story. It is the story of the elder son. The elder son is the one who stayed home with his father. He was obedient and trustworthy. He still appeared innocent, or at least without fault.

All that changed when the younger son returned home and the father called out to all who could hear, “Quickly, bring out a robe (not just any old robe but the best one) and let’s dress him royally complete with a ring and slippers.” Further details are given to the servants about the celebration and the food that is to be prepared, but backstage is the elder son who is also listening to the father’s joy over this younger brother who was “once dead and is alive again; who was lost and is found!”

As the elder son began to hear the sounds of the music and the dancing and the celebration taking place, he could also hear the resentment and anger and, yes, fury that was boiling-up now inside of him. At the same time, the father noticed that this elder brother was “lost” from the celebration and he set out to find him. The encounter was again a story of being lost.

Our concern with the elder son is not so much about his “lost innocence” but rather his rejection of his father’s compassion and consequently his rejection of his father’s love. It was a terribly painful time for both father and son. We never know what happened to the elder son.

My hope is that in the end he made his way to Golgotha and to the foot of the Cross. It is there we see how unresolved anger, sin, and, ultimately, separation from God our Father, destroy our innocence. We also find compassion and a welcome home.

R&D In what ways do you identify with the elder son? Are there emotions or life-experiences that have left you thinking that life is not fair? Spend some time with the elder son and look at the Cross and think again about sounds of dancing and music that you may have missed.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, it is on the hard wood of the Cross you reach out to all with your saving embrace. During this season of Lent, we pray that you will reach out and touch us wherever our hearts have been hardened. As we gaze at your Cross, may we follow you out of the tomb this Easter and celebrate fully the joy of your resurrection.

Day 17

Read: Luke 16:1-9

The Risk

We move in our reading from the familiar and favorite story of the Prodigal Son to now the strange and uncertain story of the shrewd manager. We’re going to look at this parable in an unconventional way. The immediate attraction is to the master who shows mercy and generosity—even to the dishonest steward. What a great master! We could end the story there but Jesus says more.

The dishonest steward is treated with mercy and generosity and grace. He is simply relieved of his job. He is fired. The reader and listener know his punishment should have been and could have been much worse.

What happens next is a plan that the dishonest steward acts out before our eyes. No one knows he is no longer working for the master and so, in a sense, he is independent. But the dishonest steward is well aware of the generosity and the grace and the mercy that has been extended to him by the master.

It is now his turn to do the same. And so the dishonest steward goes around town and looks up, one by one, all the debtors who owe his master and cuts them a deal in their repayment plan. The dishonest steward is now operating in a world of grace and mercy and generosity. We are uncertain as to how this plan will unfold and work out. Surprisingly, the dishonest steward is a hero, not only with all the debtors, but even with the master of the household. How can this be?

For those looking for a moral to this story or an edifying ethical teaching—it is not to be found. What is present is the relationship between the master and the dishonest steward and all the debtors. The community is still intact—grace, mercy, and generosity flows. It is not the way we expected or the way we might do it but, in the end, salvation is extended to all and communion with the Master is unbroken.

R&D As we reflect on this parable we might have questions about the apparent “shrewdness” of the dishonest steward. He is not our focus however. Remember, during Lent, our ultimate goal and focus is not on control or fixing everything around us, but it is to stay in communion with God. When one door closes another door opens.

Prayer: Remind us always that we are under Your judgment and that our only prayer is to stay focused on You; when we make poor choices and when we make mistakes may we find not only wisdom but Your grace, mercy, and generosity quick to save; in the Name of Jesus we pray.

Day 18

Read: Luke 16:19-31

Repent

Again, Jesus tells a parable that claims our attention. The contrast is set up immediately between a rich man, who is dressed in purple and fine linen, and Lazarus, a poor man who is covered with sores and who is hungry. The contrast is striking. It catches our attention both in the way the story is told and in the way we imagine the different characters. We can picture both. Our heart and our sympathy is drawn immediately to Lazarus. The rich man is an easy target of scorn.

But that is not the point of the parable. This is not a parable about class warfare. It is a parable that is designed to help the rich, the middle class, the poor, and all who are lost to turn around and repent.

Repent is a good word for us to consider, especially during this season of Lent. It is not simply a spiritual word or a word that is confined to only religious vocabulary. Repent means to think-again-about-your-thinking. Often times our thinking is what gets us into trouble. “Stinking thinking” shapes the images and ideas and thoughts that we carry around in our head about both this life and the life to come.

Today’s parable about the rich man and Lazarus is designed and told by Jesus to help all who have been separated from God—for whatever reason—to think again about how they are living their life right now. It is a sharp, sudden intervention that is designed to ask each and every

one of us: what does it take to think again? If we do not listen to Moses or the prophets, do you think we will change our mind if someone should rise from the dead?

Conversion will not come from the outside but needs to take place on the inside first, and one way to bring about a change of heart is to repent.

R&D Christians have a continuing need to renew repentance just as we do our faith. In fact, the two—repentance and faith—often go together. Have you taken time to repent this Lent about some aspect of your life that is removed from God? Take some time and think-again-about-your-thinking.

Prayer: Almighty God, accept our repentance for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering and for our indifference to injustice and cruelty.

