

Luke 8:1-15  
September 29, 2013  
FBC Vancouver  
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Ears to Hear, Eyes to See  
(Introduction to the series: "Parables of Jesus:  
Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

I have been looking forward to this day for a long time – like for over ten years! For over a decade now, I have wanted to engage in a sustained study in the parables of Jesus. As best I can read the will of the Lord, now is the season for that study. And today is the day I get to invite you to join me in it!

Given the powerful experience we have had over the past two weeks relative to the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Walk for Reconciliation, starting a series in Jesus' parables might seem like leaving the experience behind, and acting as though we have done our part and can move on to other things.

But that is not the case. Not at all. For as we will discover, Jesus' parables have everything to do with what we have experienced. Jesus' parables have everything to do with what the whole world is experiencing. For as David Wenham of England says, Jesus' parables are "pictures of revolution" [*The Parables of Jesus*, 7], pictures of the revolution Jesus is working all over the world.

Ask any person on the streets of our city who has had any meaningful exposure to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, "what stands out to you about His story?" and they will likely say: He healed broken lives (or, at least, that is what the Gospels claim); He got crucified on a Roman cross (different people will give different reasons for it); and He taught in parables.

Indeed, for most people, Jesus taught *only* in parables. He is, for most people, one of, if not the best, parable-tellers in history. On my counting, the four Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – record 47 of Jesus' parables. He probably taught more! Of all He taught, 47 have been preserved for us.

Now, figuring you would not want to spend 47 Sundays in them, I am going to invite you for a season to focus on the parables recorded by Luke the physician. Another season we can focus on the parables in Matthew and Mark. The text for this introduction to the series, and for next Sunday, is Luke 8:1-15:

<sup>1</sup>Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, <sup>2</sup>and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, <sup>3</sup>and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.

<sup>4</sup>When a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable: <sup>5</sup>"The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. <sup>6</sup>Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it

withered away, because it had no moisture. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. <sup>8</sup>Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great." As He said these things, He would call out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

<sup>9</sup>His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant. <sup>10</sup>And He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

<sup>11</sup>"Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. <sup>12</sup>Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. <sup>13</sup>Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. <sup>14</sup>The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. <sup>15</sup>But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.

(Luke 8:1-15)

Why? Why does Jesus of Nazareth speak in parables? He does not only speak in parables. He also speaks in prophetic exhortations, like His Sermon on the Mount, recorded by Matthew. And He speaks in dense theological discourses like those recorded by John. But He is mostly known for speaking in parables.

Why? Why does Jesus the Healer, Jesus the Deliverer, the Messiah Who gets crucified on a Roman cross, why does He speak in parables?

The usual answer is, to make things simpler to understand. Right? Jesus comes with a message, with what He calls "The Gospel of Kingdom," the Good News that the Kingdom of God is at hand. He wants the full range of human beings to understand His message. So He speaks in parables. The word parable is made up of two words: *bole*, something thrown; and *para*, alongside. Para-bole – something thrown alongside. So He speaks in para-boles to make things easier to grasp. Right?

Well, not exactly 😊.

Did you notice Jesus' first disciples' first reaction to His parables? They did not understand them! Not even the seemingly simple parable of the sower. Or is it the parable of the seed? Or is it the parable of the soils?

The first disciples' first reaction is to ask Jesus to explain the parable! "And His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable might be" (Luke 8:9). They do not immediately "get it." The parables do not "make things easier to grasp."

If parables do not make things simpler, then why speak them? Why does Jesus choose this form of communication? I have been wrestling with this for years. Clearly Jesus tells His stories – that is what most of His parables are, stories – because He wants to give us a new perspective.

As we have said many times, we all operate out of stories that help us make sense of life. Every culture in every era has stories that enable us order our lives, which help us cope with what is going on around us. The crisis of our time lies just here. The stories by which we have been living are no longer working. The modern and post-modern stories are no longer helping us make sense of what we are experiencing. Whole societies are casting about for some story that accounts for and gives meaning to all that we are experiencing.

Enter Jesus with His stories. Stories about His Story. Stories about His understanding of history. Stories about His understanding of human existence. So clearly, He tells parables to give us His perspective. But not to make things simpler to grasp. Then why?

Luke tells us that as Jesus tells the parable of the sower, or seed, or soil – see what I mean? not simple – He would call out “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (8:8). “She who has ears to hear, let her hear.” The disciples then ask Him to explain what He is doing. He answers: “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, in order that SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND” (Luke 8:10).

