

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

12 July, 2020

1st Reading Isaiah 55:10–11

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 65:10,11,12–13,14

2nd Reading Romans 8:18–23

Gospel Matthew 13:1–23

Parables, they were such a signature of Jesus’s teaching that we’ve become almost inured to them today. We would never ask Jesus the question the disciples ask him today: “Why do you speak to them in parables?” We simply take it for granted that he does, and may even try to emulate it ourselves on occasion.

But if we look at Jesus’s answer to the question the disciples asked, it really leaves me wanting to ask the question again. The long and short of the answer seems to be that Jesus uses parables so that people won’t understand him; they hear the story, but don’t get its meaning. He’s deliberately obfuscating his message. Which leaves me asking: What kind of person doesn’t want to be understood?

The first answer that quickly jumps to mind is politicians. They regularly speak in circles around questions without ever giving real answers. How many times have you heard “That’s an important issue that we have to consider from all sides,” or some such phrasing come from the mouth of a politician? Or how about answers calling for investigations of this, that, or the other thing when they have been asked about a policy position? Or the ever more expedient, “Well, I think the real problem is...” something else entirely? Politicians often don’t want to be understood because simple, direct answers will often land them in trouble with particular people. People who don’t like that answer and the politician’s job is to please as many people as possible, or at least enough to win the next election.

So is Jesus a politician, using parables to keep as many people as happy as he can? I have to say, I don’t think so. Jesus isn’t afraid of confrontation, of taking a stand. He calls the Pharisees hypocrites to their faces. He drives the money changers and animal sellers from the temple. He even calls out the people of his own home town, telling them they don’t give him the respect that he deserves. No, Jesus isn’t trying to please people with what he says or does. His teaching delivers a challenge to all who would listen to it. So the use of parables can’t be about avoiding offending his listeners.

So who else wants to be misunderstood? Well, there is a debating tactics which depends on leaving things unsaid. In this tactic, what is left unsaid is all the evidence which might run contrary to the favored position. The idea is that if you ignore all evidence to the contrary, then a particular position will

seem stronger. Of course, this is all a delusion. The equivalent of: cigarettes are perfectly safe, if you ignore all the people who die from lung cancer. Is this what Jesus is doing?

I think the answer is clearly “no.” Jesus parables aren’t about factual arguments, or even probabilistic ones. There is no standard of evidence that the message of salvation has to meet in order to be viable. Jesus’s teaching is about what ought to be, how we ought to act, what is morally right and just. Evidence, ignored or not, is about how the world really is, not about how it should be. Don’t get me wrong, there is a fundamental truth at the bottom of Jesus teaching: that we are God’s children and He loves us. But this is not a truth which can be verified in a lab, or teased apart by deft experimentation. It is the kind of truth that we have to take on faith and respond to accordingly. Jesus isn’t hiding evidence because fundamentally he’s not in the evidence business.

Thinking about debating, however, makes me think about another tactic: leaving things unsaid so that the hearer completes the argument themselves. This is where I think we start to see a glimmer of what might be going on. As I just pointed out, Jesus’ teaching has very strong implications for how we ought to act. If we were simply told explicitly what we ought to do, given a list of “dos” and “don’ts,” then we would be less inclined to follow them. They wouldn’t mean as much to us because they come from someone else, they aren’t ours, even if that someone else is the Second Person of the Trinity. Parables, by disguising Jesus’s meaning, force his hearers, us, to work that meaning out for ourselves. They provide a framework and a guide, something to think about and constraints which must be met in order for our interpretation to be reasonable, but we have to put in the effort and therefore come to own the conclusions.

In this respect, one might ask why the second half of today’s gospel includes a complete explanation of the parable Jesus uses in the first? Isn’t that running counter to this whole tactic? As a teacher, today’s gospel reminds me of a worked example. We are being shown how to interpret parables using this one, so that we can sit down with all the others that Jesus uses and work on them for ourselves. It’s a strategy that many teachers would recognize, and that’s why I think that this sort of thinking may at least in part be behind Jesus’ use of parables.

This is not to say that we should completely disregard the interpretations of anyone else; that we have to interpret everything for ourselves. The interpretations of others, especially those who are more expert in certain areas than we ourselves are, can form an invaluable resource for checking our work, just as today’s worked example does. However, like problems from a textbook, the existence of prior “solutions” does not invalidate our need to work through the parables ourselves. It is only by actively engaging with the parable that we come to appreciate its meaning and make it our own. So I have some homework for you, pick a parable, maybe start with today’s gospel, and take the time to really think about it. Break it down, examine it from all the angles you can think of, and check yourself against the interpretations of others. Because Jesus isn’t trying to be misunderstood by using parables, he is trying to engage us in the process of our salvation.