

“The Parables According to Mark, Part One: New Wine”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo),
For June 7th 2015 (2nd Sunday after Pentecost)
By Foster Freed

Mark 2: 13-22

Let’s imagine...let’s pretend...that we one day found ourselves, quite unexpectedly, coming face to face with a creature—a human-like creature—who had arrived fresh from another planet. And furthermore, let’s imagine...let’s pretend...this creature from another planet had done their homework, understood a little something about humanity’s complex religious history, and that—in seeking you out—they were trying to learn something about what it was like to be a Christian.

Hopefully...hopefully, the very first thing you would say to them is that we Christians are the people who seek to be disciples of, followers of, learners of a man named Jesus. Hopefully you would begin there. But what if their next question, their follow-up question, amounted to this: “Tell me...tell me about this Jesus.” What might you say?

For starters I presume you would make the point that he lived on this earth a long time ago, two millennia ago to be precise. Next you might choose to summarize what Christians believe about Jesus: that he was a wandering teacher/preacher who seemed to be fulfilling the prophecies his people cherished concerning a coming saviour, but that instead of saving them in any conventional sense, he ended up being executed by the religious and political authorities of his day. And yet, just when it appeared his story was finished, his followers came to the conviction that he was still alive: a conviction we share to this day. Therefore, we still seek to follow his ways. We still seek to attend to his preaching. And yes, we still seek to hear and follow his teachings. Which maybe, just maybe, would prompt—from our inter-planetary visitor—this follow-up question! “You say this Jesus was a teacher! Tell me...tell me about his teaching.”

Suffice it...suffice it to say that it would be right around this place in the conversation...right about here...that you would likely find yourself making the point that one of the things that especially characterized Jesus’ teaching...one of the things that appears to have powerfully struck his first followers, was the impressive way in which Jesus taught through the use of parables. Through the use of sharp images...sharp poetic images...and powerful stories: images and stories through which he conveyed his message in its most compact form. Jesus...this Jesus of Nazareth: whatever else we may wish to say about him, surely it is crucial for us to say that Jesus was a wonderfully creative, a sparkingly imaginative crafter of parables.

And yes: as those of you with a keen eye and a logical frame of mind have no doubt figured out by now, that's my way of introducing not merely this sermon, but a series of sermons that will, hopefully, see us wrestling with the vast majority of parables found in what is generally regarded as the oldest of the Gospels, the Gospel according to Mark. If things work out...if we survive this year's diet of parables from Mark...perhaps next year we'll dip into the parables unique to Luke...and the following year the parables unique to Matthew. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's start at the very beginning. With Mark! At the very beginning...or better still...let's start slightly ahead of the beginning. And yes, if that sounds weird—starting ahead of the beginning—let me explain.

* * * * *

The Gospel according to Mark is not merely the oldest of the Gospels: it's also the shortest, the most succinct, the one that moves from start to finish with an almost breathless desire to head straight to the finish line. Mark's strategy, as he tells his story, is to group together episodes that are thematically linked. Incidentally, that's why it can be very tricky to produce anything that even vaguely resembles a modern type biography of Jesus. Mark doesn't necessarily give us episodes in their strict chronological order, although he does begin at the beginning as Jesus launches his public ministry in Galilee and traces the story through to Jesus' death on a Cross. In its broad outlines, Mark's Gospel is certainly chronological. But once you get down to a verse by verse, chapter by chapter examination of Mark, you realize that he's grouping incidents together because they deal with similar themes. Which is why...which is why when we turn to the fourth chapter of Mark's Gospel, we find ourselves immersed in the world of Jesus-the-story-teller, the world of Jesus, the shaper of provocative parables. You see, if we really wanted to go to the true "beginning" of Jesus' ministry of parables, we would jump ahead to Mark chapter 4, in which Mark groups together some of Jesus' most important parables. Needless to say, we will shortly—shortly as in next Sunday—find ourselves starting at the beginning; we'll find ourselves knee deep in that fourth chapter of Mark. However!

The Jesus of Mark's Gospel doesn't wait to begin speaking in parables until Mark gives him formal permission to begin doing so. The telling of parables—the making use of evocative images and stories—is so woven into the very fabric of Jesus' being, that he's telling parables right out of the gate. And so, in the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel—when he calls Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John to be his first disciples—Jesus doesn't say to them: "I'm gonna make you-guys missionaries." No! Realizing that he is calling a group who had made their livelihood out on the Sea of Galilee, he says to them: *Follow me and I will make you fishers of men!*, an image they likely found as peculiar as some of us still find it. Then, in the second chapter of Mark's Gospel—a chapter in which Mark collects a series of controversies between Jesus and other religious leaders—when those leaders criticize him for eating with tax-collectors and other undesirables, he doesn't say to them: "My, aren't