Some translations of the text print the words about ‘seeing and hearing’ in capital letters. Why? Because Jesus is quoting Scripture. He is quoting the Old Testament. In particular, He is quoting the prophet Isaiah.

He is quoting from Isaiah 6, a very important chapter is the Grand Story of God’s work in and for the world. “In the year that king Uzziah died,” writes Isaiah. A time of major transition, indeed, of upheaval. In that year, Isaiah is given a vision. He sees the Lord, Yahweh, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. Other kings, other rulers, come and go, but not Yahweh; He is the eternal king, whose kingdom cannot be overthrown. Isaiah sees angelic creatures standing above the throne, calling out, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is Yahweh of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.” (6:3).

As they sing, the foundations of the threshold tremble and the temple fills with smoke. The prophet is undone. He becomes keenly and fearfully aware of his sin. “Woe is me, for I am ruined! For my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts” (6:5). One of the angelic creatures flies over to him with a burning coal in his hand. With it, he touches Isaiah’s mouth, and says, “Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.” Then Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord, saying, “Who will go for US?” For Us – for the Triune God of grace. “Who will go for Us?” “Here am I. Send me!” says Isaiah (6:8).

Then we come to the text from which Jesus quotes. God says to Isaiah: “Go, and tell this people, ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.’ Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed” (6:9-11).

This text – Isaiah 6:9-11 – is quoted in the NT six times. Six times!

By Jesus in Luke’s Gospel (8:10).

By Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel (13:14-15).

By Jesus in Mark’s Gospel (4:12).

By John in his Gospel, in his telling of the Palm Sunday story, because although Jesus had performed many signs, the majority of people were not believing in Him (12:40). They saw but did not see; they heard but did not hear.

By the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, lamenting that those who know the Grand Story are not believing in its climax in Jesus (11:8).

And by Paul after arriving in Rome and encountering the stubbornness of people who should have believed (Acts 28:26).

What is going on here? Why quote Isaiah 6 about seeing but not seeing, hearing but not hearing? And how does this all inform the reason Jesus speaks in parables?

“Turn and be healed.” If we see and really see; if we hear and really hear; we will turn and be healed. If we see and truly perceive; if we hear and truly understand; we will make a U-turn in the road, and be healed. Jesus wants people, us, to turn and be healed. The word Luke uses is *sodzo* ... saved. Turn and be saved. But will we? Will we see and hear and turn and be healed?

In Luke, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 saying that He speaks in parables “in order that ...” (*Hina*). “In order that seeing that may *not* see, and hearing they may *not* understand.” It seems that Jesus teaches in parables *so that* people see and not see, hear and not hear.

In Matthew Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 saying that He speaks in parables “because ...” (*Oti*). “I speak in parables because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (13:11). It seems that Jesus teaches in parables to enable people who do not see to see, and who do not hear to hear.

So, which is it? To obscure or to reveal? To frustrate seeing and hearing? Or to facilitate seeing and hearing?

Clearly He uses parables to make us think. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur puts it this way: parables are used “to increase perplexity and to call into question the reader’s understanding” [*A Ricoeur Reader*, 460, 298].

But does the perplexity open up the message or hide the message? The message is the Kingdom of God. In Jesus and because of Jesus, the long-awaited Kingdom of God is breaking into the world. Heaven is invading earth, the future is invading the present. Now. Today.

Jesus’ parables are about this great news. Sometimes more about the kingdom. Sometimes more about the God of the Kingdom. Does He tell the parables to help us see? Or does He tell the parable to hide the mysteries of the Kingdom so we do not see?

I have wrestled with this for years, which is partly why I have not chosen to take on a sustained study in Jesus’ parables. Which is it? Obscure or reveal? Open up or hide?

In order to answer correctly, We need to look at how Jesus' parables work. Three words help me: secular, surprise, and scandal.

Nearly every parable Jesus speaks begins on a secular note – on an earthy note. He begins with something out of everyday life. Anyone hearing Him can immediately connect because Jesus speaks out of ordinary, everyday reality.

But as He continues speaking He surprises us. We think we are getting it, when all of a sudden we say, "Hey, wait a minute ... what did You just say, Jesus?"

And then we experience the surprise as a scandal. By 'scandal' I do not mean something dirty or corrupt or raunchy. By 'scandal' I mean something that catches us off guard, something that unsettles us. By 'scandal' I mean something that offends our understanding of how things are and should be. The surprise in the parable poses a scandal. Jesus makes claims about the Kingdom of God that offends us. Jesus portrays the God of the Kingdom in a way that offends us.

