

Almost 1/3rd century ago, a colleague of mine on the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, Robt. Newman, produced the widely used film, "Parable," which presents Jesus as clown-mime: Jesus himself the parable of God, Jesus **as** parable. Again, in various ways Jesus appears **in** his parables, & even **more so through** his parables. A safe conclusion: In letting ourselves be confronted by his parables, we're never not being confronted by him.

This Thinksheet continues the series for my summer '94 course titled "Jesus' New-World-Making Parables."

1 As I began teaching at N.Y.Theol.Seminary $\frac{1}{4}$ century ago this autumn, I tried--along with others--to represent, on an $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ of a color of personal choice, the impact of Jesus' parables on my life-thought-feeling. On yellow art-paper I glued a meandering green woolen thread, then here & there, in each a different color of letter, I spelled out around the meanderings "P-A-R-A-B-L-E." Today, I can't think of a better way to visualize their **simplicity-subtlety-seductivity-liberty**, sometimes **complexity**, sometimes **mystery**. What Jesus himself was, his parables were; what he is, they are. To love him is to love them, to love them is to love him.

2 Jn. Ruskin described Turner's landscapes as "a glorious mingling of earth and heaven": where really does one end & the other begin? I thought of this in connection with Gerald Hardy's "Portuguese fishers," which hangs in Loree's study. In his studio, the artist finished, signed, & framed it for us. The fishers are dragging their eye-of-God-in-the-prow boat (the eye to locate the fish) ashore, & their nets seem to appear both in the sky & on the earth, birds circling around the sky-nets as though a school of fish, the whole scene blending sea-sky-land in a radiant mystery for which this deeply Christian painter is famous..... Jesus' parables invite us to just this *resolutio oppositorum*, this mingling-blending of what our daily minds separate to the peril of our souls & societies: heaven/earth, God's will / our wants, God's Rule (Reign, Kingdom) / our powers, past/present, present/future, individual/community. All the parables, even those of separative-judgmental burden, are **unitive** in vision. Jesus' parables are indeed "new-world-making," but they are symbols & sacraments of shalom, in whose fulfilment no good is lost in the move from the old to the new creation.

3 Does Jesus **intend** the parables for everybody? Seems so: he says (Mt.11.28) "Come to me, all." But he knows that not all are open to the word (to which the sower [parable #19] shows various responses), so he doesn't waste his invitation, which accordingly is to "all you *that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens*," whose mood the Inviter meets, for he is (next verse) "gentle and humble in heart." In all classic Christian literature, the best exposition of this I know of is Part I of Soren Kierkegaard's TRAINING IN CHRISTIANITY (Princeton U.P./47)--scores of pages on what "Come hither!" in Jesus' mouth means. Here, at the end of Mt.11, the Parabler uses the imperative: elsewhere in the Gospels, the Inviter uses the parabolic. The parables are invitations to step through story into a New World, as Alice stepped through the lookingglass into Wonderland & C.S.Lewis' fictional children into Narnia. If we are content with the old world, we'll politely or curtly decline the invitation, as Jesus expected most would do & as S.K. observed most had done (p.39): "Christendom has done away with Christianity, without being quite aware of it. The consequence is that, if anything is to be done, one must try again to introduce Christianity into Christendom."

4 As you reflect on Jesus' parables, be alert for his **humor**, which you won't find remarked in the solemn old commentaries. It must be forty years ago that Elton Trueblood came out with his then-shocking THE HUMOR OF CHRIST. Human beings lean toward laughter, & great communicators don't disappoint them. ...Eg, Lincoln. This from Stephen Vincent Benet's 333-p. poem on the Civil War, JOHN BROWN'S BODY (self-c./27, Farrar & Rinehart/42, p.157): "...one most lonely man in a drafty White House / Whose everlasting melancholy runs / Like a

deep stream under the funny stories, / *The parable-maker...* // The sorrowful man who cracked the sure-fire jokes...." The only President the people have looked upon as a near saint was also the funniest.

