

Hope connections



Parables of Jesus

Discussion Booklet

2020-2021

Respectful Communication Guidelines

- R – Take responsibility for what you say without blaming others
- E – Use empathic listening
- S – Be sensitive to differences in communication styles
- P – Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak
- E – Examine your own assumptions and perceptions
- C – Keep confidentiality
- T – Trust ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong

Mutual Invitation Process

From The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community by Eric H. F. Law (1993) St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

- The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Try not to invite the person next to you.
- After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share.
- If you don't want to say anything, simply say "pass" or "pass for now" and proceed to invite another to share.
- Do this until everyone has been invited.
- If anyone said "pass for now," invite them again to share.
- After everyone has had an opportunity to share, then you may ask questions or ask for clarification.

Guidelines for the Study

- The Bible passages and readings are the focus of this study, not the leader of the group.
- We are not here to debate who has the right interpretation but we are here to read and listen together and share our insights.
- Our leaders are not experts. They are but facilitators who will lead us through a process by which the inspiration from the Scripture can be shared and celebrated. However a leader might bring in historical, literary, and contextual information to help the group understand the text better.
- We are all equals before the Scripture: therefore no one needs to feel disadvantaged. We invite you to adopt a “beginners mind”, so that every time we approach a text, we would hear it as is for the first time.
- Because we seek insights and not just information, it is essential that everyone join in the discussion and that no one person dominates.
- We invite you to hold the personal information shared here in confidence because only in this way can we feel free to say what is on our minds and in our hearts.

Discussion Resource

The Holy Bible – each person should have a Bible

Introduction To The Parables

A parable is a saying or short story intended to teach the listener some truth or lesson about life. The content of these stories is drawn from the everyday experience of Jesus' listeners -- a farmer sowing in the field, a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, or attending a wedding banquet. The people listening to the parable (including the disciples), often do not understand the parable and turn to Jesus to interpret it. "Then, the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." (Mat 13:10-11) It is Jesus who reveals the truth behind the parable, a hidden truth.

Jesus used the parables to reveal the nature of his earthly ministry and the coming "Kingdom of God". The parables tell us about God's love for us. These stories challenge the familiar thinking of the people Jesus is addressing. The stories do not end the way the listener expects. The father takes back the prodigal son. The Samaritan is the one who takes pity on the man lying by the side of the road. Lazarus ends up in heaven, not the rich man. These stories illustrate how God works with his people, in love, mercy, and justice. This contrasts with how we would act in a similar situation. God is surprising us still with these stories.

Session #1: Parable of the Wedding Banquet [Mat 22:1-14]

Introduction. Jesus was in the temple teaching and healing. The chief priests and the elders of the people came and asked him this question, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” [Mat 21:23] Jesus asks his own question by telling three related parables: (1) Two sons, [Mat 21:28-32] (2) Wicked Tenants [Mat 21:33-44], and our lesson, (3) Wedding Banquet [Mat 22:1-14]. The question that Jesus asks the religious authorities is, “Who is doing God’s will?” Jesus suggests that the religious authorities are the son who said, “I go sir, but he did not go”. They are the wicked tenants who did not give the vineyard’s owner its produce as agreed, or the invited guests who did not come to the Wedding Banquet. The result, Jesus says, is “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” [Mat 21:31b]

The author of Matthew’s Gospel has a strong theme about producing fruits of the Kingdom. This theme is evident in our three parables and culminates in the vision of the Final Judgment [Mat 25:31-46], “And these [goats] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous [sheep] into eternal life.”

Questions.

1. Read Mat 22:1-7. Who are the invited guests to the Wedding Banquet? Who are the slaves of the King? Why do the guests ignore the invitation and kill the King’s slaves?
2. Read Mat 22:8-10. Who are the people in the streets, “both good and bad”?
3. Read Mat 22:11-14. When the king finds a man without a wedding robe, he orders his servants to bind the man and throw him out. So, who is the king? Don’t you think the king is being a bit harsh or unloving? What does the wedding robe represent?
4. In early Christianity, the new identity of baptism and conversion was pictured as donning a new set of clothes. And the giving up of the old identity. In this interpretation, what does the man without a wedding robe represent?
5. What does this mean (v. 14), “For many are called, but few are chosen.”
6. What is the “fruit” that God expects us to produce in the Kingdom?
7. Read Mat 22:7 again. Is the king really God? Does God destroy the city of the invited guests, or the Wicked Tenants? Are the goats sent away into “eternal punishment”?