In nearly every one of His parables, He starts on a secular note, introduces a surprise, and the surprise poses a scandal. Let me illustrate.

Secular. Jesus begins with an ordinary, rather mundane story line.

The sower went out to sow his seed. Everyone in first century Palestine could picture it.

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him. And by chance a certain priest was going down on the road. Everyone could picture it too.

A certain man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many. At the dinner hour he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is ready now."

A shepherd has a hundred sheep. One gets lost. So he goes out to find it.

A certain man had two sons. The younger said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me." Give me now what will be mine when you die. Not hard to imagine, is it? Cruel, but not hard to imagine.

A certain rich man had a steward. It was reported to him that the steward was squandering his money. So he calls the steward into his office, and says, "What is this I hear about you?" Not hard to imagine, is it?

A landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And he agreed with the laborers to pay a certain amount. Ok, "I know about such things," we say.

Secular. Jesus is using the secular to speak about the kingdom of God, about the God of the kingdom. As some scholars put it: Jesus is "speaking secularly about the transcendent" [Charlesworth and Weaver, *Earthing Christologies: From Jesus' Parables to Jesus the Parable*, 31]. And our immediate response is, "Ok, I am with you ... I get it."

Surprise. But then Jesus takes the story in an unexpected direction. He surprises us.

The sower went out to sow his seed. Some fell beside the road, where it was trampled under foot. Why is he sowing seed on hard ground? Other seed fell on rocky ground, in shallow soil. Why is he wasting his seed there? Still other seed fell among thorns. Surely the sower knows better than to do that! Still other seed fell in good soil, and the seed produced a crop 100 times the normal harvest. 100? Jesus, things like that do not happen that way in the real world. Maybe 2 times the normal; like the bumper crop in the Canadian Prairies this year, or the apple crop in Ontario this year. So we get 2 times the normal, even 3, maybe even 4. But 100 times?

The priest sees the wounded man and passes by. "On the other side" of the road! Isn't it part of a priest's calling to care for the wounded? A Levite comes along, and he too passes by ... on the other side. But a Samaritan comes upon the man in the ditch and stops. Wait a minute. A Samaritan? A Samaritan does not know God's way of love in the world! A Samaritan bandages the wounded man, takes him to the nearest hotel, gets him a nice room, and tells the clerk he will pay for all the expenses as the man recovers?

All the invited guests are told it is time to come, everything is ready. And one by one they told the servants they could not come after all. And one by one they offer their excuses, each of which in a Middle-Eastern culture is flimsy at best. Things like this simply do not happen in the real world.

The shepherd in his desire to find the one lost sheep leaves the 99 in open pasture. What? Palestinian shepherds would never do that. Risk the well-being of 99 just to find one lost sheep?

The younger son who has hurt his father deeply returns from the far country. And the father has been waiting for him ... whoa ... waiting? The father has been waiting for the scumbag? And the father runs to meet his son at the village gates. Whoa, Jesus... the father runs? Jesus, You know that a man of his age and stature never runs in public for any reason. And the father embraces the son, and kisses him, and calls for the best robe to be put on him, and for the father's signet to be put on his finger. And then the father throws a party! What is this? The son should be punished ... instead he gets a party?

The steward of the rich businessman is exposed for his shenanigans. So he goes to the rich man's clients and re-writes their loan agreements ... downward! And when the rich man finds out about it, the rich man praises the steward for being so shrewd! What? What did You say, Jesus?

The landowner sends the first group of laborers into the vineyard. A few hours later, he hired another group. A few hours later, he hired yet another group. Towards the end of the day, he hired still another group. And when it comes time to pay them, they all get the same amount! Whoa, Jesus. We thought You were talking about the Kingdom of God. This is no way to run a Kingdom, especially the Kingdom of GOD.

In every one of His parables Jesus surprises us. He takes the story in directions we would have never thought of.

Scandal. And the surprise then poses a scandal – intentionally so. Jesus takes the stories in surprising directions to intentionally pose a scandal. The scandal of His Gospel, the scandal of His Good News.

The parables are about the Kingdom of God. In each parable He tells us something surprising about the Kingdom, something surprising about the God of the Kingdom. He surprises us in ways that we can say, “Wow, I never expected that!” “We would have never deduced that on our own.”

