



Parable: THE LORD'S FAVORITE LITERARY TOOL

Editor's note: This is Father Kerper's last column. Though he's stepping back from Parable, he'll still be tending his flock at St. Patrick Parish in Nashua. We'll miss his wit, wisdom and pastoral advice. See the next issue of Parable for our special tribute to Father Kerper.

DEAR FATHER KERPER, I'VE BEEN READING *PARABLE* MAGAZINE SINCE IT STARTED 16 YEARS AGO. AFTER ALL THIS TIME, I'M A LITTLE EMBARRASSED TO ASK: WHY IS IT CALLED *PARABLE*?

Please don't be embarrassed. Like you, I never really thought about the magazine's name until you posed your question. Now, at long last, I realize that *Parable* is indeed the perfect name, perhaps even inspired.

Here's how *Parable* came to life. More than 16 years ago, Bishop John McCormack decided to reestablish a diocesan publication. *Tidings*, a short-lived tabloid, had expired earlier, leaving New Hampshire Catholics without face or voice. Bishop McCormack felt the need for a new and more professional publication. He enlisted Father John Grace, a diocesan official, to get the magazine up and running, which he did with superb results.

Though Bishop McCormack had initiated the project, Father Grace acted as a "midwife," nurturing and coaxing the small plant into robust maturity. Very quickly, Father Grace hit upon the name *Parable*, perhaps through the Holy Spirit's quiet inspiration. Bishop Peter Libasci, who succeeded Bishop McCormack in 2011, has lovingly supported *Parable* ever since.

As the first issue took shape, the working group proposed a question-and-answer feature. Someone asked me to explain why non-Catholics can't be godparents. I quickly responded but never expected that 99 questions and answers would follow.

Why call the magazine *Parable*? Because the parable is the Lord's favorite literary device for communicating his truth and love. Indeed, the 40 or more parables in the New Testament attest to the Lord's love for this powerful yet simple form.

But what exactly is a parable? This term combines two small Greek words: *para*, which means alongside and *ballein*, which means thrown down. Parables, then, always have two tracks: images of real things like sheep, wheat, coins and so on, and the movement of a storyline. For example, when we hear the story of the Good Shepherd, we visualize the sheep as well as the shepherd who goes on a rescue mission.

We experience tension, wondering whether the sheep will survive. And we also wonder about the shepherd: Will he rescue the endangered sheep or abandon it? The same happens in other parables: Questions arise, drama bubbles up and our active investment in the characters causes us to think — and even pray! As Father John Donahue, S.J., a brilliant biblical scholar once noted, "Jesus is parable." By this, Father Donahue meant that the Lord, who has a unique divine-human "personality," embodies and manifests all the features of parables. As such, whenever we hear or read a parable, we actually encounter the Risen Christ, the Word made flesh.

Parables have three key features.

First, the Lord always carefully considered his audience before he uttered a word. He measured them. Were the listeners friends or foes, educated or common folk, religious or lax, Jewish or Gentile, closed-minded or open? He always sought to know and understand people who had questions. We see this so clearly when the evangelists almost always precisely identify the audience by background — scribes and Pharisees, disciples, Samaritans, paupers, rich people and so on. By doing this, he invites us to situate ourselves among the people, whether few or many, who heard him preach. We must ask ourselves: Am I a scribe, a bystander, a half-hearted disciple, an arrogant son? Without this personal engagement with God's Word, the parable becomes just another ancient story.

Second, the Lord's parables invited people to rethink and possibly overturn their settled opinions and beliefs. In other words, every parable evoked a conversion — a change in how we see and relate to other people — and God! The Lord never rushed people to quick conclusions. Rather he gave them time to mull over his words, to pray and even to consult others.

Third, all parables draw upon ordinary things and events. Unlike other ancient religious teachers, the Lord avoided complex mythologies, intricate rituals, visions and legends. By doing this, the Lord tore down the walls separating the sacred from the profane. As such, he showed how God's presence pervades the entire world, not just the religious realm.

As I thought about our magazine's name, I began to realize that it perfectly reflects all the qualities of a parable. How so?

First, like Jesus, those who produce the magazine look around at those who will eventually read it, carefully compiling and considering the worries and hopes of the readers.

Second, *Parable* is profoundly personal, not primarily theological or catechetical. Instead, it conveys essential Catholic teaching in and through the lived experiences of Catholic people. I dare say that every article published in *Parable* has some connection with a specific teaching of the Lord.

Parables come in all shapes, sizes and lengths. Recently, while thinking about these matters, I recalled a "parable" in the form of a 5-year-old boy. After Sunday Mass, he approached me, arms folded and tapping his right foot on the sidewalk. He looked at me with a bit of anger and blurted out, "Why don't you speak English in church?" I said to him, "Is my vocabulary too obscure?" He almost burst into tears and, while walking away, loudly complained, "See! You're still not talking in English!"

This simple parable teaches us about our need to adapt our speech to those who hear us. I was doing the opposite: Talking to myself and angering a child. He

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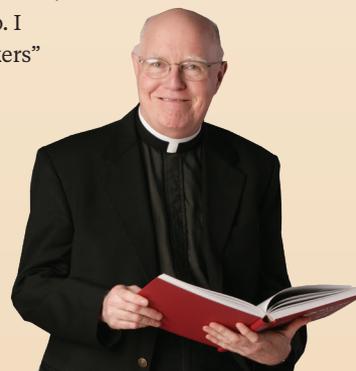
needed something like a simple parable; I gave him a frozen stone.

Now as I come to question 100, I wonder about the previous 99. I see two kinds of questions: Those that get asked over and over again, things like rules, eating before Holy Communion, Limbo, purgatory, indulgences and so many more. For sure, these things have importance, but the questions that really matter come from the heart, which carries within itself suffering, wonderment, grief and constant perplexity about God.

The first type of question is easy. We quickly pull out old answers to the same old questions, failing to notice that no one's asking the questions anymore. By contrast, the answers to the second batch come very slowly, painfully and with "fear and trembling and sickness unto death," as Søren Kierkegaard famously said. Among these questions, we find the "big ones." Why does God love us? Why do so many innocent children, whether unborn or not, suffer so terribly? Why can't believers in God have unity? Now and then, the Lord's parables provide soothing insights, but not necessarily answers. Indeed, for some people, God seems cruel, allowing us to await the ultimate answers.

What are we to say? Rainier Maria Rilke (1875-1926), a wonderful — yet troubled — poet of Catholic background, heroically struggled with unanswered questions. The following words rose up from his soul: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions. ... And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now."

Over the past 16 years, I have truly learned to love the questions, as most priests eventually do. I also especially love the "seekers" who resist overly certain answers. And I thank the simple and faithful Catholic people who have humbly entrusted their questions into my hands, hoping for answers but satisfied to patiently await the day when each of us will experience the disclosure of all answers. ■



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