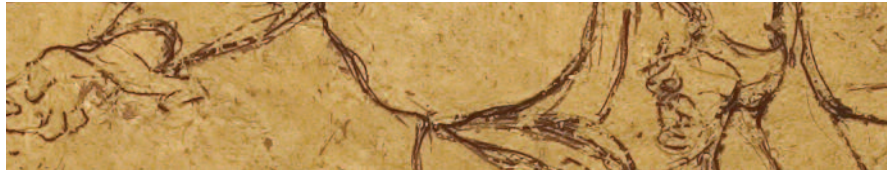


PICTURING THE Parables



By Tyrus Clutter

The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables.

— Luke 8:10

ONE OF THE MOST ENDURING LEGACIES of the Gospels is the manner in which Jesus explained the mysteries of his Father's Kingdom. The parables of Jesus were opaque to the religious leaders of his day; even the apostles were confused with many of his allusions. Yet the parables have remained compelling stories for artists to visually explore for centuries.

The pieces that compose this exhibition retain the potency of the New Testament parables. They demonstrate that contemporary artists are still finding unique ways to unpack the stories of Jesus. Present among these works are some of the favorite tales of Western culture. Even though we are now living in a society that some have deemed post-Christian and biblically illiterate, many of these stories remain in our collective consciousness.

Our Works Before Others

The Good Samaritan is one of the best-known parables. It is a story that offers multiple scenes, each of which can be further explored and developed by the artist. In Kirsten Malcolm Berry's work the focus is on the moment of healing, when the Samaritan binds the wounds of the man who is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Berry illustrates the lavish expenditure on the part of the Samaritan, who unsparingly pours ointments upon the wounds of a man who hated him and his kind. In her work, the original Greek text of the parable surrounds the vessels so that the very words of Christ encircle this healing action.

Gwen Meharg's *The Good Samaritan Meets Jim Crow* explores this familiar tale in an updated fashion. For us to understand the full weight of Jesus' message of love for our neighbor, Meharg confronts our culture's own history of racial prejudice. Utilizing repetitious images of buses, drinking fountains, school desks, and public toilets, she reminds us that, though we are integrated

through the laws of the land, the separations and segregations of our "enlightened" society are not simply part of a now distant past. Our societal wounds, rather, remain fresh and the reality of racial segregation continues to frustrate our best intentions.

The ministry of Jesus provides a counter-example of overcoming such cultural riffs. When Christ met the Samaritan woman by the well of Jacob and asked her to give him a drink of water he turned the conventions of the day on their head. Not only did he break Jewish customs concerning relations with Samaritans, he also upset the typical pattern of gender interactions. His unusual behavior paved the way for many Samaritans to believe in his ministry and message.

Kathy Hettinga's small artist's book is an example of how the New Testament parables so often infiltrate our daily experiences, bringing to mind the words of Jesus. This book of images from the artist's trips among the poor on the islands of the Bahamas includes the ecstatic Mrs. Sawyer, whose worship and praise is unimpeded by her poverty. Her generosity to Hettinga and Hettinga's travel companions was similar to the widow who gave her last coins. Jesus praised her for giving generously from her poverty even as others callously and conspicuously gave from their wealth.

Other works within *Picturing the Parables* seem to connect to the Gospels through multiple contexts. David Levine's *Go Fish* is open enough to recall several instances of fishing from Jesus' ministry. Just as Jesus lived and moved among the masses, this work's foundation of a Goldfish Snack Crackers package places it within the realm of everyday experiences. Jesus called Peter and Andrew while they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee, where he told them he would make them fishers of men. After his resurrection, Christ also met Peter and several apostles following an unsuccessful night of fishing. At Jesus' request they cast

their nets on the other side of the boat and the massive catch nearly burst the nets.

Levine's work draws on Jesus' knack for transforming the common moments of our lives into profound spiritual insights. The playfulness of Levine's imagery belies the seriousness of the proclamation. As with much of Levine's work, his materials seem to be trampled under foot. This gives us pause. Have we not, perhaps, also cast the words and message of Christ upon the trash heap?

The Kingdom of God

A lesser discussed parable also draws on the imagery of fishing. The Parable of the Net is one of a series of parables in Matthew that begins, "The kingdom of God is like..." Jesus states that at the end of the age the "fish" will be divided at the final judgment. David McCoy explores these parables in his mixed media assemblage, following Christ's example by placing materials from everyday life into his work. These objects—such as tiny seeds—become potent symbols or metaphors that encourage us to discover the eternal in the ordinary.

Both Shirley Cunningham and Anne Brink tackle the parable concerning the mustard seed, in which Christ likens the Kingdom of God to this tiny seed. Cunningham provides a visual comparison of this miraculous concept by incorporating a diminutive bead/seed that dangles from the thread-like root of her massive, majestic fabric tree. Brink depicts the tree as the home for the birds of the air. As with many of her works, the peoples of the earth celebrate with all of Creation the earthly realization of God's coming Kingdom.

Joan Bohlig's etching considers the path to the Kingdom of Heaven that contains one of the most potent and enduring metaphors in our cultural consciousness—the wolf in sheep's clothing. Surrounding the wolf are grapes among thorn bushes. This parable is one of warning and the artist's visual metaphors explain what we are to avoid if we wish to partake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Watchfulness and Preparation

Bohlig considers Christ's statements about his imminent return in another small etching where Jesus warns us to be watchful, because we know not when the master of the house will return. He states that it could be at the breaking of the dawn—at the

rooster's crow. Through the swirling patterns that compose the background, Bohlig alludes to both the uncertain hour of Christ's return and the end of time as we know it. The screeching rooster becomes a visual reminder, a warning that we must always be prepared.

