

Pastors' Pre-Lent Bible Class
 Mark 4 and 5
 Feb. 16-17, 2014

Christus Lux Mundi – the Master Teacher

Part I: Mark 4:1-34

Remember that in the parables Jesus captures the whole of life in a moment of time and puts various aspects of life into proper perspective. Remember too that in the parables Jesus is not allegorizing nature; rather he is giving us reminders that he has planted in nature from the beginning, so that all of the visible creation serves as a reminder of and pointer to invisible, spiritual realities.

Give some thought to the tension in the interpretation/application of parables between an over emphasis on the rule of the *tertium* on the one hand and allegorizing on the other:

Can the emphasis on the *tertium* result in a rather wooden, not to say very shallow and self-serving application of the parable?

Might applications that go beyond the simplest use of the *tertium* have a good hedge against allegorizing if one kept in mind that any further application must be in harmony with a) the *tertium* itself, b) the analogy of faith/the corpus doctrinae?

Use the paradigm parable Mark 4:1-20 to test out the point.

Notice in this parable as in all of them Jesus emphatic and repeated imperative: *Listen!* What he has to say is not only important but also it requires serious attention - - it's not going to be altogether easy to get it without serious attention being paid. (Is our teaching always worthy of such an earnest exhortation?)

Seed by the wayside - - the Word is heard but not listened to. What was last Sunday's epistle lesson?

Seed in shallow ground - - the soul's Sunday morning happy walk in the park.

Seed in the thorns - - *Anfechtung aller Art!* Distractions, deceptions that drown up what had been perhaps serious listening.

Seed in good soil - - good in itself? Here is where the rule of the analogy of faith comes in very handy. Good but lifeless. Good because of the sower and the seed.

Notice that the fruit is various and takes time to appear. Most of the life of the plant is in the necessary but invisible root system and relatively useless growing stalk.

Vss. 21-24 Consider the example that God himself sets for the implied injunction of this parable, the example of Genesis 3.

That light shines is of its essence, its purpose; it's not optional. That a secret should be revealed is in the very nature of a secret.

Thus there is an urgency in God, an excitement already evident at the fall and in all of Christ's life, to tell the secret. - - Call to mind as well, Luther's particular insight on the word "reveal," that when used of the gospel, it is a synonym for "give" and that *cum affectu et effectu*.

But why does God hide it? Why not make the gospel from the start part of the natural knowledge of God, something instinctive and innate? Life would be so much more simple then. Instead he makes himself dependent! He makes us dependent too! Perhaps a bit of stretch - - see how God humbles himself with the Word (as in *Behold I stand at the door and knock*) and with the office of the ministry; see as well what folly it is for us to ever get uppity about it!

Consider the options presented. The one who hides the light under a bushel is fool; the one who sticks it under the bed is lazy. Both are ungrateful in the highest degree.

Consider the lowliness of the vessel that bears the light and at the same time how indispensable it is. That consideration too is a constant from the moment of creation (dust bears the image of God!) through so many of the parables other precious parts of the Bible e.g. Mary considers her lowliness in the *Magnificat* and that's what makes her joy so great in God's might acts and great things done for her/us, Paul who boasts in his weakness so that God may be exalted in his grace, Peter who begs the Lord to leave him because he is a sinful man only to be told that he will become a fisher of men - - fish, by the way, have no value until they are caught!

If Christ is the light and you the vessel, what a delightful union and blessed purpose for your life in him, with him, for him! Again, keep in mind that the parables tend to capture all of life in a moment: the only purpose that a lamp has is that it bears light, and the only point of light is that it shines; everything else is merely incidental. Jesus underscores the point and urges on our own shining with the promise that the more we measure out, i.e. the more faithfully and constantly we shine, the more we will be given to measure out: Who hasn't experienced that? You learn most by teaching! You should expect to be more edified than your hearers could possibly be by preaching! What martyrs we foolishly imagine ourselves to be!

But note the incongruity - - all that we have to measure out has been given as a gift of grace; yet we are made responsible for its use, which use results in more grace. We are not Calvinistic robots.