Day 19

Read: Luke 18:1-8

Persistence

From my experience as a parish priest, one of the most difficult types of parishioners to call on are those labeled: “lapsed.” All the charm, all the excitement in the church, all the ways in which they have been missed and are needed, all the logic—nothing seems to touch them. There is a wall built around lapsed members and, when it comes to church, nothing seems capable of penetrating that thick defense.

Although it is difficult to identify only one reason, one key factor that runs throughout our discussions is that the lapsed member has simply given up. They have given up on the church, the clergy, the staff, the choir, the parishioners, and all that constitutes their understanding of church. Ultimately, they have given up on God.

Today’s parable is again told in a manner so that the characters are vivid in our imagination—we can picture the widow and it is not difficult, nor any stretch of the imagination, to consider what the judge is like. And like with the rich man and Lazarus, our heart immediately takes sides and we go with the widow.

What strikes me about the widow is that, unlike a lapsed member, she never gives up. Against all odds she continues to remain vigilant in her prayer. Nothing will distract her. She is a woman of focus. I can’t speak for those who are lapsed and who have left the church. They are gone. I can speak for myself, however, and what confuses me and blurs my vision and focus is impatience.

We live in a microwave culture where we expect instant results. Today’s parable convicts me of the need to pray for those who are lapsed and to pray for everything that tends to clutter my life. Not losing heart, but keeping focused on the vision found in the Kingdom, life requires not simply patience, but persistence.

R&D What happens to you emotionally when you find yourself impatient? What good comes from being impatient? When were you last persistent? Take a moment to reflect on the relationship of persistence to your prayer life.

Prayer: Lord, so often when I am impatient I not only become frustrated and angry and simply want to throw in the towel, but I also lose sight of what is important in life with You. Help me to

be more persistent in my prayers and perhaps then become more patient in all that I do and say. Amen.

Day 20

Read: Luke 18:9-14

Humility

I remember, years ago, taking a walk in a park all by myself. I sat down at the foot of the mountain and simply gazed at the mountain in the spirit of contemplation. The mountain stood before me, big and massive. It had stood there long before I was born and, God willing, it will stand there long after I am gone from earth. The mountain has always been there. Not only that, there is nothing I can do or say to catch the attention of the mountain. It is not about me. It is about the mountain.

These are the kind of thoughts I bring with me to our parable for today. Yes, the Pharisee is full of himself. The Pharisee trusted in himself and his self-righteousness. It is a bad combination and a toxic mix, especially when it comes to character formation. In the end the Pharisee is filled with contempt.

The tax collector is remarkably different. He simply went up to the temple to pray and, like sitting before a mountain, realized how big God is and how small he was. He had a balance and a proper proportion to his life that is based on humility. Humility reflects the inner life of a person.

One of the insights that comes with this parable is that by getting in touch with the two characters of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we get in touch with ourself. We discover quickly that we do not want to be like the Pharisee. Being like the tax collector is not easy. It takes a dose of humility.

Humility weakens hypocrisy. It is hard to be hypocritical sitting before a mountain. Jesus wants us to know that it should be just as hard to be hypocritical when we go to church and pray. In place of hypocrisy there is humility, and when we find humility love is never far behind.

R&D The parable today helps us examine our prayer life and our motives for prayer. Sometimes we pray without humility only to find ourselves caught in a web of self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and contempt. What keeps you humble?

Prayer: Lord, help us always to stay humble before You and to not get too carried away with ourselves; we know that without humility we quickly slip into a life of hypocrisy and pride and contempt for others.

Day 21

Read: Romans 7:1-6

Grace Interlude

As we finish our study of the parables in the Gospel of Luke we have been made aware, time and again, of how grace is the key for entering a life with God. This life-with-God is “Emmanuel Life” where God is with us, and we find ourselves now alive in God’s Kingdom. This understanding of the Kingdom of God will be further told through the parables in the Gospel of Matthew, where we will next turn our attention.

As we make our way through the season of Lent, may we carry with us this gift of grace. We know grace is stronger than sin and we know grace frees us to love God, while sin does not. Today, Paul leaves us with one more image, or metaphor, when discussing our life-with-God: it is

like marriage. More than sin or more than slavery, Paul uses the metaphor of marriage to respond to initial question: “Should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1). By no means!

There is a “No Parking” sign in London’s Heathrow airport that simply says: “Don’t even think about it.” Basically, that is what Paul is saying when it comes to continuing in sin, especially after receiving grace. We wouldn’t even want to think about sin because we love the life of grace so much. It is like marriage.

The question is: “Should we continue to sin?” The answer is: “Are you kidding?”

A person who is in love will have died to sin. A person who is in love is set free. A person who is in love received that love as a sign of God’s grace. A person who is in love will only want to please the beloved. So it is with marriage; so it is with God. Lent is a time to think about God’s grace.

Sin? Don’t even think about it!

R&D Love is grace in action. Love is a matter of both giving and receiving. When was the last time you extended grace to someone? Can you recall the act? What might you do during the remainder of Lent to set grace in action?

Prayer: Grant us grace, dear Lord, to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Day 22

Read: Matthew 13:1-23

The Kingdom of Heaven

As we move through this season of Lent we will move from the Gospel of Luke to the Gospel of Matthew. Our reading of the parables found in Luke emphasized over and over again one word: grace. If we can summarize in one word the parables in Matthew it would be “kingdom.” Read and enter into these parables as if hearing them for the first time. With ears to hear listen again and again as Jesus teaches us about life in his Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven is quite simply where Jesus is Lord.

