“VBS in Parables”

A sermon by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

Sunday, September 22nd, 2019

Scripture reference: Luke 16:1-13

So, today we have heard the parable of the Unjust Steward. This parable sits at the end of a series of parables in Luke’s Gospel…the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son. And each of these, like all parables, are intended to throw us off just a bit…as biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine notes, they are intended to unsettle us, provoke us, or to get us really thinking. There is always something not quite right about the situation presented in the parable. Perhaps we are thrown off that a shepherd might leave his large flock unattended in a dangerous place simply to bring back one little sheep that wandered off. Or, alternatively, perhaps we are thrown off that a skilled shepherd would lose count of his sheep in the first place, even allowing one to wander off.

Levine states that “Our reaction to [parables] should be one of resistance rather than acceptance,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and warns us against reducing a parable to a single meaning.

Well, my reaction to today’s parable is certainly “correct,” if resistance is supposed to be the mark of a good parable. This parable definitely gets me thinking, is more than a little unsettling, and has as many interpretations as there are clergy willing to take it on!

Is Jesus suggesting that shrewdness—calculated thinking and problem-solving—is more important than honesty or transparency?

Is Jesus suggesting that we focus on the master, urging us to find unexpected benefit even in circumstances where we have been wronged?

Is Jesus holding out forgiving relationships---whether through the steward’s forgiveness of those who owe the master, or the master’s forgiveness of the steward-- as the key to stepping into the eternal blessing of the Kingdom?

This parable definitely does what Levine says parables are supposed to do in raising more questions than answers. For me, it also reinforces the consistent theme of Jesus’ parables….that God’s Kingdom is *nothing* like we would expect….

Today is VBS Sunday. It is the day that we not only celebrate our 4th year of VBS, but when we also celebrate our beloved VBS leadership, especially Sarah Scoville. VBS was Sarah’s idea 5 years ago…she spent an entire year visiting other VBS programs, gathering information, thinking, planning, recruiting help, and ultimately putting together the VBS model we have grown so deeply into these past 4 years. Sarah will be moving onto other things, and as we prepare for a transition in VBS leadership, I think it’s important to explore why we will continue to offer VBS.

I have to admit that I was not an early VBS convert. I had a suspicion that VBS might fall into my ministry portfolio, and frankly, I wanted to run screaming. The only VBS—Vacation Bible Schools—that I had known were very biblically conservative. VBS did not seem like a program in which my questioning approach to scripture would have any home. In addition, any sort of summer camp, especially one that included 3 year olds all the way up through highschoolers, seemed like a recipe for total chaos. My inner introvert thought the whole thing a really bad idea. In the end, I did agree to have VBS fall under my ministry portfolio, and every single summer I get that same apprehension, AND every single summer VBS upends my expectations—It is never what I worry it will be, but always a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. It raises hard questions, could be interpreted numerous different ways, and teaches me not what I expect it to, but something else entirely, dawning slowly on me in the weeks and months that follow camp. VBS is a series of living, breathing parables.

And So, I ask you to indulge me for a few minutes while I tell you a few more parables this morning… The parables of St. Paul’s VBS, and some of the questions those parables have raised for me….

Here we go!

Parable 1: The Kingdom of God is like 10 preschoolers who scream and beat as loudly as they can on drums on the very first morning of camp, and who then enter the chapel, immediately taking on hushed tones as they kneel eagerly in front of some clay bible story props. “Oh!” a repeat camper whispers to a new camper, “You’re going to LOVE the stories! The stories are my *favorite* part of camp.”

*A few questions that have come up for me in experiencing that parable:*

*Why do I resist these stories for our children? Why am I surprised that our children are in love with them? Why do I worry that these stories are too fantastical, or out of date, or unrelatable?*

Parable 2: The kingdom of God is like VBS doing the story of David and Goliath. They make David’s holy slingshot out of a toilet paper roll, balloon, and sparkly, fluffy pom-poms….which, by day 3 of camp, has given rise to cardboard handguns, duct tape bulletts and the Rector wondering why his boys wake up proclaiming with unbridled excitement that today will be the day they will be inducted into the St. Paul’s Gun Club.

*Is violent contest part of human nature? Did we fail our kids somehow, that they connected to this aspect of the slingshot? Or did it all turn out just fine, as now they know forever the story of David and Goliath?*

Parable 3: The Kingdom of God is like 4 highschool counselors urging the 5th to come to church even though she doesn’t believe because it’s OK to not know here, or even not believe—for some of them don’t buy all this religious stuff at all!-- and the love and friendship and community she will get is too important to pass up.

*How do I manage the presence of both the sadness and the fantastic joy I feel at the argument these teens have made in favor of this beloved parish community?*

Parable 4: The Kingdom of God is like when almost every kids’ *favorite, not upsetting…favorite* part of Noah’s Ark is when God drowns all creation and starts over.

*What in these sometimes very dark stories appeals to them so much? And, how can I regain that same openness?*

Parable 5: The Kingdom of God is like a mass of 4th and 5th grade boys begging you to spend our last bit of time together not hearing a mesmirizing story of shipwreck and miracle, but rather by beating their quiet meditation record by 10 whole minutes…and you feeling annoyed and wondering if they are really getting something out of chapel time.

*Does the competition they bring to our quiet time together each day render it unholy? And, what is the right balance, for all of us, between quiet time and time studying or hearing the biblical stories at the heart of our faith tradition?*

Parable 6: The Kingdom of God is like a teen counselor who makes a bad split-second decision, comes to tell you about it before you have even a chance to find out from others, and digs so very deeply to reflect in utter vulnerabililty about why they think they might have made that decision…and you, initially moved to display some tough love, are overcome with respect, admiration, and love for this child, worried only that the powerful forgiveness pouring out of you is not enough to assist this child in forgiving themselves.

*How do I as a priest, and all of us as parents and loving adults best steward our teens through this intensive period of growing up and into themselves? How does VBS, a microcosm of church, best invite one another into the ministry of liberation—freeing one another from whatever it is that pushes us down?*

It is the experiences, the resistance, the questions raised in these parables that explain, for me, why we will still do VBS, even without our beloved Sarah at the helm. We will do VBS because it invites our teens into the full stature of their divine gifts…because it teaches our children the stories of our faith and reminds us all of the questions they compel us to ponder…because it invites all of us into God’s compassionate, forgiving embrace…because it enables the youngest among us to minister to us old folks, right in the midst of this glorious sanctuary. We will still do VBS because it is a living parable—and like every parable, it invites us into wondering, and mystery, and transformation.

Through our participation in VBS, whether as a camper, counselor, or adult mentor, we really do get to enact the liberating power of forgiveness and unconditional acceptance that are the hallmarks of God’s Kingdom. We will still do VBS because it is not just a living parable, but a space and moment in time in which we live in the heart of the Kingdom of God, itself. And that, as our teens taught me, is too important a thing to pass up.

AMEN.

1. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Harper Collins, 2014, Kindle Edition, location 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)