

“The Parables According to Matthew, part 1: Self Portrait”  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for June 18<sup>th</sup> 2017 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 13: 51 & 52

Those of you with long memories will likely recall that this is the third consecutive summer in which we have devoted at least a part of our summer to an exploration of parables, the parables of Jesus. Two years ago we started with Mark’s Gospel: an appropriate starting point for such an exploration given that Mark’s Gospel—while ranking as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gospel according to the traditional order of the New Testament—is generally regarded as the oldest of the Gospels. We followed that up, last summer, by looking at the parables according to Luke’s Gospel, and included in that mainly parables found **only** in Luke’s Gospel so as not to repeat the many parables found in Luke that are also found in Mark. Finally, this summer, we’ll look at those parables found in Matthew but not in Mark, including two or three that are not found in Mark, but are found also in Luke. It gets confusing, and when we get to those parables, I’ll explain how it is that we have parables found in Mark, Matthew and Luke...as well as parables found only in Matthew...as well as parables found only in Luke...as well as parables found in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. But let’s not go there this morning, largely because this morning’s very brief parable is truly unique to the Gospel according to Matthew.

For that matter, the fact that this parable is so terribly brief, makes it an ideal starting point for this summer’s exploration, because it helps to give us a quick reminder of what we mean by a parable. After all: when we think of parables, we tend to think primarily of those that contain an elaborate narrative. Last summer we spoke of many such parables, including what must surely rank as Jesus’ two best-known parables: that of the Prodigal Son and that of the Good Samaritan, both found exclusively in Luke’s Gospel. And yes: we will come to other such parables, elaborate narrative parables, later this summer. But it is worth recalling that some parables are exceedingly brief, using nothing more than one simple image to make their point. This morning’s is a good example of such a parable, the key clue—in many ways—being that seemingly ordinary word “like”: l-i-k-e, like!. As in: *Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like...*

There’s that weighty word!!

*Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house: a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.* That simple comparison between two seemingly different things—a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven (on the one hand) and a master of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (one the other hand); that simple comparison is what makes this a parable. And brief though it may be, it is a parable that still has much to say to us today. That having been said...

That having been said, I won't even try to pretend that it is, at least in some ways, a rather odd way in which to begin...a rather odd parable with which to launch...a series on the parables of Matthew.

Why do I say that?

Well, I say that because this mini-parable, far from marking the start to something in Matthew's Gospel, actually marks the end of something, namely the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew which—in terms of parables—is a very important chapter indeed. Based on the fourth chapter of Mark's Gospel—which is the chapter in which Mark introduces us to the parable-telling side of Jesus—Matthew's 13<sup>th</sup> chapter borrows some of Mark's chapter 4 parables, adapts others of those parables, and adds a few parables not found in Mark. All in all, there are seven parables found in Matthew 13, many of which we'll be visiting over the coming weeks. And the final parable in that sequence is the one we heard this morning. And so there is a very real sense in which we are coming at Matthew's 13<sup>th</sup> chapter the wrong way around: approaching it from its concluding parable rather than starting at the beginning. But I think—at any rate I hope—that there is at least some method to this seeming madness...method having to do with the fact that I do believe...really and truly believe...that this parable provides us with something of a self-portrait...something of a self-portrait of this Jesus, this bringer of parables. Listen again.

*“Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes”. Notice how Jesus starts with a question, and only then offers the parable. “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” And he said to them: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”*

And I realize...realize full well that the biggest objection to regarding this wee parable as a self-portrait of the one who told the parable, is that it is pretty hard to justify regarding Jesus as a scribe. On the contrary, he appears to have maintained an arms-length relationship with the scribes who are generally regarded as a fixture within the Jewish movement associated with the Pharisees. And so even though this parable clearly envisions a place within the Church for those who do the work of a scribe—the Christian teachers, theologians, philosophers who have been part and parcel of every era within the 2000-year history of the Church—the label scribe just doesn't seem to be one that we would affix to the Church's founder! St. Paul, St. Matthew, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth: those are all people to whom the title scribe could happily be applied. Jesus himself? Not so much. And yet!

When I focus less on the label “scribe”, but think instead about the parable, that's where things shift...and where I can begin to see these words as revealing something utterly critical about this Jesus. *Therefore every teacher*—let's substitute the word teacher for the word scribe, just for now...*therefore every teacher who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house: a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.* And I am struck, first and foremost, by

that phrase *every teacher who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven* in that the whole idea of the *kingdom of heaven* (which is what Matthew's Gospel refers to in those places in which Mark's Gospel refers to the *kingdom of God*)...