Dan McGregor examines a similar parable in his two works from his Exit Strategy series. Contemporary figures populate the scenes. As a woman prepares a meal and a man mows his lawn we notice that something is askew: a bowl has fallen to the kitchen floor, spilling its contents; a rake seems to be standing on end, ready to drop to the ground. In each composition a figure is missing.

These artworks are not simple framed canvases. They have been constructed with turning handles and individual sections that seem to indicate a device or machine to aid in the "Exit Strategy." There is also something subtle about each scene that indicates that Christ is central. The compositions are built on cruciform imagery. The tree at the center of the yard is a more obvious reminder of the cross of Christ, but the sink, window, and cabinets in the kitchen also form a cross. In fact, the central position of the faucet in this scene can serve as an allusion to Christ—the living water.

Amber Block's sculpted and painted wooden eye seems a bit pedestrian at first glance. Her work, however, is fashioned with an emphasis on process even more than final product. When paired with its video companion the eye takes on immeasurable significance. Block's video—which depicts the creation of her sculpture—is based on the parable that contrasts the speck of dust in our neighbor's eye with the plank in our own. The progression of the video image, through time, unfurls complex nuances within the parable and expands its meaning and significance.

Cultivation of the Word

Because of the distinct segments that compose a larger tale, The Parable of the Sower is another story that lends itself to several interpretations. While some artists, like Ryan Jackson and Lisa Snow Lady, chose to relay the parable through multiple canvases and in a more traditional manner, others have focused on specific aspects. Edward Knippers represents the sower as evangelist. The Divine Word seems to enter him, flowing through his hand as he distributes that kernel of truth. DeLynn Coppoletti's triptych appears to be a straightforward narrative until one rec-

ognizes the role of the rocks in the soil. They may suggest an unsuitable location for growth, but they also represent the human heart. The large stones exhibit the new life and growth enjoyed when the seed finds fertile soil.

The Relentless Love of the Father

The Parable of the Lost Sheep provides some of the most diverse interpretations by the artists in *Picturing the Parables*. Gregg Wilimek's *I Am Willing* explores the dual meanings of some popular biblical symbols. The parable of the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in his flock behind to search for the one sheep that is lost, is the main element of this altarpiece. The Good Shepherd, however, shows us exactly how he will lay down his life for his flock. The image of the scarecrow, like a crucified man, brings the message of Jesus into our contemporary world. In Wilimek's hands, a common image takes on a heightened significance.

Marianne Lettieri seems to combine this parable with another. Among the field of faces—the innumerable lost sheep that recall the faces of missing children from the sides of milk cartons—rests one small jewel. It seems nearly like the Pearl of Great Price. That allusion turns the second parable on its head, but the mixing of symbols makes the work all the more potent. We become Christ's costly pearl.

Wayne Forte's two paintings considering the Lost Sheep are disquieting. Originally part of an exhibition in his homeland, the Philippines, these works offer a unique view of the depth of the Good Shepherd's love. Among a field of sheep—animals that have a specific place within the sacrificial language of both Judaism and Christianity—Jesus seeks to rescue the “most lost sheep” in the guise of Adolph Hitler. The twin image finds the Good Shepherd rescuing what appears to be Imelda Marcos within a mass of Filipinos. These images seem audacious and perhaps distasteful. Forte, however, may more forcibly get to the heart of the parables of Jesus. The potency of Christ's stories are often lost on our contemporary eyes and ears.

Andy Rash also investigates a parable indicating God's relentless pursuit of the lost. The Parable of the Lost Coin exhibits the great joy in heaven when one sinner repents. It can represent the struggle to find the “lost coin” from the point of view of both God and the seeker. The object in the quest for God is not something that is readily apparent. The figure of Christ is obscured

within this work. Though it is somewhat recognizable behind the glass pane, the face of Jesus is concealed. Still, Christ—the light of the world—emanates from behind the obscuring objects, beckoning the attention of the seeker.

Three artists in the exhibition tackled the well-known tale of the Prodigal Son. Edward Knippers provides a view of the beginning of the prodigal's journey. His back is to us just as it is to his father, to God. George Robinson has produced a small accordion-fold book with a progression of scenes from the story. Tim Timmerman, however, adds insight to the end of the tale. The long road that Knippers' prodigal has traveled is still in view. The restored child is now separated from his long journey and that period of his life. He is enshrouded in the embrace of his father on a ledge that protects him from that past. Presiding above this scene is the sacrificial lamb of Christ. In this context the image of the lamb is full of multiple meanings. The lost sheep has also been found.

The artworks included here seek to update the imagery for our own time, so that the timelessness of these stories may bear fresh fruit in a new generation. Each artist has grasped certain details that expand the narratives into new directions. The metaphors and symbols used by Christ appear just as pertinent today as to the hearers of the parables two thousand years ago. He who has ears, let him hear. She who has eyes, let her see.

Selected Parable Texts

Matthew 13:31-32

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.

Matthew 13:45-46

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Matthew 18:14

In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Matthew 24:39-42

That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Luke 6:42

How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye," when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Luke 8:15

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Luke 10:33

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

Luke 11:9

So I say to you: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Luke 12:37

It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.

Luke 15:4-6

Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."

Luke 15:9-10

And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Luke 15:20

But while he was still a long off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 18:14

(Pharisee and Tax Collector) I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

CIVA

255 Grapevine Road
Wenham MA 01984-1813

office@civa.org | 978.867.4124 | www.civa.org