Notice in verse 23-25 how seriously Jesus takes his Word. As so often a promise of rich blessing is combined with a warning against carelessness with respect to the Light/light

of the world. Call to mind how often those two are combined, e.g. – 1 Kings 18:21, Rev. 3:14-21. Notice too the passive verbs: Christ remains the Giver and the Taker of the treasure of his Word, a Word that he always takes seriously whether we do or not.

Vss. 26-29 With each parable, one building on the other, Jesus fills out ever more fully the relationships in the kingdom of God; first (13-20) the relationship between the Word and the individual, then (21-22) the individual receiver and those around him, then (23-25) the absolute, the supreme importance of the Word in the whole equation preceding and yet to come, then (26-29) the common and yet miraculous effect of the proclamation of that Word - - common to encourage us, miraculous to leave us ever in awe.

Here's a secret revealed, a secret given. The emphasis is on the "what" of the secret; the "how" remains forever a mystery even to those who regularly observe the result of that secret revealed.

The secret is the kingdom of God, i.e. God's own ruling activity. Here the one aspect of that ruling activity is held out to those who have been urged to pay attention in their hearing, to those who bear the light of the world.

Notice how in this parable Jesus and his sub-sowers are indistinguishable - - he does not sleep, but he is the one who sends in the sickle for the harvest.

What are the sub-sowers doing? What are lights doing with the light given? What else but sowing seed whose purpose it is to sprout. Consider the parallels between the shining of the light and the sowing of seed. The light is not self-absorbed; it simply shines because it's light. Now in these vss., the one sowing is active, but likewise not self-absorbed. And why not? Because the promise is in the seed and so too its fruition.

The one who sows is anxious for and expects a yield; but to fret about it is to imagine that there might be something wrong with the seed. It is to suppose that the power of the plant is in the one who sows and so too then must be the praise for the fruit - - and the blame for its lack.

How dull the soil looks, how utterly uninteresting. The teenager yawns through the service; the adult looks at his watch; grandpa is napping. Then you see them in trouble, on a sick call, in the hospital. The message is not met with: "I never heard that before!" but with "Thank you, Pastor!" There it was, and we need not be surprised but will still be in awe. Faith is the life produced by the seed which then has various and maturing manifestations, young and basic to old and mature; the faith is the same, only its manifestations are different. The fruit at whatever stage is appropriate to its source, i.e. all that follows from faith as Paul describes it so fully in Galatians 5:19-24. As the fruit described by Paul may often be invisible to the naked eye, thus also much of the fruit on the plant of faith, some of its richest and sweetest fruit lies hidden in the stalk; still, when and where God grants it, it becomes evident, but only in part and that often under the cross - - in church when purity of doctrine is opposed, at home when disorder seems the norm, in society when the hideous has been turned into a virtue ...

So much for those who lazily assert to their ruin as well as to the harm of the church and the world: “We’re Lutherans; we don’t believe in good works!” The goal of the sowing and of the plant’s existence is that the ultimate Sower should have a harvest. The harvest is when he decides that there is fruit to be harvested, and, of course, ultimately the hour of the Christian’s death and as well of the *Parousia*. Notice too that it is the ultimate Sower who decides when to make visible and then to collect the harvest - - a point that we in our weakness often miss, when we become impatient with the maturity of the fruit in plants we tend (as distinguished from the fruit in ourselves, of course).

(Notice how almost all of the parables about the kingdom of God bring to the fore the importance of a correct understanding of the doctrine of the means of grace, indeed the assumption that we do understand that doctrine correctly.)

Vss. 30-34 The *tertium* doubtless has to do with growth. But all sorts of debates arise around what the seed is and who the sower. Is the seed Christ himself or the Word? If Christ is the seed, who is the sower? Is it the Father? Is it the Christian with the Word? But as so often the answer (*meiner Meinung nach*) isn’t an either/or, but a simple “Yes! Now it’s one, now another.”

Either way, this parable sharpens the previous ones by bringing us to focus on the seeming incongruity between the seeming insignificance of the seed and the out-of-all-proportion and ultimate use of the plant that results.

