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DIANE CODDING

PARABLES AND PRETENSE: TEACHING METAPHORIC
LANGUAGE IN THE CHURCH

BY

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B.A., McMURRY UNIVERSITY, 2010
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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE CANDLER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

CANDLER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

2013

ABSTRACT

According to the gospels, Jesus spoke in parables. These brief, metaphoric narratives are windows through which we may glimpse the Kingdom of God. The power of the parable lies in the ambiguity of the language, rather than the artificial pretext constructed by the church over the past two millennia. Arresting and strange, parables do not immediately lend themselves to comprehension. In the aphoristic words of Multatuli, “An idea which one comprehends immediately is often not worth comprehending.” If we are to hold the parables as something worth comprehending then we must reconsider how we encounter them.

Jesus did not surround himself with the learned Pharisees or the wealthy and educated; Jesus dined with sinners and preached to the poor. Neither Jesus nor the gospel writers interpreted the parables for their audience. If we censor the parables by interpreting them *for* the church rather than *with* the church, we inhibit the power of the parable to cross the lines of what society finds acceptable. We must be willing to risk the parable, for if we do not, the power of the parabolic language may be stifled.

This thesis considers what it means to encounter a parable throughout the development of one’s faith by examining Greek exegesis, metaphor theory, Flannery O’Connor’s use of the short story, and education theory. Although often taught as children’s literature, the language of the parables exceeds the concrete cognitive abilities of juvenile interpretation. The role of the church is not the passive acceptance of biblical interpretations; as a church we must take an active role in parabolic engagement and interpretation as a part of the development of faith.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Steven Kraftchick, for his enduring faith and encouragement.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres, for kindly offering her critiques.

My family, for their unconditional love and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO PARABOLIC LITERATURE

*And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven."*¹

Jesus spoke in parables. These brief, metaphoric narratives are windows through which we may glimpse the Kingdom of God. But why did Jesus use such cryptic language to teach? In this passage from Mark, Jesus explains the complexity of the parables to his disciples.² Jesus assures them that they have “been given the secret of the kingdom of God,” while those who are “outside” hear everything as a “parable.”³ The English word *parable* is a translation of the Greek word παραβολή, which is defined as “something that serves as a model or example pointing beyond itself for later realization” or “a narrative saying of varying length, designed to illustrate a truth especially through comparison or simile.”⁴ Parables express religious Truth through illustrative, figurative language.

Jesus did not surround himself with the learned Pharisees or the wealthy and educated; Jesus dined with sinners and preached to the poor. According to Donahue, “Jesus *as* good news and the good news which he proclaims are an intrusion into

¹ Mark 4.10-12, RSV

² I have chosen to use Mark 4:10-12 rather than Matthew 13:10-17 in order to address the more simplistic question—Why did Jesus speak in parables?

³ Mark 4.11, RSV

⁴ BDAG, 759.

everyday life. His mission in the world is not one of an isolated prophet, but involves the engagement of others called out of the ordinary way to follow his way.”⁵ Jesus did not interpret the parables for his listeners; the ordinary men and women who chose to follow Jesus actively participated in his ministry. When a pastor assumes the role of interpreter, he or she removes the mystery and metaphor from the parable and forces a stagnant interpretation upon the passive audience. In order to achieve such active collaborative parabolic interpretation we must allow the congregation to participate in the parable.

The parable does not, therefore, involve a transfer of information or ideas about an established world from one head to another . . . This means that both narrator and auditor *risk* the parable; they both participate in the narrative and venture its outcome.⁶

We must be willing to risk the parable, for if we do not, the power of the parabolic language may be smothered. We cannot sit and passively accept the assumed exegesis and literary engagement performed by others while we are force-fed yet another homily on the same old parable. Too often we make presumptions of the parables, remembering a version of the story rather than reading the story itself. As a church we must take an active role in parabolic engagement and interpretation as a part of our faith.

In this thesis I will examine parabolic literature from three approaches. First, I will question the nature of parabolic literature itself, declaring the definition of parable that will frame my work. Second, I will examine the role of parabolic interpretation in religious education by performing a Greek exegesis and offering a translation and interpretation of Luke 15:11-32 as a parable that portrays the forgiveness of God. I have chosen this parable precisely because “everyone” already knows it; through overuse the

⁵ John R. Donahue, “Jesus as Parable of God in the gospel of Mark,” *Interpretation* 32, no. 4 (October 1, 1978), 386.