Do we have to die in order to enter this Kingdom? No. By professing Jesus is Lord, we find ourselves immediately open to his divine rule over our life and, as a result, his Kingdom is at hand. This Kingdom is real. It is spiritual. We can rely on this Kingdom just as I can rely on the chair that I am sitting in while I write this devotion. This reality provides us with a new way to live.

“Listen! A sower went out to sow.” With these opening words to the parable of the sower we are invited into the reality of God’s Kingdom. Not everyone understands or appreciates what this Kingdom is all about. Like birds that swoop in and eat the seed so the devil snatches our minds and thoughts about the Kingdom and flies away.

Still the sower throws out more seed about the Kingdom life but the rocky soil of our feelings is so superficial that we lose heart quickly. Our soul—like hard soil—can become baked by the sun and the seeds can gain no root system, no staying power. The sower throws seeds on the thorny ground, but they get choked by our distractions and worldly cares. Watch, however, what happens this Lent when we allow the seeds of the Kingdom to grow on soil we have tilled and prepared for Jesus. Anyone with ears: Listen! The parable speaks to us.

R&D *As followers of Jesus we live in an environment that is not always productive to life in the Kingdom. What are some of the difficulties you have experience this Lent that have inhibited your growth?*

Prayer: *Lord, we watch as You scatter Your seed on both the soil and the soul of our life. Help us till an area for You so that we might experience the growth in Your Kingdom and, by putting down roots in this life with You, may we bear fruit that is as always to Your honor and glory. Amen.*

Day 23

Read: Matthew 13:24-30

Day of Decision

Hear again a parable about seed and the Kingdom of Heaven. The seed is planted again by the farmer who places it with care in the field. This time, however, the enemy plants weeds next to the wheat. Now the field is filled not only with wheat but with weeds as well. What is the farmer to do?

The farmer instructs his servants to let the wheat grow alongside the weeds. Should the servants try to dig up the weeds, they would uproot and destroy the very wheat they were trying to grow. Wait until the wheat is grown and then we will separate the two, the farmer advises. The wheat will be gathered into the barn and the weeds will be burned.

Jesus is telling another parable about the Kingdom life and, as you know, “there are days and there are days.” We are not always sure if what we are doing is to the glory of God. There is a part of us that sometimes wants to uproot a good idea, or a good thought, or a dream and examine it, which, in the end, would only ruin it. But Jesus encourages us to “sleep on it” and allow the idea, the thought, or the dream to run its course. There will be a time to examine and discern the worth and value latter on.

The outcome is often determined by the outlook. We are not in control, but we know who is. If we are always trying to manipulate the outcome, we will set ourselves up as gods and uproot the divine seed that has been planted in our soul.

The outlook means we have a vision where we rely on Jesus and depend on him to help us sort through and discern the good and bad when we are mature enough to decide. Decisions and choices and judgment are necessary components of responsible living in God’s Kingdom. We are responsible. Life in the Kingdom is able-to-respond.

R&D *Can you identify some weeds that have been planted next to your wheat? In light of this parable, what understanding do you now have about spiritual growth?*

Prayer *Lord, it seems like we always want patience—and we want it now; but grant us today the ability to discern and to sort through the clutter in our life and to focus our full attention on You so that we may grow in Your image. Amen*

Day 24

Read: Matthew 13:36-43

Listen

Although we studied the parable of the weeds and the wheat in our prior lesson, it is well worth our taking a moment to reflect upon the explanation Jesus provides as to the meaning of this parable: “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.” That may seem obvious, but it is

apparent that Jesus wants what is good for us. Now the question might come up in your mind: “What is good?”

Good is the promotion of love. When we do something good we are promoting love for another person or for God. Life in the Kingdom is the “good life” because it is all about love. The enemy who sows the weeds “is the devil,” weeds that do not bear good fruit. It is that simple. In the end, angels will separate the weeds from the wheat. We need not worry about how that is done or when that will be done or where it will be done. Focus only on the seed Jesus has planted in you and allow it to grow as wheat and you will bear fruit. The fruit is spiritual fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22).

When the weeds are separated from the wheat the “righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom.” This parable helps us live with the weeds and all that irritates us, like clutter and conflict and troublesome behavior and lies and deceit. “Listen!” Jesus says. That is the word for today. When we listen for his Word we move beyond the five senses into the sixth sense and into the spiritual realm. It is here that we quiet our senses and we allow the possibility of obedience to come alive and grow in our heart.

It is not about our abilities. It is about availability. Listening for God’s Word is a way of availability.

R&D St. Francis of Assisi once said: “Preach the Gospel all the time; if necessary use words!” Often our words interfere with our actions much like weeds interfere with wheat. Take some time today and listen for God’s Word in your life.

Prayer Lord, help me to take a moment today to close my eyes, close my mouth, clear my thoughts, calm my feelings, still my body and then, when You are ready, open my ears so that I may hear You and Your Word for me. Amen.

