

June 13, 2021 | Summer Worship Service

TEXT: [Mark 4:21–28](#)

TITLE: **Gifts Prepared in Advance**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

It is hard to write a good sermon about a parable, because the parable is already a type of mini-sermon in itself. Parables are short stories, vignettes that invite you to ponder them and consider how they apply to your own life. They are designed to be both memorable and a bit mysterious, layered in meaning. That's what makes them hard to preach on. With parables and jokes, if you have to explain it too much, you're probably just messing it up.

There are about 30 parables attributed to Jesus in the bible. Many of them are widely known, even by people who don't darken the doors of churches. There's the one about the shepherd seeking the lost lamb, the prodigal son who eventually staggers back home, or the Good Samaritan who cares for the wounded man even as the powerful and pious pass right by on the other side of the road. Parables are invariably about doing what's right—doing what's just and merciful—and how such good deeds align with God's plans for this life and for the life to come.

The three little parables I just read from Mark 4 aren't the best known parables of Jesus, but they each give us a lot to think about. The first one simply asks, "What do we do with lamps?" We let their light shine all around, chasing away shadows. God's word is like that light and we are to look at what it illuminates: seeing ourselves as created in God's image and worthy of love and respect; seeing others as children of God, especially those on life's margins, those hidden away on back roads, behind bars, or nursing home walls. The light is meant to illuminate what is true: no more secrets or self-hatred; no more racial bias or double-standards. The light is for all and it shines on all. So come, live in the light!

The second parable asks us to imagine we are shopkeepers weighing out goods with a measure and a scale. Are we generous or stingy? Do we help those in need or do we hold back, hoarding what we've got for ourselves? This parable stresses a type of virtue ethics—the idea that by doing a good deed, and then another and another, we develop the habits of a faithful, virtuous life. The preacher Eugene Peterson described this type of life of good deeds as "one long obedience ever in the same direction." Use your measure generously and it will be the measure of goodness you receive from others. Use your measure sparingly, and you'll fall out of the habit of virtue, until good deeds rarely come your way. It's sad, but true.

The third parable is about seed scattered on the ground that grows while the farmer sleeps. By God's design, the seed organically changes from hard kernel to young plant, to growing stalk, budding grain, and then full wheat or barley ready to be harvested. Jesus was preaching mostly to an agrarian society, so these types of agricultural parables were commonly used by him. To balance out a possible over-focus from the

second parable on doing good deeds, this one calls us to live a life resting in the promises of God—the God who provides for us providentially, grace-fully; who is the ultimate source of a healthy, flourishing life. Let those who have ears to hear, listen.

Do these parables still preach well today? We're not really an agrarian society—at least not here in East Liberty. We're more of an Amazon, Google, Facebook kind of society. Yet think about that last parable for a moment. *The realm of God is as if someone scattered seed on the ground, and then would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he or she does not know how.* The parable is saying that faith in God is like a sleepy, restful trust. We do our works during the day and then we lie down at night while the Lord continues to hold the world in God's own hands. Our heads hit the pillows; we rest and sleep. In the morning we awaken to a world where ocean currents still ebb and flow, breezes blow, seeds sprout, children are born, and life moves onward, ever in God's hands.

A restful trust in God. This is not the same thing as a lazy trust in God—we are working partners with God, not freeloaders in God's creation. We have free will, the ability to choose good and reject evil—that too is part of God's design. We are to be impatient when it comes to injustice and wrong, yet patient knowing that sorrow and adversity may linger for a night, but joy comes in the morning. In these uncertain times when so many voices tell us to just do more, work harder, and run the rat race as fast as you can, this parable reminds us to be still and trust in God who is Lord of all our days.

I read a story recently in the paper that was almost a modern parable of this very idea.¹ A woman named Genevieve shared that just before her twelfth birthday she lost her mother to breast cancer. Her mother had been a businesswoman who was always prepared—by day writing marketing slogans and five-year business plans, by night caring for her daughter with bubble baths, pillow forts, and bedtime stories. When she first found out she had cancer, she researched every available treatment. But in time the medical journals on the dining table were replaced by wrapping paper and ribbons. She died 10 days before her daughter's 12th birthday.

On her birthday, Genevieve's father carried into her room a gift box that had been prepared by her mother. Inside were packed presents and letters for the milestones of her daughter's life she would now sadly miss—getting her driver's license, high school graduation, every birthday until the age of 30. They were there in neat rows of wrapped gifts, lovingly prepared while her daughter had been sleeping. She opened the package marked "12th Birthday" and found a small amethyst ring. The card said "I always wanted a birthstone ring when I was a little girl. Your Granny finally bought me one and I loved it more than I can say. I hope you like this one. Happy birthday, darling girl. Love, your Mommy."

Year after year her mother traveled forward in time to meet Genevieve, always in the guise of a little package with a pink ribbon and a white notecard. "Happy 15th! Happy 16th!" When she got her first period and didn't want to talk to her father about it, a four page letter laid out practical advice and invited her to make friends with herself, to not

lose herself during these challenging years but discover which values she should hold dear. When she graduated from high school she opened a box to find a strand of pearls, since (as her mother said) there's a tradition in their family to give pearls upon graduation. And on the notes went: "Congratulations on your driver's license! Happy 18th! Happy 21st!" Always "Happy birthday my darling girl." One note said, "I'm so sorry to be leaving you. Please forgive me. I know a box of letters and tokens can't begin to take my place, but I wanted so badly to do something to ease your way through the future. Love, your Mommy." It was a beautiful essay to read.

In this world, challenge, struggle, and loss belong to the very structure of life. To wish the world were immune from every form of suffering is to wish not to have been created at all. But through it all, God is near; God is at work; God is loving and merciful and will never forsake us. This good news is too deep to be put into theological essays or lengthy sermons. It deserves to be wrapped in small packages like the gift of a parable. So listen once more:

The kingdom of God is like lamplight that freely shines over us all, illuminating what we most need to see.

The kingdom of God is a measure that is generous in its giving and calls us to be generous in response.

The kingdom of God is like a loving mother, who prepares for her daughter a gift box for every momentous event in her life. She goes ahead of her and is there when those times come—times both good and bad, of struggle and of accomplishment. She offers words that encourage. She offers a gift of grace that sustains. And she offers the promise of watchful accompaniment, of being awake while she sleeps so she can always rest in peace. Together they spend their days, both for this life and for the life to come, producing a harvest that is rich, that is just, and that is loving.

Let anyone who has ears to hear, listen.

AMEN

¹ Genevieve Kingston, "She Put Her Unspent Love in a Cardboard Box," *New York Times*, May 30, 2021.