Notice at the start how Jesus brings us into the whole matter of coming up with parables for explaining the kingdom of God. “How shall *we*...?” What answer would you give? Might it be: “I haven’t a clue. It’s all a mystery, a secret - - and you, Lord Jesus, must make it known, you alone, and on you I depend and on your revelation of the secret!”

For who would come up with it of himself? Jesus and his Word are in the sowing so weak, so easily passed by, so apparently incapable of mattering at all.

Who/what are the wild birds? They are not the believers, for the believers are the result of the sowing in the plant itself. They may be unbelievers who benefit from the planting of faith/the church in the world even though they have no real part in it. For, after all is said and done, the world exists only for the benefit of the planted seed. Apart from the results of that planting the birds have no shelter or possibility of shelter. Indeed, they will perish once faith is no longer possible.

Notice in vs. 34 the incentive for those closest to Jesus to be in no big hurry to think that with one simple hearing they know it all. The pastors’ devotional life is an important part of Jesus taking us aside as grow in the grace of listening to him ever more attentively.

Part II: Mark 4:35-5:43 *Christus Lux Mundi – The Perfect Pastor*

Mark 4:35-41 Now Jesus prunes the plant with *Anfetzung*. Nothing sharpens the ear for hearing like situations in life and in the soul that reveal to us our helplessness. We cannot help but notice that Jesus' miracle here and those in chapter 5 and generally are always performed in situations that are desperate.

Could a text more fully demonstrate the *union personalis* than this one? In his state of humiliation, in his full humanity, Jesus is tired. How nice for us to know that!! He is so exhausted that even so violent a storm does not wake him. The disciples for their part are pros when it comes to boats and to storms too. Their very professionalism makes them as fully aware of their peril as do the obvious circumstances of the storm.

Note the interesting nature of their prayer. Surely when they wake Jesus up they are not expecting that two more hands bailing would save them. No, theirs is a prayer of mixed expectation, perhaps disappointment, and despair. Has your own cry in the *Kyrie* ever been mixed with *Don't you care?! May it be a reasonable assumption that the same is true in the secret cries of members in trouble that you know about and trouble that you can't imagine? Even the Psalmist cries out Awake, O LORD! Why do you sleep (Ps. 44:23)?*

The prayer is the more pitiful when considered in the context of all the miracles that they had seen Jesus perform. *Ah, but, this time things are different!* How the anguish of the disciples echoes down through the ages in the prayers of saints who are sinners!

Jesus calls them cowards! Of course, that's what they are whenever and to whatever extent they are unmindful of Jesus' presence, whether seen or unseen. Their cowardice and their lack or littleness of faith consists in their inability to trust that whether they perish or not they are in the hands of God, their Savior, and that fear therefore is always irrational in the believer. We at once marvel at Jesus' patience with us, flesh that we are, and never a moment away from fears of the past/present/future.

Take a moment to consider what faith it is that Jesus is talking about here. Is it faith in his person and work, a lack of "saving faith," a lack of which would be the mortal sin of unbelief? Or is it faith in particular promises, the failure to apply promises of God to a specific situation in life? What's the difference and what difference does it make to make the distinction?

Jesus, the man who was so tired that even such a violent storm did not wake him, is the God to whom all the forces of nature submit in an instant.

The disciples' response is that they are awestruck. But why? They had seen his power over nature before in the miracles. Do the wondrous interventions of God in personal history become for us *passé* simply because we have experienced them so often? It takes a sudden and new kind of terror to bring us again in awe *uns wieder und allein ganze auf Ihn und Sein Wort zu verlassen*. Indeed it is a special mark of his providence that he

sends such disasters to us in order that we may learn anew that he is not the one who has been sleeping! Then it is that pay attention to the person and to the Word, the secrets, the mystery that he reveals and all that he wants to give us with it.

Again we note his patience, one of his most comforting attributes!

The order of things in Mark's gospel is always so beautiful! In chapter 4 we have deep things to think about from his teaching. At the end of the chapter and then in chapter 5 we get to marvel at how he shows himself to us in ways that demonstrate his teaching, in ways at once so practical and as rich in application as the weighty things that he has said in his parables.