Day 25

Read: Matthew 13:44

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”

What follows now are three short, simple parables on the Kingdom of Heaven. Even though the three parables are short (a verse or two) and simple (a treasure, pearls, a net), we will reflect on them one at a time.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure.” What is a treasure? A treasure is something of value, perhaps even great value. A treasure is something you search for. Now, think about what you treasure. It could be a car. It could be a house. It could be a coin collection. Each of these describes a material treasure. Jesus wants us to go deeper. A treasure is something we relate to and it has great worth.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure because it contains relationships and it literally relates to our identity. Without this treasure, relationships would be lost and our identity would be weakened. And so we search for these relationships and we search for our identity but to no avail. It is a one-dimensional search. It is all about being human. We want control over relationships. We want control over our identity. We want control over our world. Jesus wants us to dig deeper.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure “hidden in a field.” In other words, the Kingdom is hidden from those who seek control. The Kingdom is hidden in a field over there, or out there, or not here, or it can’t be seen, or it can’t be found. The Kingdom of Heaven is hidden from sight.

However, for those searching to be under God's control and under God's rule and God's under authority, the treasure can be located and found right here and right now. When we find the Kingdom Jesus says "we will sell all that we have" and will turn our life over to God and find a new identity and an eternal relationship. Imagine!

R&D What do you know about the discipline of submission and the art of letting go and letting God? When did you last experience joy in the practice of this discipline?

Prayer: Lord, You have taught us to imagine the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure, and we know that the greatest treasure is in seeking after You and finding You. Remind us always that this treasure is within our grasp when we let go of our will and take hold of You so that Your will may be done in all that we do and say.

Day 26

Read: Matthew 13:45

The Pearl of Great Price

Again Jesus understands the importance of images that will help transform the imagination, the ideas and the thoughts that travel through our minds. Jesus seeks the renewal of our minds and the image today is that of a merchant in search of fine pearls. At first this parable may not catch our attention, but again allow this image to penetrate and literally sink into the very depths of our mind and our being.

Yesterday we reflected on the hidden "treasure" being like our hidden identity with Christ, and today we might think of the pearl as providing purpose, meaning, and significance to our life. Pastor Rick Warren touched the nerve of a large audience with his book *The Purpose Driven Life* and his opening line: "It is not about you." Today, as we reflect upon the merchant in search of the finest pearl, we are aware that the pearl is not about us but is about God. It is God who brings purpose, meaning, and significance to our life.

Without trying to turn this parable into an allegory, it is important to reflect upon the ways in which God brings purpose, meaning, and significance to our life. Certainly, one way is by helping us discover our mission. When we are on a mission we are in touch with our deepest longings and with the hurt and the hope of the world. When we are on mission we are less into our own survival as we are into service.

Today provides us with time to reflect upon the mission that God has given us. For some, mission is waking the kids up and driving them to school. For others, mission is caring for elderly parents. For others, mission is work in the marketplace. Each of us has a mission that God has placed upon our hearts. It comes with a great price. So too does the pearl, and the Cross, and life in the Kingdom. It is worth it!

R&D Take a moment and think about the mission you are on and what kind of purpose, meaning, and significance it is bringing to your life. How does the mission you are on tap into your deep longings with the hurt and the hope of the world?

Prayer: Lord, You have sent your disciples out and have given them authority throughout the world; send me today so that I might reach someone for You and, in so doing, find the pearl of great price.

Day 27

Read: Matthew 13:47-50

The Net

I remember being in a boat on the Sea of Galilee with a group from our church. It was a cloudy day and there was a fog over the water. Somehow it seemed just right for the mystery of seeing Jesus walking on the water. But the boat stopped and the guide simply pulled out a net and cast it over the water. It was a dramatic reminder for all of us of the importance of the net.

So often we think of ourselves as the ones who are throwing the net and that we are the fishermen. In this parable, however, Jesus is clear that the Kingdom is throwing a net to catch us. We are the fish who are swimming around unaware of being caught. God throws out the net, meaning that God intervenes and breaks into our history and it is God's net that enters our life.

How God catches us is different for each person reading this parable. For some, it is when bad things happen to good people and we struggle with the meaning of suffering. God's net grabs us and brings us onto the shore with the words: "How blessed are you that mourn." For others, it may be a case of "stinking thinking" where we are tired of being weary and making poor decisions. Again, God's net catches us from a life of self-destruction and we hear the words, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit." You get the drift. Each one of us is swimming around unaware of what is next, but once we are caught we are different.

It is not that we will be brought to shore and our life will be over, but it is a parable that reminds us "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). This is a parable that reminds us we will be transformed and then we will be called to throw out the net and become "fishers for people" (Matthew 4:19).

R&D Reflect on this image of the net. What it is like being a fish swimming into the invisible grasp of the net? Recall the initial fear that life as we know it will be over, but then notice the pull of the net and the change and conversion taking place. How does the net compare to your story of transformation?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, remind us that when we are powerless and unaware and you catch us in your net you are bringing us to a new power and a new awareness found only in you and in your Kingdom.

Day 28

Read: Colossians 1:9-14

Thinking about the Kingdom of God

As we continue into this season of Lent, the concept of "Kingdom" will surface, time and again, in our study of the parables that are recorded in Matthew. For some, this concept of "Kingdom" may be new, for others it may sound antiquated, and for still others the Kingdom is merely a reminder of a fantasy world like Disney and the "magical kingdom." Yet, Jesus talked more about the Kingdom than anything else.