Prayer. Dear God, We are too busy with our own lives to hear your call to service. We do not want to give up control. We do not want to be inconvenienced to fight for racial equality, or sanctuary for the undocumented, or efforts to deal with climate change. Give us courage to be “one of the sheep”. In Jesus’ name. Amen

Session #2: Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:1a, 14-30)

Introduction. Well, this parable has me stumped. It follows a parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids where the message is clear: Jesus wants his followers to be watchful for his return. But then with the talents parable, he seems to ratchet up the command of watchfulness with a command to be productive as well. The parable involves a master who entrusts each of three servants with unimaginable wealth—just one talent alone is worth 15-20 years of wages for these servants. He gives them no instruction what to do with this money, but all three realize they need at least to preserve the investment. Two of them manage to double what they had received via trading; they proudly return these huge gains to the master when he returns. The third, in contrast, simply avoids losing the money he was given by hiding it. For that he is condemned to hell by the angry master! The message seems to be: you must grow what you have been given! No excuses for not producing! And so it has been interpreted down through Christian history. By now, it has become a command to develop our God-given talents (abilities) to a maximal extent.

But I wonder if the parable is so clearly an endorsement of enterprising striving. First, the third servant reveals an unpleasant truth: the master draws wealth out from others; he is hardly a model of enterprising effort himself! (Frankly, he reminds me of our current president.) We might even call him a parasite, and begin to wonder whether the first two servants followed in his exploitative footsteps when doubling his money. Second, the harsh judgment meted to the third servant seems to contradict the next parable, which is a powerful vision of approaching judgment in the end times. Here Jesus (=Son of Man) assigns damnation not to lazy servants, but to those who fail to show compassion to the vulnerable—the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless. Would not this Jesus approve the third servant for showing sensitivity about the exploitative practices of the master, rather than to the master who shows no compassion at all? So, count me puzzled. Both the master and Jesus are presented as judges able to send people to hell. But they are worlds apart.

The parable of the talents has been affirmed by centuries of tradition as encouraging—requiring!—Christians to apply their talents and effort diligently. That is a fine message, I suppose, particularly for those of us who hide our lights under bushel baskets. But does it really connect with the compassion for vulnerable neighbors that many of us have taken to be the heart of Jesus' moral message? Somehow the parable fits Jesus' overall message, but I am not sure how. Food for ongoing thought....

Questions.

1. What person in this story do you relate to most (the master, the two resourceful slaves, or the fearful slave)?
2. Do you think the master is just or fair in his judgments?
3. Our session author thinks the moral of the story is to “Be productive.” Is that what you think?
4. Is this story about making money or something else?
5. Jesus said many times that it will be hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God (Mat 19:24). In this light, what does v. 28 mean, “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”? Can v. 28 be referring to money?
6. What if the master's task is not about making money, but serving the neighbor? One slave gets a 10 for serving the neighbor, one slave gets a 5, and one slave gets a 0

(because, he or she did not try). Then, the master praises the first two slaves and says "Enter into the joy of the master." But, the one who did not try, gets the master's rebuke.

7. What if the slaves try to use the master's talents, but lose them in trading. What would the master say to them?

Prayer. Dear God, We are so often afraid to do your work, or are distracted, or indifferent. The need in our neighbors is so great! Give us strength, stamina, courage, and heart to feed, welcome, clothe, care for and visit the poor, the vulnerable, the stranger, the foreigner, and our neighbor. In Jesus name. Amen

Session #3: Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

Introduction. Much of Luke 10 is about Disciples being in the world. The parable of the Good Samaritan begins with a man who sought to justify his place before God (and the people): “But wanting to test Jesus he asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

I begin by putting this devotion in the context of my life. I was having trouble breathing and on May 25, 2020 I went into the hospital. It was determined that I had issues with my heart. This was the same date that George Floyd was calling out that he could not breathe and the police response revealed just how sick of heart our society is.

The Good Samaritan parable raises questions of social responsibility and connectedness. I sat for five days glued to the news: watching marches, rioting, memorial services, debates. I heard people witnessing to their own experiences of systemic violence and racism. Perhaps more whites are positively involved with the 2020 protests than the 1960s'. I personally have been moved, I've gained a new perspective, recognizing that I have much to learn, as part of the white community, somehow a bloody body that I would normally pass by has this time caught my eye. Many more of us need to be able to hear and see. If we are able we may hear of the soul crushing experiences of living under Jim Crow generation after generation; perhaps we'll gain some understanding of “white privilege. This change in perspective gives the whole “Good Samaritan” parable different emphases, but the question remains, “who is my neighbor?”

Questions.

1. “Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it (Lk.10:23-24).” What did you hear and see below the surface this summer that has changed you?
2. Why is it so hard for white people to talk about racism and white privilege? What is racism? What is white privilege?
3. What is your working metaphor for racism? Take time to think about some different metaphors; does that change anything?
4. Is white a race? Would you be willing to say that you are a racist? Can a white person grow up in this culture and not be a racist? Is it possible to see another race as equal?

