

I begin this evening with our passage from the Gospel of Matthew. As usual, let me set it in context. Our passage which the NRSV entitles, *The Purpose of the Parables*, is slotted right between Jesus addressing a great crowd who are gathered on the beach, seated in a boat just off shore he speaks to them. He tells them the Parable of the Sower, which is the first parable in Matthew. It also appears in Mark and Luke. In our passage the disciples ask, *Why do you speak to them in parables?* Our passage is followed by a complete explication of the Parable of the Sower to the disciples. Jesus answer to the disciples' question *The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."*

What does the word parable mean? It comes from the Greek. Its literal meaning is thrown beside. That is a story thrown beside a truth to illustrate the truth and to promote a depth of understanding. Depth of understanding is the critical concept. The story is designed to awaken a response in the listener that might not be there for a straight forward literal statement of the truth. Think of the Parable of the Sower, which we all have heard innumerable times. The truth expressed is that only those with a truly open mind and heart can hear and understand about the Kingdom of God. But how many have open minds and hearts, how many are closed and hardened, how many are fickle and ready to jump from enthusiasm to enthusiasm each one more engaging than the last, how many are seduced by the charms of wealth or power. How many closed and preoccupied minds and hearts are likely to be influenced by a straight forward injunction to keep open. But a story captures attention, it provokes thought, if nothing more than "what's the point?. A story can niggle away at consciousness and can recur in the mind in the way a literal statement will be heard only once and forgotten. Think of why we tell children stories it is not just for diversion, it is not just to shut the brat up, its to create and nurture a growing sense of a wider and broader world critical to the development of intelligence, of awareness, of a concern for others, and of one's place in the world. Again think of the Parable of the Sower. How different is it to you now forty, fifty, sixty, or perhaps even more years since you first heard it in Sunday school? That is the power of story; it can illumine in different ways as the hearer's life experience grows.

Let me give you another example of two different statements: 1. If I were to say to you, I have changed my mind on my future directions, or, 2. were I to say to you, In thinking of my future directions I have felt as though I am on the road to Damascus. Which statement would more command your attention? I suspect the Damascene statement. That is the power of story. Because we are all Christians and have known of the story of Saul transformed from persecutor to apostle on the road for most of our lives, my second statement carries so much more texture and depth than simply saying I am changing my mind. So even just an allusion to the story can carry great power. It can be shorthand for so much more. But, and here's an important caution, in a secular society if I went into a meeting with people from outside the faith and said I felt as though I were on the road to Damascus, they would probably think I was irrationally

afraid of being bombed. What stories can we tell to our fellow citizens that illuminate our faith and promote understanding or even just curiosity about our God?

Even as we think of what stories we can tell, our reading from Sirach cautions us to exercise great care in what we say. *Slander has shaken many, and scattered them from nation to nation; it has destroyed strong cities, and overturned the houses of the great.*

Sirac also known as Ecclesiasticus was written in the 2nd century BCE by Jesus ben Eleazar ben Sirac a functionary in the second temple. It is not an accepted part of the canon by either Jews or the western Church. Sirac is part of the Orthodox Bible. While rejected by Protestants, the Roman, Anglican, and Lutheran Churches all accept it as a valuable resource, hence its inclusion in the Common Lectionary. Sirac is referenced within Judaism in the Talmud which contains the law and Jewish theology.

Never in all the history of humanity have slander, lies, and distortions been capable of such immediate and widespread dissemination, and never has such dissemination caused more damage than now. We could use measles as an example. In 1998, measles was declared eradicated in Canada; it was no longer an endemic disease as it was when we were young. But by October 11th, 2025, there has been over 5,000 cases of measles in Canada. Why? A considerable drop in the percentage of Canadian children receiving vaccinations. Why the drop? A study associating the vaccine with autism in 1998 – a study that was totally discredited and disproved before 2010. Slander destroys. Anti-vaccine advocates, contrary to all scientific evidence, are turning back many of the public health advances achieved in the last 80 years.

During the first Trump presidency, we heard of the concept of alternate truths. Now it is endemic in political and social discourse not just in the United States but across the world. Our own Leader of the Opposition in Canada thought it appropriate last week to slander the leadership of the RCMP. *Those who pay heed to slander will not find rest, nor will they settle down in peace.* I think when we were young most of us were taught that there was no greater sin than lying. Now the most powerful man in the world is widely recognized as a serial liar. No one expects him to tell the truth about just about anything, but that's just fine with a very large proportion of the electorate. Endless brazen lying without apparent consequences, so debases appreciation for the truth and completely undermines even a sense that there is something called truth.

Well our readings this evening call us, on the one hand to repudiate spreading untruth and on the other to be disciples of Christ so that our eyes may be blessed to see and our ears blessed to hear. In our time, that is a challenge, indeed. But if we are to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, we must be ready to embrace the challenge. And if we are truly to love God and neighbour, we have no choice. How can we tell the story of our God and his son in a world in which truth is an endangered species? There is something to prayer over. Amen