During Lent, we will reflect on what Jesus taught about the Kingdom and think again about our life in the Kingdom. We will think about the solid reality that God is in control of our lives and we will dispel images and thoughts that have been less than helpful. For starters, we know the Kingdom of God is made available to us through the Son of God, Jesus Christ. As we follow Jesus and step into his Kingdom we find our life changes from a mortal life to an immortal life. In his Kingdom we are born again (John 3) and we receive life from on high that is eternal. This never-

ending life-with-God brings us into the fullness of human life right now as we are transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Look again at our reading for today: “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son...” (v.13).

As we enter the Kingdom we don’t just relax and act as if we have arrived. No, God is active and God is moving and, as a result, the Kingdom of God is dynamic. We who have been rescued find it incumbent to not just sit there but to *do* something! One of the first things Jesus encourages us to do is to “seek first the kingdom of God...” (Matthew 6:33). Seeking requires daily spiritual disciplines like prayer, reading the Bible, fasting, serving, and worshipping Christ the King! Let’s go.

R&D What do you know about the Kingdom of God? What do you “do” to recognize the Kingdom in your everyday life?

Prayer: Almighty God, we give You thanks for Your Son, Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords; help us always to seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness.

Day 29

Read: Matthew 13:51-53

New and Old

After reflecting on the treasure, the pearl, and the net, Jesus turns to his disciples saying, “Do you get it?” The disciples say, “Yes.” Jesus says, “OK then, every one of you who follows me has now been trained in Kingdom life and you are like the master of the household, or the manager, who is now responsible for taking care of the thoughts and feelings and behavior of all that you say and do. From this day forward, you now need to integrate your past and present and future in a way that is coherent and transparent and helpful to all who enter your house. Don’t forget the net. Think about the pearl. Remember the treasure. Hold these images in your head. I will help you live this new life. You will integrate your time with me through a life of conversion rather than living a life that disintegrates. There is a knock at the door. Listen! Behold I stand at the door and knock. You are alive to God. Go ahead. Open the door. Enter the Kingdom life!” (my translation!).

With that kind of encouragement, Jesus is coaching us to come alive to him and to his Kingdom. Obviously, the reason why we know we are alive to God today is because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The key to Kingdom life is to then take seriously Jesus in the present tense. Jesus is. We do not refer to Jesus who simply was. We serve and we follow a Risen Lord now. It is Jesus who knocks at the door, Jesus who leads us to the treasure, Jesus who helps us find the pearl, Jesus who transforms us, and now Jesus who calls us to cast the net.

“I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Corinthians 6:16). This fulfillment of Leviticus is a reminder for all priests and scribes and followers of Jesus that when we find the treasure, the pearl, the net, and enter the Kingdom of Heaven, our life and our house contain both new and old treasures that have been redeemed. Our life in Christ is priceless!

Why? Because we share in the same time and space with Jesus as Lord in ways that even his disciples would envy today! Remember: “Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name I am with them” (Matthew 18:20). So be it! Amen.

R&D Prayer is a way of talking about what you and Jesus will be doing together today. Take a moment and pray to Jesus about what the two of you are going to do today.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth and in my life, and in my house and in my day. Amen.

Day 30

Read: Matthew 15:10-20

Inside Out

Often politicians and celebrities and the media try to separate public life from personal life. Leadership is taught as if it were all about the polls and the external forces and news of the day that influence actions and reactions. What is often neglected is how the outer person and the inner person correspond to each other. It does us no good to cultivate and train and manipulate our good looks and our dress and our appearance if it is not based upon our inner selves. Today's parable opens us to take a serious look at the heart.

“For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

The heart is the central organ that, in Greek times, was the source of identity. How the heart went is how the person went. It is the place of volition or choice or decision. Another way of putting it is the heart houses the will and the capacity to do what is good or to do what is evil. Jesus knows this.

Jesus knows we have free will, and this will is closely intertwined and interdependent with our feelings and thoughts and our body. So a bad feeling or a bad idea can go a long way towards making a bad decision. Lest this sound overly psychological, again Jesus is proposing that we think on a spiritual level. That is, what makes for poor decisions, ideas, and feelings is what Jesus refers to as defilement. Today we might say our culture has been ruined by a “toxic” atmosphere or spirit that is harmful, but in reality we are simply describing sin. Christian spiritual formation is not at the mercy of external circumstances or bad feelings and thoughts, but we go to the heart-of-the-matter where darkness resides and we live and lead from inside out.

R&D Why can't we just separate our personal life from our public life? Have you tried to live by putting your life in compartments? What was the result?

Prayer: Lord, we look to You to open our hearts where all desires are known and from You no secrets are hid and then cleanse our thoughts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit; in Your Name we pray. Amen.

Day 31

Read: Matthew 18:23-35

Forgive

This parable really packs a wallop! It is a parable that follows on the heels of Peter asking: “How many times am I supposed to forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus replies, “Seventy times seven.” Most people interpret literally that passage on how many times to forgive as “a lot.” In other words, they still grasp for a number or some kind of mathematical equation. The truth of

the matter is Jesus is not trying to cite a formula as much as he is opening us again to live in the Kingdom. Kingdom life is about forgiveness. When we live in the Kingdom we forgive.

