

“Taking a Second Look at the Parables of Jesus”

Date: June 30, 2019 Occasion: Parables of Jesus, series
Place: Lakewood UMC Theme: Biblical interpretation
Texts: Mark 4:33-34; 2 Samuel 12:1-14

When our first child was just a baby, crawling on the floor, my wife informed me we needed to “child-proof” the house to make it safe for little Christopher. Babies crawl on the floor and they reach up and out to grab things. We needed to remove anything that might be dangerous – things the baby could pull down on top of himself, or grab that might be sharp. We had to put covers over the electrical outlets and hide the electrical cords, as best we could.

At one point, I was instructed to get down on my hands and knees, so I could see the world from the baby’s perspective. And when I did, I noticed things I hadn’t seen when I was standing upright, in my adult position. I was so accustomed to seeing the world from five foot 10 inches high, that I didn’t really notice what it was like crawling on the floor.

Every once in a while it’s good to get a different perspective on things, to see the world a little differently than the way we’ve always seen it. This summer we’re going to take a second look at the parables of Jesus through a unique set of eyes, that of a contemporary Jewish rabbi.

Her name is Amy-Jill Levine, who is a university professor of New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee. She is a remarkable biblical scholar who brings a unique perspective to New Testament studies.

She is thoughtful, interesting, humorous and challenging. We’re going to be engaging with her book, *Short Stories by Jesus, the Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Rabbi Levine is a great admirer of

Jesus, calling him a genius in one place, but she does not worship him as Lord and Savior.

However, her unique perspective will allow us to hear the parables in a new way, helping us to not only understand what the parables might have meant to those who first heard them, but also helping us to understand what they mean now – both for those who do worship Jesus and those who admire his teachings.

Parables are a hallmark of Jesus' teachings. Some of them are only a sentence long, and others are involved stories. Mark 4:33-34 tells us this is one of the main ways Jesus taught: "With many such parables he spoke to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples."

Parables are not always easy to understand and Jesus had to explain them even to his disciples. But because we like things simple and easy, we have reduced the parables to stories with a moral, or children's stories, or simply platitudes, like "God loves us," or "Be nice," or worse, assurances that "all is right with the world if we just believe in Jesus."

But the original purpose of parables was to challenge and shake up. If we stop with easy lessons, good though they may be, we lose the way Jesus' followers would have heard the parables, and we lose the genius of Jesus' teaching.

Those followers, like Jesus himself, were Jews, and Jews knew that the parables were more than children's stories or restatements of common knowledge. They knew that parables and those who told them were there to prompt them to see the world in a new way, to challenge and even indict.

We might be better off thinking less about what they "mean" and more about what they can "do": remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb.

Rabbi Levine informs us that parables were not unique to Jesus. The Jewish people were already familiar with them; their own rabbis taught using them. In fact there are examples of parables in the Old Testament. The passage from 2 Samuel this morning is one of them: the Parable of the Ewe Lamb. Nathan was King David's court prophet, think of Billy Graham to Richard Nixon, the figure who spoke to the moral conscience of the king.

Following David's adultery with Bathsheba and then his arranging for the murder of Bathsheba's husband Uriah (imagine, a politician who has an affair and then attempts to cover it up!) Nathan the prophet tells the king about "two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor."

The rich man had large flocks, but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb – let's call her Fluffy – who was like a daughter to him. When a visitor came to the rich man and it was time for dinner, the rich man took little Fluffy and butchered her, and served her for dinner.

That's the parable, and David, who takes it as an actual story, is outraged. "Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die.' And then Nathan proclaims, "*You* are the man!" David hears the parable and indicts himself.

The shock of Nathan's parable is that the one condemned is the parable's intended target, David himself; he was able to recognize, finally, the gravity of his sin.

There are other parables in the Old Testament, and in the Rabbinic texts – compiled after Jesus' time- there are numerous parables. The point we Christians need to understand is that Jesus didn't invent parables and they were not unique to him.

Rabbi Levine encourages Christian readers to better understand the context of Jesus' parables, and not simply read them as though they were written in a vacuum. She brings her unique Jewish experience to the dialogue and helps us better understand what was going on historically at the time.

In her introduction, she mentions several things that make it hard for us to hear the parables as they were originally intended to be heard. First, she mentions that parables, because they're good stories, often function as children's sermons. We reduce their meaning to simple phrases that children can understand.

For too many adult Christians, when they hear the parables, they remember the Sunday school lessons they had when they were children, and they think, "I've heard this before; I know what this means."

For example, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan we assume it simply teaches us to be kind and help others. That's the point of the story. But is it? A deeper understanding will reveal that Jesus is criticizing the racism of his time. That's a harder lesson for people to hear.

A second reason we have a hard time hearing the parables at a deeper level, is that preachers are afraid of their congregations. We've been too timid to challenge congregations about social policy, family dysfunction and loving the enemy.

It's much more comforting to hear that God is a loving father who welcomes us home no matter how much we stray, than it is to hear a sermon exhorting us to reconcile with the brother, sister or fellow parishioner with whom we haven't spoken in who knows how long.

A third reason we get the parables wrong is that we are naïve about their Jewish context. Here, Rabbi Levine invites us to get down on the

floor, to use my baby-proofing analogy, and see things from a different perspective. Too often, we Christians, including pastors, have unintentionally repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes. Naively we believe that Jesus came to fix Judaism, so therefore Judaism – whatever it was – must have been bad.

One very common way parables are interpreted is by drawing a contrast between what Jesus taught and what “the Jews” generally understood. Thus, the Prodigal Son teaches that God loves sinners, when “the Jews” thought God only loved the righteous and didn’t give a damn about sinners.

Such a reading makes no sense to anyone who has read the scriptures of Israel. God does not give up on sinners; to the contrary, God is always waiting for us to repent and return. We may mess up; we may break the covenant, but God is faithful to us. Jews also believed that God cared about the sinful, otherwise why send the prophets to Israel, or Jonah to Ninevah?

Well, for the next several weeks, we’re going to read the parables of Jesus, look at their historical context, listen to a fresh understanding of what they meant to the people who first heard them. And then, finally, we’ll examine what the parables could mean for us today.

I, for one, am looking forward to this journey. I want to see with new eyes. I want to understand Jesus better. I want become aware of my own anti-Jewish thoughts that have been hidden to me before. I want to be challenged in a new way. And I hope that you’ll join me for this exciting journey. Thanks be to God. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publisher, NY, NY, 2014. “How We Domesticate Jesus’s Provocative Stories,” 1-26.