

St. John's Oneida July 31, 2022

Why did Jesus speak in parables? Why not just tell us what to do for crying out loud!? That is a good question, but first I would like to share a story with you. For most of my adult life I was a college swimming coach. One day, many years ago, the team I was coaching was facing an opponent that on paper should not have been anywhere close to us. Not even remotely! Unfortunately, my team gave up. They were listless and disengaged. Our team lost badly. As a leader of young men and women I realized there were issues to address and that something needed to be done so a debacle such as this could not happen again. The culture had to change or else more bad days would be forthcoming.

So, after things had quieted down I gathered the swimmers in a quiet room and told them a story. There once was a school of fish that were granted a great gift by their creator. They had the gift of swimming as fast as they WANTED to. They could do great things! However, some of the fish were lazy and did not take their gift seriously. Instead of training hard they would while away the time playing silly fish games (like seeing how long they could hold their breath out of water) to the point where the leader of the school wondered why they were allowed to stick around. Meanwhile, a lesser school of fish came along and trained so hard that they soon were able to swim faster than the school with the greater ability. That meant that they could outswim the lazy school of fish for the best food. Soon they were the greatest school of fish in the sea and became strong enough to compete in and win the deep water olympics. The lazy school fish were too slow to swim in the deep water olympics. In the end most were kicked out of fish school and because they were too weak to swim in the deep water, much less to win the olympics, they were caught in a net, processed in a factory, and sold for food in boxes labeled "Gorton's".

To be completely honest, I did not call such a meeting or tell such a story. Perhaps I should have. Instead, I considered working them half to death, much like the scene in "Miracle on Ice" where the coach had the USA players do wind sprints until they were getting sick. I also engaged in a histrionic fit of anger which had only a short term effect but remains legendary to this day. What I did not do at the time was get them to think about why the competition turned out that way and what they could do as individuals and as a team to prevent it from recurring. I did not require them (at least not right away) to think and reflect on the situation.

Jesus frequently taught by using parables. They were remarkable in their time for several reasons. The lives of the vast majority of people at that time were practical and oriented toward survival. Jewish law featured over 600 rules and regulations governing every aspect of life. The Romans would make sure that there was no threat to the social and political order. Rather than forming discussion groups, average citizens just wanted to provide for their families, be law-abiding and faithful, and stay out of trouble. The people were accustomed to obeying rules and serving those in power. Jesus was a new kind of leader and teacher. Jesus honored their identity as people made in the image of God by inviting them to think. People could think, ask questions, and think some more! Parables invite contemplation and understanding. People are free to draw their own conclusions. They stay with you because they are yours. Sometimes instead of answers they lead to more questions, and that is perfectly fine. We keep trying! Rules can be followed blindly, without thinking. The end result of exploring the questions is a greater understanding of an issue. It becomes lodged in your mind and heart.

In the parable of “the rich fool” we read today, it is too easy to say that “being greedy is bad”. No kidding! Jesus would have his listeners think about how they relate to the story. They would be encouraged to think how greed has impacted their lives and the lives of those around them. They might go on to think about things they could do to counteract greed in whatever form it takes. They could even discuss the matter with friends and other members of their faith communities. Eventually, some form of consensus could be reached on how to address the problem. If things don’t work out, the questions can be reviewed. Being faithful is an ongoing process of asking questions, praying for guidance, and proceeding one step at a time. Columnist David Brooks of the New York Times once wrote that people are frequently not sure why they do things. Their motivations are not always clear; even to themselves! Jesus wants us to ask questions, and as people of faith, to understand how and why, if we do, take action.

What does that look like? To what end? Blind Faith was a great name for a rock band but I believe that Jesus is telling us that there is no easily defined path for the people of God to tread upon. Circumstances and realities can change. We have to keep praying and asking questions of ourselves and each other. We can see from the ministry of Jesus that He wants people to succeed, but not at the expense of others. Winning is fine but one need not destroy the opponent. Challenges are terrific as long as they lead to improvement. Being proud of something is acceptable as long as we avoid arrogance. We can be honest without being cruel. We can be both tough and fair, and we can point out mistakes while offering the hope of redemption. This is love, not a strategy.

The city of Oneida faces the same challenges as much of the country. Access to affordable housing, health care, and education is not available to many of our neighbors. Food insecurity is ongoing. From His ministry and message it is easy to “get” or understand what Jesus’ opinion of this situation might be, but there is no instruction book on how to solve these problems. The best we can do is love God, love one another, ask questions of ourselves and each other, form a consensus, take a step forward, evaluate what we are doing, ask more questions, and take another step forward when the time is right. Our faith is not passive or submissive. It requires engagement. Eventually we can affect change in our lives and the lives of others that we own and understand. It will be change coming up from the “grass roots”, change we can believe in because it is yours and because it is ours. Amen.