...the whole idea of placing the coming kingdom at the very centre of things is an aspect of Jesus' teaching from which there is no escaping. I'm also struck by the comparison between such a teacher and "master of a house", suggesting that those who teach in the name of Jesus are expected to be no less concerned with the mastery of their craft as a skilled carpenter or electrician or plumber would be expected to be concerned with the mastery of their craft. (God help us on that one!) Above all, however: above all: it seems to me that Jesus, in summing up the parables he has just told his disciples, the parables recorded in Matthew 13...it seems to me that Jesus is telling us that those parables (and, by implication, all of the insights he has tried to share and will continue to share with his disciples)...

...seems to me that Jesus is telling us that his teaching, his story-telling, and ultimately his life's trajectory, involve a bringing of something new that honours that which is gone before. And that, incidentally, is why we find within the New Testament such a great tension between certain books. The letters of the Apostle Paul, for the most part, wish to emphasize the newness that is Christ: a newness so radical that it prompts Paul to declare, having shared with the Philippians something of his background as a proud Pharisee: *I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish—count them as trash!—in order that I may gain Christ!* Christ, for Paul, is the master of the house who takes out of his treasure that which is new...that which surpasses even the very best of that which came before. And yet, other parts of the New Testament—including the letter of James, and also including the Gospel of Matthew—have a significantly higher appreciation of the something old that Jesus, the master of the house, brings out of his treasure. It's in Matthew's Gospel that we read: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* Here is the Jesus who regards himself as being in deep continuity with that which came before him. This is the Jesus who regards his ancestral heritage not as rubbish to be placed behind him, but as a gift to be cherished and conserved. And the good news, I think...

...the good news as we prepare to journey with this startling collection—this challenging collection—of parables from Matthew's Gospel, is that we do not have to choose between the Jesus who brings something radically new and the Jesus who comes to us in profound continuity with his Jewish heritage. On the contrary: we can regard him...and we can regard each of his parables...as exemplifying the master of the house...this unmatched master of an incomparable house...who brings out of his incomparable treasure that which is new and that which is old. That's an essential clue: an essential clue to his parables, an essential clue to all of his teaching...and yes, an essential clue as to who this Jesus really and truly was and still is. The master of the house coming with treasures...with treasures new, with treasures old.

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Permit a final thought...a final thought pertaining to the challenge such a description lays at **our** feet, as the Church...as the body of those who seek to follow in the footsteps of this Jesus. And yes: it seems to me that one of the defining challenges the Church continually faces is that of recognizing within its treasure-house, both that which is new and that which is old. For better or for worse, the Church is not an institution that is primarily defined by a law or even by a sophisticated and elaborate body of law. *For freedom Christ has set us free...*and surely part of the freedom that is ours as the Church, is the freedom to discover where Christ may be calling us in this time and place. In the words of James Russell Lowell's beloved hymn—*Once to every man and nation*"...a hymn which, in many ways, provides a succinct portrait of that which has been at the heart of the liberal Protestant tradition at its best...in the words of that stirring hymn:

*New occasions teach new duties,  
Ancient values test our youth,  
They must upward still and onward,  
Who would keep abreast of truth.*

Perhaps more than any other branch of the far-flung and endlessly sprawling Christian tradition, our branch has long recognized that Christ is, indeed, the master of the house who endlessly brings from his treasure that which is new. And yet!

Surely it is also fair to acknowledge that we have at times struggled—perhaps especially over the past fifty years—to recognize the deep continuity between discipleship at the start of the third millennium, and the challenges of discipleship that were experienced by the very first generation of Christians and every successive generation of Christians. While it is most certainly the case that the Church of Jesus Christ is not called upon to be a museum preserving precious relics from a by-gone age (God forbid!), neither can the Church impulsively discard that which no longer strikes it as useful in its present context. On the contrary: if our foundational mandate is that of offering Christ to the world, can we possibly do that if we treat with disdain the traditional means through which Christ has been embodied to and for the Church, by which I mean above all scripture, worship, the sacraments and prayer. As we seek to discover the newness to which Christ is calling us in this time and place, we are bound to miss the mark if we set out on that journey having discarded those tried and true compasses that have accompanied God's people every step of the way.

*Have you understood all these things?* That's the question Christ posed to his first hearers, and Sunday-by-Sunday as we wrestle with his life-changing parables, that's the question he will continually place before us. *Have you understood...have you understood all these things?* And whether we offer, in answer to that question, the confident "yes" offered by those first disciples, or whether we offer the far more tentative mixed assessment I'm always tempted to offer...

...”I think so, Lord, but I need your help on some of the fine points”...

...the gift of these parables is that they will always push us and pull at us in the expectation that they will provoke us into understanding more deeply and more fully! To understand more fully this Jesus: his way, his truth, his life! And in the process to understand more fully—and to live more boldly—the life-in-Christ to which we have been called.

May it be so! In Jesus' name. Amen!