

Teaching Like Jesus: Using Parable to Explain the Faith

BY OLIVIA SPEARS

“For catechists, our goal in teaching from the parables is to allow Jesus’ words to resound anew. It is his heart, conveyed in the parables, that will beckon children toward living the full life of a Christian. ‘When the moral imagination is wakeful, the virtues come to life.’”



MY CHILDREN LOVE STORIES. Our days are dotted with stories from the Bible, lives of the saints, fairy tales, biographies, Shakespeare, literature, and history. They retell them to their dad around the dinner table, act them out in the backyard, and make connections between the story and their own lives, even weeks later. They ask to read beloved picture books over and over again. They want to know the impetus of action and the background of the main characters.

Their pure hearts are enthralled by the idea that they, too, are living a story. Perhaps, when in the fullness of time the Father sent

his Son into the world to save it, he saw in his creatures a similar trait: despite their wayward hearts and lost innocence, his children love stories.

God Is the Storyteller

Since the beginning of time, God has been writing a story in the world. It's why the events of Sacred Scripture are called "the *story* of salvation history."

Beyond the pages of the canon, we see God's story written in the lives of the saints. Whether they were on the world stage or

tucked away in a home or cloister, an encounter with the life of a saint is an encounter with an authored story.

As humans, we are enamored with story. Familial quips are passed through generations; we learn about right and wrong through fairy tales; heroic stories call us to bravery and perseverance; we long to know one another's "life story." Sharing in a story extends unity, aspiration, and education.

"If there is a story, there must also surely be a storyteller."¹ We can be confident that the Author of Life has

something to say to us *through* story. In the person of Jesus Christ, he teaches us through stories known as parables.

Jesus and the Parables

As catechists, we are to model our lives and our teaching after Christ the Teacher. It is imperative, then, that we observe *how* he teaches. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized that "the parables constitute the



¹ Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 39.

heart of Jesus' preaching."² Jesus frequently taught by telling a story, particularly utilizing metaphor to capture the attention and imagination of his listeners, helping them draw conclusions about the spiritual from their understanding of the material.

Parables like the prodigal son, the sower, the good Samaritan, and the lost sheep all possess square footage in our minds because they are incredibly accessible. In telling us about God and his kingdom through story, Jesus provides us with a deeper understanding *and* an endless expansion of truth for contemplation. This is proven by many centuries' worth of art, music, literature, homilies, and spiritual writing based on these parables. Jesus may have only told them once, but they are a deep well from which humanity, thirsty for truth, continuously draws knowledge, sustenance, and inspiration.

The parables not only teach us about God, they draw us closer to him. The ultimate goal of catechesis is communion with Christ. "Catechesis aims therefore at developing understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God's word, so that the whole of a person's humanity is impregnated by that word."³ In the parables, Jesus gives us the Word—himself. One who encounters his parables cannot help but be curious about the heart of the loving Good Shepherd, the forgiving Father, and the wise Judge.

The parables showcase the reality of God's love for us here and now while simultaneously directing us toward where we are going. The parables are meant to bear fruit in our souls unto eternal life in heaven. That is why so many of Jesus' parables allude to heaven or Christ's Second Coming. The eschatological tone reminds us that the parables are not passive stories but active invitations. There is a choice to be made going forth from encountering the narrative. These stories aren't ends in themselves; they pave a clearer path to the one who has prepared a place for us.

² Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Doubleday, 2007), 183.

³ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 20.

The Importance of the Parable in Religious Education

We can see, then, that adopting a method of teaching with the parables is incredibly useful for the catechist. It accomplishes our goals of meeting a child in their present reality, drawing their attention and imagination toward God, explaining something about him and his Church, inviting them to respond in love, and sending them forward with a clear mission.

Jesus shows us that this is possible in a matter of minutes. “A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate.”⁴ The parables offer an access point, especially for children, to contemplate truth that is as vast as a father’s mercy toward the prodigal and as simple as searching for a lost sheep. In a world of short attention spans, the parables remain ideal content for catechesis.

This ushers us into the next consideration, the importance of a well-formed moral imagination.

The Moral Imagination of Children

This first step in catechesis of capturing a child’s moral imagination is not saccharin or irrelevant. It is the on-ramp to lifelong learning at the feet of the divine teacher.

By their nature, parables lead to repentance and discipleship. Pope Benedict XVI tells us:

By means of a parable he brings something distant within their reach so that, using the parable as a bridge, they can arrive at what was previously unknown. A twofold movement is involved here. On one hand, the parable brings distant realities close to the listeners as they reflect upon it. On the other hand, the listeners

⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 96.

themselves are led onto a journey. . . . For Jesus is not trying to convey to us some sort of abstract knowledge that does not concern us profoundly. . . . This means, though, that the parables are ultimately an expression of God's hiddenness in this world and of the fact that knowledge of God always lays claim to the whole person—that such knowledge is one with life itself, and that it cannot exist without “repentance.”⁵

Through the parables, God calls people—in their entirety—to himself. This necessitates continual repentance, seeking, and trust

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that what is small or hidden in the eyes of the world is, in reality, greatness in the kingdom of God.

As children encounter the parables and are given time and space to contemplate them, their hearts are more ripened for the action of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who will move

them from the teaching into its practical application in their lives.

For catechists, our goal in teaching from the parables is to allow Jesus' words to resound anew. It is his heart, conveyed in the parables, that will beckon children toward living the full life of a Christian. “When the moral imagination is wakeful, the virtues come to life.”⁶

Teaching from the Parables

We are blessed with an abundance of reflections on the parables from popes, saints, and other holy minds through the centuries.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 191–93.

⁶ Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, 26.

We can draw from their knowledge and inspiration to formulate lessons.

Of course, it is worth mentioning that our own prayer with a parable will shine through in our presentation of it. If we are convicted, moved, and compelled by the story, so much greater will our proclamation be.

“The kingdom of God is like . . .” Jesus repeats. He tells us stories over and over. And like children, we want to hear them repeatedly. “We need to ask him again and again what he wants to say to us in each of the parables.”⁷

Let us, then, as we teach children, have the hearts of children, crying out with joy to the Lord to tell us the story again.

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Art Credit: Parable of the Sower, Fr. Lawrence Lew, OP, Flickr.com.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 183.