5 Now please look again at the boldface words in §1. The parables are simple in that nobody had any trouble with **recognition**: "That's the way life [as we know it] is." So with OT, rabbinic, & pagan (eg, Socrates [in Plato]) parables: "I see!" Yes, but do you see *through* (get the immediate point), see *beyond* (to the wider picture, the deeper truth, the ultimate message)? How much do you see--a point, two or more points? Of what you see, what do you think is most important (a) within Jesus' total message, (b) for you/yours now? Facing such questions, it's easy to see how the remaining boldface words in §1 come into play.

For in Jesus' well-crafted parables, art is doing more than copying life with the contented precision of a 17th-century Dutch master painter. This art, Jesus' art, is in the business of changing life, moving from the easily recognizable to the puzzling-frightening-promising new. We should, then, be prepared to find in them all the moods such an art would generate, & behind that the moods that would generate such an art. For the parables are a mode for those moods. And we Christians find in those moods, through that mode, time-transcending revelation. For the word of God comes through all that we are toward all that we are meant to be; & we are wills, feelings, moods, ideas.

6 Once the recognition of the parable's grounding in common life, the hearer may or may not be open to pass through its door into the **uncommon** truth(s) the Parabler-Inviter seeks to engage the hearer with. (Presumably it took some effort for Jn. the Revelator to ascend through the heaven-door in response to the voice within, "Come up here" [4.1].) Hearers may say to themselves "It's a trap!" & they would be right: a Jesus parable intends **entrapment**: recognition is the fish hooked, entrapment is the fish landed. Heads go up & down in affirmation of recognition: when the point(s) dawn, some heads continue to go up & down, others change their movement to side to side in refusal. The light dawns, the penny drops, the cookie crumbles--but not everybody wants the light, the penny, the cookie.

Entrapment. Another metaphor for what happens is **cracking**. "The parables are designed to make...impossible discernment possible; they do this by presenting...'riddles' (Prov.1.6), or 'dark sayings' (Ps.78.2) calculated to crack him ["the unspiritual man"] before he can crack them. The parables'not only arrest attention; they arouse something deep within'" (Walter Russell Bowie, in Rob. L. Short's THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PEANUTS (Jn.Knox/65, p.21; this Schultz cartoon strip is itself, as Short shows in his PhD dissertation on it, Christian parabolizing)....And another metaphor: Jesus' parables **stretch** the skin of reality till it breaks, and one sees through to a deeper reality (this figure used several times in Sallie TeSelle's SPEAKING IN PARABLES).

7 At the beginning of §6, I said "the hearer may or may not be open" to take Jesus' parabolic point(s), which the hearer may find to be turn-offs. Another class of failed hearers are those who are ready for turn-ons but don't get them because they don't "get it." And a class overlapping both is hearers who misunderstand. Says J. Jeremias (UNKNOWN SAYINGS OF JESUS [SPCK/64], p.92), "Jesus was misunderstood even by his closest disciples. They were men of little faith. They disappointed the Master again and again." So the Cross "began...much earlier than the crucifixion." The previous p.: "Jesus complains of the disciples' failure to understand him (eg, M.4.13 7.18 par. 8.17ff par. 8.32 par. 9.19 Jn.14.9)" --& J.J. adduces a noncanonical parallel (Apocryphal Acts of Peter 8): "They that are with me have not understood me."

8 We disciples, today, even with the best scholarly help based on the latest data, find understanding the parables not always easy. They are about God's in-breaking new age (not today's gnostic New Age!), & the new is the not-yet-experienced, so how can we understand it? Our basic biblical text here is Is.6.9-10, which is yearningly satiric but sounds coldly cynic & is variously (mis)understood in the Gospels (Mt.13.13-16 M.4.11-12 L.8.9-10--W.O.E.Oesterley, THE GOSPEL PARABLES IN THE LIGHT OF THEIR JEWISH BACKGROUND [Mac/36], pp.51ff).