To expand and advance our understanding of forgiveness, Jesus reinforces his teaching to Peter and the disciples and to all who have ears to hear that “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle his accounts with his slaves” (v.23). One slave fell on his knees and begged forgiveness. The king, out of pity for the slave, forgave him of his debt.

That same slave, however, found a fellow slave who owed him money and he refused to forgive him, and actually tossing him in prison until he could pay his debt. The king was outraged. So it will be, Jesus says, “if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (v.35).

The operative word in this parable is forgiveness. It is a Kingdom value. We find forgiveness in the Kingdom. To not forgive sets us outside the Kingdom. It is that simple. I remember the 2006 schoolhouse massacre that killed the Amish students. I also remember how the Amish stunned the media, and all who witnessed that tragedy, when they changed the narrative from a grisly schoolhouse massacre to a remarkable story of forgiveness. Forgiveness lies at the heart of being a Christian.

R&D What do you know about forgiveness? When have you last been forgiven? When have you last forgiven others? When have you last forgiven yourself? When have you last been forgiven by God?

Prayer: Lord, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen.

Day 32

Read: Matthew 19:16-26

The Eye of the Needle

Although not technically a parable, the story of the Rich Young Ruler is a “must” read for anyone serious about Kingdom life. First of all, the title often refers to the “Rich Young Ruler” which, by the time we are finished with the story, makes us aware that we cannot rule over our age or our youth any more than we can rule over our riches. Secondly, the question by the disciples at the end of the story is an important one: “Who can be saved?” Traditionally, wealth was thought of as a sign of God’s favor and blessing, and the possession of wealth and fortune was regarded as a reflection of righteous living. Jesus turns such thinking around with one quick story!

Not only that, but notice the humor Jesus uses by saying it will be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than a rich man into the Kingdom. Is this class warfare? No, it is a very serious reminder that the Kingdom values giving. Giving is one way we find ourselves living in the Kingdom. It is not that we buy our way into heaven. That went out with indulgences! We do believe, however, that giving is once again an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace at work in the lives of believers. When we give to honor and glorify God, we let go.

We also trust when we give. So often we trust in our own resources and we trust in what we have. When we give we demonstrate faith and hope and love, and we trust the spiritual resources that God gives us. When we give we also trust, not in the limited resources of what we have, but in the unlimited blessings that God bestows upon us, which is always something bigger and better. Holding on like the Rich Young Ruler is not only a lack of faith, but it is a desire to hold on and live in the past. By giving we let go and our faith opens us to the Kingdom and the future.

R&D *What if God were to look at your checkbook? Would he find generosity or self-indulgence there?*

Prayer: *Dear Lord, we remember the account that we must one day give. Help us now to be good stewards of Your gifts so that our possessions may never possess our hearts, but only open us more and more into life with You in Your Kingdom.*

Day 33

Read: Matthew 20:1-16

Kingdom Values

Famed psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a wealthy patient, “What on earth are you going to do with all that money?” The patient replied, “Just worry about it, I suppose!” Dr. Menninger went on, “Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about money?” “No, not really,” responded the patient, “but I am scared to death when I think of ever having to give it away.”

Much darkness lies behind the fears of modern day men and women and our association with possessions, and especially money. The economy is far and away the number one political issue of our day. It is a priority because in many respects the economy has taken a beating. Consequently, many of us have had to tighten our belts. We have seen how a bad economy can potentially wreak havoc on a country, having witnessed worldwide revolutions and upheavals all because of the economy.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard strikes deep into the heart of our sensibilities of fair play and equality. At first blush, this parable seems outrageous and an unworkable economic model. How can a just God pay the same to all the workers regardless of the hours they have worked? It seems to make no sense. But again, this is a parable about Kingdom values and in the Kingdom the attention is simply not on the money. Remember: “No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). In the Kingdom we are called to serve God alone.

One other thought: the owner asks, “Are you envious because I am generous?” (v.15). During Lent, take time to think for a moment about envy and where envy comes from. Envy walks closely with lust, jealousy, pride, worry, stress, anger, and fear. There is no place for any of that in the Kingdom. Think now about generosity.

R&D *In what sense is it true that giving money is a reflection of giving our self? In what ways has God been generous to you?*

Prayer: *Lord, we know it is more blessed to give than to receive, but it isn't easy. Instill within us Your spirit of generosity so that we may give freely with no strings attached and thereby discover the work that You have called us to perform. Amen.*

Day 34

Read: Matthew 21:28-32

Change Your Minds

We are fast approaching the final week of our Lenten study and the parable of the Two Sons now comes before us. It would be easy to look at the two sons as good and bad, or right and wrong, or light and dark, and separate them by a boundary line in our mind. It would be easy to

take sides and say, “I’m for the son who changed his mind” and then boo for the other son as if we were attending a sporting event.

Jesus shocks such easy categories and simplistic thinking when he says: “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (v.31). Suddenly the tables have been turned and what had been a pretty straightforward parable now throws us a curve. Welcome to the final days of Lent!

It is apparent that what Jesus says, he means. John the Baptist called us to “repent” and change our ways and we did not believe him. At least the tax collectors and prostitutes—when they saw John and the way of righteousness—believed.

Transformation, change, renewal, and conversion are deeply embedded in this parable. Jesus is not subtle. Jesus is not swinging with a big stick but soon he will be going to the Cross. What will it take for us to see and change our minds and, ultimately, believe? This question haunts and returns, especially at this time of the year. It is like the volume is turned-up.