Mark 5: 1-20 In this account we see both how evil really is and more than anywhere else in the Bible how irrational it is. The whole account reeks of unreason; for the devil is incapable of sound reason. That's what makes both sin in general and heresy in particular always unreasonable, in spite of the devil's insistence and fallen reason's agreement to the contrary. Further, that unreason is always destructive.

But there's more. Jesus shows that reason must always be subject to him and to his Word in order to be truly reasonable. For according to any common sense, Jesus' behavior in this account is likewise unreasonable. But notice the difference: the devil and fallen reason use reason for destruction; Jesus uses what we might consider unreason for salvation, and that is true in this account and in the great doctrines of the gospel. God's call to Isaiah (1:18) and his defense of his own reasoning (Isaiah 55:8-11) find their rationale only at the cross in the saving rationality of a vicarious substitution as Paul so magnificently outlines it in 2 Corinthians 5. But just that perfect reasoning is a secret and a mystery which can be known and trusted only through its revelation in the effective Word (- - see how it all comes together!). The only obviously reasonable person in this whole account is the cured demoniac! And his reason too is made subject to Jesus' saving irrationality.

Once again Jesus' patience is astonishing, especially given the frustration of his saving intention on the one hand and his might on the other. Can't help but call to mind Vergil's insight and implied warning to Augustus in the *Aeneid* that man's mind does not know how to exercise moderation when he is lifted up by success. But Jesus' mind does know how to do that and uniquely so.

Vss. 21-43 That uniqueness is underscored by Jesus' behavior in the rest of the chapter. For not only is he patient; he also exhibits a tenderness that belies his omnipotence, a tenderness and an attention to the needs of the individual.

First there is Jairus. He is an important man. For him to come to Jesus with the anguish of his sick little girl must have underscored the depths of his anguish. After all, what would people say? He had a responsibility to watch out for this new teacher who had aroused so much hostility from Pharisees and Sadducees alike. But as anguish is often God's own

pre-evangelism program, so here. Whether Jairus was a believer already or not is somewhat beside the point. It is his anguish that drives him to Jesus.

Notice how Jesus deals with him. He does not scold him for the weakness or the imperfection of his understanding - - “What little faith you have! Why do you imagine that I have to touch your daughter in order ...?” No, he deals the man where he is, as he is.

Then there is this woman. How remarkable she is! Twelve years of only growing agony of body. Twelve year of Levitical uncleanness and all that that implied. Twelve years of ruinous expense and all for only greater suffering. But she has a plan! Given her wasting away for those twelve years, she must have been just a little spit of a thing, and she could therefore perhaps easily wiggle her way through the jostling crowd to where she could touch him.

Notice Jesus’ compassion, his tenderness. To be sure, the woman would have preferred to slip off and disappear in the crowd. But that would not be in her best interest. For it is Jesus’ which must also receive pride of place, not his omnipotence, as important as that indeed is. So Jesus emboldens her in the midst of her trembling fear, so that he can give her even more than she had come for. He asks a question, but not because he doesn’t know. He asks to bring her to himself. And then he calls her “Daughter!” What a word for such a woman as this, unclean for twelve years, destitute, with nothing to give except her trembling obedience to his call.

Then this: She told him everything! Twelve years worth of suffering! Everything! How long did that take? Can you picture Jairus, the important man, while all this was going on? How inconsiderate of this woman! How unwise, not to say foolish, of Jesus to spend all this time with her while an important man is waiting.

One can’t help but wonder what thoughts may have gone through Jairus’ head when they came and told him that it was all too late, that the little girl was dead. But Jesus still deals with Jairus as he is, and uses his gentle but always powerful word to still the man’s anguish and whatever anger or resentment that he may have felt.

And again, patience. Again, tenderness. He takes her by the hand. He even tells the parents to give her something to eat!

Too often people think of Jesus as an abstraction and far away. These stories draw us to the Savior who is never too busy for the least of us. They draw us to the Savior who gives his total attention to even the fringes of need. They draw us to the one who touches the untouchables in his Word and in that special way in the sacraments. In short they show us the perfect Pastor.