you mean-spirited.” No! In good poetic form he says to them: *Those who are well do not need a doctor, only those who are sick...*an image that can appear benign or sinister depending on whether you regard yourself as spiritually healthy...or spiritually sick. Then, finally, also in Mark’s second chapter—when accused of being frivolous, something of a party-boy, especially when contrasted with the stern John the Baptist—instead of responding to his accusers with a carefully constructed logical argument, Jesus shares a series of images, a series of one-line parables, in which he tries to open their eyes as to why it is that he and his disciples rejoice. He asks them: *Are the wedding guests able to fast while they still have the bridegroom with them?* He admonishes them: *No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.* Finally, shifting images but sticking to the same theme, he says to them: *No one puts new wine in old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.* With such images...with such one-line parable-zingers, our Lord enters the fray: long before we are introduced to the parables in a more formal way. That’s why we are beginning here...in a sense beginning before the beginning.

* * * * *

Of those one liners...of those incredibly compact mini-parables...the one that always grabs me is the one about the wine...and the wine-skins. It’s a parable that seems far weightier in its implications, than its small stature would lead you to believe. In truth, good things sometimes do come in small packages...and that parable...of the wine and the wineskins, brief though it is, raises some profound questions, early on in Mark’s proceedings: profound questions about the mission and identity of the man from Nazareth.

And probably...probably because of my own Jewish roots...I find the whole conversation concerning the relationship of Christianity and Judaism to be one of ongoing fascination. For many centuries...for much of its history...Christianity appeared to lose sight of the fact that Jesus was a Jew...and that his entire outlook, from the time he drew his first breath right up until the time he gave out his final dying breath, was shaped by the fact that he was a first century Galilean Jew. Too often the Church has lost sight of that. And, to its credit, much of the very best theology and much of the very best historical writing from the 20th century attempted to correct that distortion: helping us to see Jesus in his Jewish setting. All of that is to the good; none of that ought to be lost. On that we can hopefully all agree. And yet!

When challenged as to his disciple’s seeming frivolity...when asked why they go about their business with seemingly none of the sombre dignity associated with a real prophet, like John the Baptist...rather than seek out historical precedents, rather than give examples of similarly light-hearted religious figures in ancient Israel’s past...Jesus tells a parable, a parable that

makes it clear he has no intention of arguing with them as a lawyer might argue, dusting off ancient volumes and finding precedents. Instead he freely acknowledges their point, conceding that yes, this is different. This is the new wine. His ministry is new wine. His whole way of being is new wine. Even his use of stories, open-ended images, sharply constructed and far from easy to interpret parables is part and parcel of the new wine he brings, the new wine he seeks to be for his people. My point being that no matter how much we try to seek the genuine continuity between Jesus and that which came before him...we will thereby only tell part of the story. And the part we will leave out, if we only speak of Jesus' continuity with that which came before him...the part we risk leaving out...is the one thing needful...the one thing we dare not overlook...namely, namely, the new thing God began...the new wine God poured out...with the coming of Jesus.

* * * * *

Permit me a final thought. As those who live some 2000 years after Jesus, it's crucial we remember that even here, even now, Jesus comes to us as the one who brings new wine...the one who seeks to be our new wine. It's not just those who were his contemporaries who habitually misunderstood him, friends and enemies alike. It's that we, for all of our sophisticated know-how, for all of our technological daring-do, for all of our pride as to just how with-it, open-minded and progressive we can be...for all that, when it comes to our expectations of what a properly constituted "religious-leader" ought to resemble, we rarely get what we bargain for in this Jesus. This Jesus, whose most characteristic way of teaching was through the telling of parables, parables which raise more questions than they answer. This Jesus, whose seeming preference for lowlifes and thugs can't help but irritate us. This Jesus, whose continual goading of the so-called religious people can't help but get under our skin. This Jesus, whose insistence that life-ought-to-be-filled with joy defies our own experience of just how damnably difficult life can be. And you know: Jesus the teller-of-parables doesn't have any quick and dirty answers to any of that...but what he does offer is even better than the quickest and dirtiest of answers: namely this. Namely...

...namely this table...this table and the gifts piled high on this table, including—strangely enough—the new wine of his life-blood. And yes: he invites us to come to this table mindfully, thoughtfully, with a willingness on our part to recognize the full gravity, the full immensity of the gifts offered us here. But to do all of that in joy: not because he waves a magic wand that will make life easy for us, but because he has promised never to abandon us as we journey through life's peaks and valleys. A promise made in bread broken. A promise ratified through wine lavishly shared. That we might have life and have it in abundance! And yes: that his joy might be in us...and that our joy might be complete.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!