And yet, there is more than meets the eye. At times there is no formula. Maybe we need to change first and then believe, and then we will finally see the light. Maybe it is not a cause and effect, but an effect and then a cause. Remember the road to Emmaus: “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:31). What does it take to get our attention?

R&D Jesus introduces John the Baptist into this parable and says, “You did not believe him.” What is it about John that we need to heed and hear and see, especially as we enter the last days of Lent?

Prayer: Lord, You sent Your prophet John, who preached repentance and prepared the way for our salvation. Give us grace to heed his warning so that we may greet with joy the Kingdom that You have made available to all who believe.

Day 35

Read: John 1:1-13

Kingdom Power

God’s power is worth thinking about especially as we head into Holy Week. Power often is understood only in negative terms, like an abuse of power, such as power that is used over and against those who have none. We also think of power as a possession, where some have it and some don’t. Or we understand power like electrical power; that is something we can turn on or off.

The reality is power is a fact of life. We all have power. That doesn’t mean we necessarily use our power for the good. Today, think about the responsible use of power, such as power used for the good, like the showing of love. We would consider the showing of love as a good use of power. Assuming that we know good from bad, when we use our power for good, we discover authority as a result of what we do. Furthermore, where there is authority there is truth. Philosophically, we might string these words as follows: responsible → power → good → authority → truth.

The reason why many people struggle with these words today is they often get mixed-up and jumbled. For example, people in authority do not represent the truth, but a falsehood. As a result, power is abused and good is not done. Or, people are irresponsible and, as a result, they seek only power and ignore what is true; thus their authority is undermined. Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). All authority means all truth. It also means what Jesus did was good, and the Cross demonstrates he was able to respond.

Jesus is responsible for New Life. Pay attention this Easter as the Word says: “He gave the power to become children of God” (John 1:12). Kingdom power—there is nothing like it in all the world!

R&D At baptism we promise to do all in our power to support those being baptized in their life in Christ. What might this mean to you?

Prayer: Lord, strengthen us with Your Holy Spirit, empower us for Your service, and sustain us all the days of our life as children of God.

Day 36

Read: Matthew 21:33-45

Wicked Tenants

It is painfully obvious as we read this parable, that Jesus anticipates his own rejection and death when God sends him into Israel, the vineyard. For the sake of our study and our focus on the Kingdom, notice that “The kingdom of God will be taken away and given to a people who produce fruits” (v.43).

Rather than dwell today on the rejection and killing of the landowner’s son, does it not make sense, in these final days of Lent, to reflect on what is necessary to produce the fruits of the Kingdom so that we can build on the cornerstone of a new life in Christ? In other words, accepting the fact that the time, talents, and treasures that have been given to us are on loan from a generous God is a way to begin a life in Kingdom-based stewardship. This is not simply a positive spin.

The act of giving is a way to enter the Kingdom because it cultivates the fruit of generosity. Where there is generosity there is no desire to seek revenge or violate another. The first three servants, who represent the prophets, are then accepted with kindness, rather than beaten, stoned, and killed. The Word then bears fruit in our life.

When we recognize the landowner’s son as Jesus, we find ourselves in position to live a life of faith and gentleness and self-control. The parable then comes alive as the words of Psalm 118:22-23 speak to those who accept God’s Son and welcome him into the harvest as life in the Kingdom: “This is the Lord’s doing and it is amazing in our eyes!” There is an accountability that goes with Kingdom life and a responsibility.

We can read this parable as if we were reading the daily news and walk away depressed. But Jesus was speaking to the chief priest and Pharisees (v.45), which doesn’t let us off the hook; it only makes us more grateful for his clear warning.

R&D Jesus is serious about our participating in the building up of his Kingdom. Are you? Can you identify some ways you are actively involved in Kingdom work?

Prayer: Lord, help us in whatever way possible to extend Your Kingdom so that all members of Your Church may truly and devoutly serve You, day in and day out. Amen.

Day 37

Read: Matthew 22:1-14

The Wedding

Again, as we approach the end of Lent the warning signs and sirens seem to get louder and claim our attention as we now hear yet another story about a king who gave a wedding banquet for

his son. Do you know who the bridegroom is? Jesus Christ. The banquet is again life in the Kingdom.

With that in mind, the parable seems sad at the beginning because the wedding banquet, or the kingdom, is nearly spoiled. The king is not about to be deprived, however, and his kingdom will not be defeated. The king invites everyone to the banquet—both good and bad—and the wedding hall was filled with guests. There was one who stood out, for he was not wearing a wedding robe, and he was thrown out of the banquet hall. With that Jesus closes the parable by simply saying, “many are called but few are chosen” (v.14).

Our attention is naturally focused on the guest who was excluded from the kingdom. The punch line sears our heart as well: many are called but few are chosen. What are we to make of this Kingdom characteristic that may exclude rather than include? Is this the dark side of God we would prefer not to think about? No, the parable is not so much about God as it is about our preference to not wear a wedding robe and, instead, to act and to believe and to serve God on our own terms. And, as you know, when we make such a god in our own image we become like the gods we make and serve which really are not fit for Kingdom life; in fact, they are lifeless idols.

If you seek clarity in this parable, read on to the question about paying taxes. “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God” (v.21). It is that simple.