And the surprise offends us. Not that Jesus speaks offensively. It is just that what He speaks offends us. Why? The surprise calls into question our understanding of Kingdoms. The surprise calls into question our understanding of God!

The surprise poses a scandal. We either embrace the scandal as the way things are in the Kingdom of God or we reject the scandal as a distortion of the way things are in the Kingdom of God. We either take our stand on the scandal, or the scandal becomes a “rock of offense” over which we trip.

So, back to the question of why Jesus speaks His parables.

“They who have ears to hear, let them hear.” Hear and truly hear, and turn and be healed; see and truly see, and turn and be healed. Or see and not see, and not turn and not be healed; hear and not hear, and not turn and not be healed. It all depends on what we do with the scandal. Press through it, and see and hear and turn and be healed. Or back off, “take offense” at what Jesus says, and not see and hear and turn and be healed.

Paul Ricoeur again. Jesus tells His parables to “re-orient” our understanding. But to accomplish this “re-orientation” He first “dis-orient” us. The “dis-orientation” is unto “re-orientation.” He doesn’t want us to stay disoriented, he wants us to be reoriented. But first comes the “dis-orientation.” “The parable surprises, astonishes, shocks, provokes ... it obliges one to reconsider things, to come to a new decision” [*The Kingdom*, 166].

And, says Ricoeur, the critical element in the surprise that leads to scandal is “extravagance” (168). Did you hear the “extravagance” as I re-told some of Jesus’ parables?

Throwing the seed everywhere! Hard soil, shallow soil, cluttered soil, good soil – throws it everywhere!

The Samaritan pays the full cost for health care.

Seed growing up, producing a 100 fold harvest.

The vineyard owner paying everyone a generous wage for a day’s work.

And the father throwing a party for the prodigal son. The kid should have, at minimum, been sent to his room. But no, not the God of the Kingdom of God. A sinner comes home and He throws a party: fattened calf, music and dancing. And the older son is scandalized. The extravagance is too much for him. He will not join the party. He will not enter into his father’s joy in having the prodigal home. He is too offended by the extravagant grace and mercy of the father.

And those who were hired by the vineyard owner early in the morning are scandalized. They cannot handle the extravagance of the owner paying everyone the same. They cannot handle the generosity of the God of the Kingdom.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard helps me at this point. He speaks of Jesus' parables as provoking "a collision of understanding" [*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 132]. The first disciples did not immediately understand Jesus because they experience Jesus' teaching as a collision with their understanding of reality. And that collision will either result in faith, or it will result in staying offended. For Kierkegaard, faith is born only out of the collision. We do not really have faith until we work through the collision. Faith is born out of embracing the scandal of the Gospel.

It turns out that Jesus Himself is the scandal. Not only what He speaks. But Jesus Himself. His mere presence in the world calls into question everything we understand. Everything about what it means to be human. Everything about what it means to do justice. Everything about what it means to love. Everything about what it means for the Kingdom of God to come. Everything about what it means for God to be God.

Jesus, the man from Galilee, God in our flesh and blood? Jesus, Who knew no sin, became sin for us that we might be reconciled to God? Jesus, Who through utter weakness overcomes the power of evil in the world? Jesus, Who by dying defeats death? Jesus, Who by simply speaking makes us alive? Jesus, the One to Whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess as Lord? Jesus, the One by Whom and for Whom all things were made? Jesus, the One Who holds all things together?

Jesus, just by being Who He is, poses the great scandal. Whom we either embrace and are healed, or over whom we trip.

John the Baptist had the great privilege of being the one who introduces Jesus to the world. He carried out his role with great zeal and joy. But not long after Jesus began His public ministry, John became disappointed with Jesus. Jesus was not acting the way John expected Him to act. Jesus was not bringing in the Kingdom the way kingdoms ought to be brought in. There was far too much extravagant mercy and grace, and not enough judgment and condemnation.

So he sends envoys to Jesus asking, "Are You the coming one, or should we look for someone else?" Jesus reviews for John all that is happening: people's lives are being changed, grace is abounding to the broken. And then Jesus says: "Blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me" (Matthew 11:6; Luke 7:23). The word is *scandalized*. Blessed is the one who is not *scandalized* by Me.

So, why does Jesus speak His good news in parables? To see and see, to hear and hear. So we will turn and be healed.

But we will only see and see, and hear and hear, and turn and be healed when we embrace the scandal. When we embrace the collision of understanding. When we embrace the extravagance. When we embrace Jesus and let Him rock our worlds.