Prayer. Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free

Session #4: Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)

Introduction. In a book about Jesus' parables, Helmut Thielicke suggested "The Prodigal Son" should be renamed "The Waiting Father," because it more accurately gets to the message of the story. Luke 15 has three parables about Lost and Found. In the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, God is portrayed as actively seeking. In the prodigal son parable, God is actively waiting. (...for his son's return.) He is not caught by surprise, but he's so excited that he runs out in compassion to greet him on the road. The preparations for the celebration are immediate because he has been waiting for this reconciliation. He isn't asking what happened to his son, since he doesn't care about that. He is just so happy to welcome him back that he can't contain his joy over his "dead" son being returned to life.

Questions.

1. Have you ever felt overwhelmed about a mess you've created in your life?
2. Who or what pulled you out of the mess?
3. If your life has been more like that of the older son, what has helped control your self righteousness, pride, anger, and/or jealousy?
4. If your life has been more like that of the older son, what has helped control your self righteousness, pride, anger, and/or jealousy?
5. Did you notice the references to "your son" and "your brother" in the discourse at the end of the parable? What might Jesus be emphasizing?
6. Have you ever felt God's grace surround you in an unimaginable way? In other words, far beyond whatever you would hope or expect?
7. Was this presence of God felt spontaneously or through another person or a group of persons?

Prayer. Heavenly father/parent, open our eyes to the wideness of your mercy for us personally and for those around us. Amen.

Hymn suggestion. "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," page 587 in the Lutheran Book of Worship.

Session #5: Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

Introduction. Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a story full of challenge and promise for a diverse audience. The verses preceding the parable suggest that one audience for the parable were the Pharisees whom Luke describes as "lovers of money" (16:14). Jesus tells them "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God." (v15) These verses set the stage for the parable which explores what is valued by humans, what is valued by God, and what's at stake when people get these mixed up.

It's helpful to see this parable in terms of challenge and promise. The poor and oppressed might hear promise in seeing the final comfort of Lazarus and ultimate justice in the fate of the rich man. The rich might be challenged to be more generous and mindful of the poor and needy. This has been a traditional teaching from this parable from the beginning. We might see ourselves as one of the five brothers of the rich man. Will we heed the law and prophets? What will move us to attend to the poor at our gate and invite them to our feasts? A core theological theme this parable addresses is that what humans value is often different than what God values. God reveals God's values and desires in the law and prophets, which are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Questions.

1. What is different between these two people's lives on earth? What assumptions might someone make about each of them in terms of their relationship with God?
2. Remembering other stories from the gospels, what does Jesus say about feasts? Who is invited to God's feast?
3. What is surprising about this description of both characters' death?
4. Read Luke 1:52-53 and 6:20-21; 24-25 which describe "the great reversal". How does Abraham's explanation to the rich man go with these other stories in Luke?
5. Compare the distance between the rich man and Lazarus during their life on earth with the afterlife. Who caused this distance in the first place?
6. What does this parable say to those who have money?
7. What does the parable say to those who have nothing?
8. How has your interpretation of this parable changed over time?

Prayer. Dear God, We pass by our neighbors in need on a daily basis. We shrink from speaking to them. We close our hearts. Strengthen our courage to work for justice and equality for all of us. In Jesus name, Amen.

Session #6: Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-23)

Introduction. Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people and his story of the Sower of Seeds is told twice because the disciples asked for additional explanation to help them understand. (Even as the parable describes those who do not understand, in unfavorable terms). The seeds have fallen on a path, and among rocks, and in thorns (v. 4,5,7), and did not survive; while seeds that landed in good soil, germinated and produced high yields of grain.

The disciples' relationship with Jesus as their teacher enabled them to ask questions. Jesus uses the prophecy of Isaiah (v.14-15) to characterize those whose hearts and minds have grown dull. The disciples have been given knowledge of the kingdom of heaven (v.11), they are fortunate, their eyes see, and ears hear (v.16). Even prophets and other righteous people, Jesus tells them (v.17), have wanted and longed for, the ability that they possess, that ability to see, to hear, to understand. In verses 18-23, Jesus wraps up the meaning behind the four outcomes of the seeds. The disciples may have come away with a clarified view of their position and responsibility to receive and share the Word. Having already been blessed with understanding, they are in an optimal situation, to nurture and nourish what they have received so that the Good News of the Word can thrive and grow.

Questions.

1. It appears that Jesus understood human nature. Birds, rocks, thorns, the internet, road rage, etc. can get in the way of living in a Christ-like manner. Give a What-Would-Jesus-Do example in your life.
2. In his teaching, Jesus affirmed the disciples' ability to see, hear, understand, and know. Why do you think he did this?
3. We are given gifts and blessings continuously and ongoing as Christians. What responsibilities and choices come with all this receiving?
4. How do you expand your understanding when you suspect your perspective is lacking?

Prayer. Dear Jesus, we are still pondering your parable of the Sower of Seeds. It has so many dimensions. Thank you for my eyes, ears, and ability to understand and remain curious. It is a blessing to hear your voice in scripture guiding us, this year, especially. Amen.