R&D What do you know about false idols? Can you identify some of the gods of your own making? Are there areas of your life where God is not allowed?

Prayer: Lord, we know that many are called and few are chosen and so we pray this day that You will open our eyes and minds and hearts by the power of Your Holy Spirit and, that in all we do, it may be always acceptable in Your sight.

Day 38

Read: Matthew 25:1-13

The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids

Another parable with great drama is brought before us in Holy Week. “Keep awake” is the punch line. The parable speaks of ten bridesmaids preparing for the return of the bridegroom. Five of the bridesmaids have their lamps trimmed and stocked with oil. The other five are not prepared, so when the bridegroom returns unexpectedly they have to hurry out and shop for oil. By the time they return it is too late and the wedding hall is closed. The party, in this case the Kingdom, will go on without them. Outwardly the parable is a clear message of preparedness, which is what Lent, in many respects, is about.

There is an inner message, however, that is found in the symbolism of the wedding. The wedding as the image of the Kingdom runs throughout Scripture. In fact, in early Christendom, the Christian life and the church were likened to a bride awaiting union with Christ. The wedding would bring not only Christ and the church together, but heaven and earth would unite and New Life would emerge.

So what are we to make of the missing bridesmaids? Are we left to conclude that only the wise and the prepared will enter the Kingdom? No, the central theme of the parables speaks to the Kingdom reality that Jesus wants us to be in union with God. In fact, God wants us, and insistently pursues a relationship with us like a bridegroom in search of the bride. But—we don’t want God. That is the central problem. The crucifixion demonstrates just how wide the gulf is between God and His beloved children. It also shows what it is like when the lamps really go out. Realize Jesus

wants us to be in union with God. The resurrection will open the door once again. Maybe then even the foolish will see how serious Jesus is about life in the Kingdom.

R&D How is the Kingdom Jesus speaks of in the parables different from other kingdoms found on earth? Jesus builds his Kingdom in our mind with parables. What about today's parable will you carry in your mind?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls from wandering of mind and spirit, so that our hearts may be fixed on life with you where true joys are always to be found.

Day 39

Read: Matthew 25:14-30

Accountability

Lest we picture Jesus as a “bean-counter” it is important to read this parable as a very serious reminder that not only are there consequences for our actions but we are held accountable in the eyes of God. The notion of “accountability” might sound old-fashioned and out of date by today’s standards, but the fact is we are responsible in all that we do and all that we say. The word “responsible” literally when broken apart means we are *able to respond*. As we enter the Kingdom of God, it is apparent that God would like to know what we did with the life He has given us. How will you respond? This, again, is the drama that unfolds in the parable before us today.

There are three servants that are the focus of our attention. Two of them respond to the Master with not only a sense of gratitude but with great satisfaction for the expansion and growth found in the talents that had been entrusted to them. Two of the servants were given an encouraging word: “Well done.” God, as you know, is our primary source of encouragement. The gift of our life and the blessings that have been bestowed upon us are signs of encouragement. God sends us Jesus as a way to rebuild our lives and enter a life found in His Kingdom. The Holy Spirit brings great comfort and a spirit of guidance and direction that leads us forward with spiritual encouragement. Yes, our God encourages us, and there is nothing better than at the end of the day to hear the words: “Well done!”

There is, however, a third servant who was irresponsible and not accountable to his master. He simply buried his talents and was greatly discouraged. As we approach the days of Holy Week, remember there is judgment found with the Cross. We will be held accountable. We are responsible. There are consequences for our actions.

R&D When was the last time you counted your blessings? Take a moment and do just that.

Prayer: Lord, we thank You for all the blessings You have bestowed upon us for this life and the life to come, and we pray that we may always be mindful of all that we have been given, knowing full well the account we must one day give.

Day 40

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Discipleship

We come to our final parable, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory” (v.31). Think about it. Imagine it. Picture it

in your mind. In one sense, this final parable is the final judgment and, as a result, it is concluded by a grand doomsday that is terrifyingly focused on the end of time. The parable is as allegorical as any. Much has been said and much has been written about this parable. It is the granddaddy of all parables!

For the sake of today, however, and for the sake of simplicity, may I suggest we focus our attention on one aspect of this parable and perhaps only one verse that appeared earlier in Matthew's gospel: "Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a *disciple*, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42).

That's it. That is the key that unlocks this parable. Being a disciple is what concerns Jesus most. We have spent forty days reflecting on the parables and as we come to a close there is a sense of what is next? Obviously, Easter Sunday. As disciples of Jesus, we have been taught that "if we are crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). What is next is a New Life with Christ found in the resurrection.

Such a life will naturally open us to life in his Kingdom. As disciples, we naturally live in Christ and so where there is hunger, we provide food; where there is thirst, drink; and nakedness, clothing. The same with those who are sick or in prison; we extend compassion. Being a disciple is Kingdom life. By grace, it is life in Christ. The reward is life-with-God that is forever and ever. Amen.

R&D Studying the parables provides an opportunity to reflect on grace and the Kingdom. Review your study over these past forty days and identify the parables that spoke most clearly to you. Has there been a change in your thinking as a result of your study?

Prayer: Lord, we thank You for Your presence during these forty days and forty nights and now, as we await the resurrection of Jesus, we commit ourselves to Kingdom living.

by Robin Jennings

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