⁶ Robert W. Funk, “Good Samaritan as metaphor,” *Semeia* no. 2 (January 1, 1974), 76.

strength of the metaphor has been compromised. Third, I will examine parabolic literature as it relates to the literary form of the short story by comparing the form, metaphoricity, and paradox of the parables of Jesus to Flannery O'Connor's unsettling short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Fourth, I will assess parabolic literature as a teaching method, questioning how we interact with and interpret metaphoric language at various stages of faith per Fowler and at various stages of development per Erikson. Finally, I will propose a new method for teaching parables in the church, one that acknowledges the advances we have made in our understanding of human psychological and spiritual development, as well as the new approaches in education that have developed in this post-industrial society.⁷ Before we can understand how parables contribute to faith formation, we must examine the essence of a parable.

Like many other theologians, I will implement C. H. Dodd's definition of parable as the basis for my inquiry:

At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness and strangeness, leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.⁸

Dodd's description is terse. The metaphoric comparison of the parable draws from the familiar and forces the listener (reader) to understand the world through a new, parabolic hermeneutic. Dodd's use of the participle *arresting* adds the sense of forceful acknowledgement to his definition. It is not that the reader chooses to change her worldview; she is *arrested* by the vividness and strangeness of the parable. This

⁷ The United States public schools have shifted from the education of future factory workers to the education of free thinking students capable of collaborative work. Such a change is evident in the way desks are arranged in the classroom. Students are most often seated in collaborative groups rather than the traditional rows of the industrial era.

⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner's, 1961), 16.

vividness and *strangeness* come from the use of ordinary life to reveal the extraordinary reality of the Kingdom of God. Although the parable is revealing, the layers of metaphoric language cause *sufficient doubt* in the mind of the reader. It is this doubt that causes the transformational change within the hearer (reader). Without a clear resolution we are left to complete the metaphor on our own through extended contemplation. This contemplation allows the teaching of the parable to be *teased* into our *active thought*. The parable, although arresting and strange, does not immediately comprehend. In the aphoristic words of Multatuli, “An idea which one comprehends immediately is often not worth comprehending.”⁹ It is this *active thought*, this measured, concentrated attempt to comprehend, even for a moment, the complexity of the Kingdom of God that I wish to address in this thesis.

Let us reconsider how we understand the parable. According to Steven Kraftchick, “Parables are like good comedians, coming right up to the line of what is acceptable and then stepping over it.”¹⁰ When we interpret the parables *for* the church rather than *with* the church, we sensor the language and inhibit the power of the parable to cross the line of what we find acceptable. Parables are offensive; they interrupt the way in which we see the world.¹¹ Parables interrupt and insult our worldview. We recognize that we are not always the Good Samaritan or the prodigal son of the parable. When we disagree with a metaphor, our response is frequently, “No.” The parables we like support our own world order, while the parables we dislike push us to reorder things that we have

⁹ *The Oyster and the Eagle: Selected Aphorisms and Parables of Multatuli*, Ed. E.M.Beekman (Tennessee: Kingsport Press, 1974), 52.

¹⁰ Steven Kraftchick, “Parables of Jesus: Thinking It Slant,” Lecture (Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, GA), August 25, 2011.

¹¹ Kraftchick, September 1, 2011.

already ordered.¹² We must take a step back and give the congregation the opportunity to respond “no” to a parable, for without the opportunity to say “no,” their “yes” is shallow.¹³ When we truly engage the parables, we are forced to question and likely change the way in which we interact with one another, having been lead to reimagine what it means to live in connection to God. If, however, we impose our pretense on the parables of Jesus rather than allow them to teach us anew with each encounter, we effectively render them dead metaphors.

The church must reanimate the metaphoric material of the Gospel. As figurative language, the parables of Jesus create word pictures within the mind of the reader. It is this literary image that allows the reader to move beyond the limitations of language and encounter the Kingdom of God. The parables use language in a way that is wholly unique from other narratives and moral teachings in the New Testament. Parables form an individual literary genre. Paul Ricoeur defines this literary genre as a combination of three traits: “the narrative form, a metaphorical process, and an appropriate ‘qualifier’ which insures its convergence with other forms of discourse which all point toward the meaning ‘Kingdom of God.’”¹⁴ John Dominic Crossan summarizes Ricoeur’s traits of a parable as: narrativity, metaphoricity, and paradoxicality.¹⁵ I will adapt this approach as I examine the parables as a brief, metaphoric narrative that teaches through the paradoxical comparison of the world we know to the Kingdom we desire to know.

¹² Ibid. (September 6, 2011).

¹³ Mike Graves, Interview, Candler School of Theology (Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia), December 2011.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical hermeneutics." *Semeia* no. 4 (January 1, 1975), 33.

¹⁵ John Dominic Crossan, “Paradox Gives Rise To Metaphor: Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and the parables of Jesus." *Biblical Research* 24 (1980), 20.

Through the parables, Jesus takes the familiar and uses it to enlighten our understanding of things we do not understand, such as the Kingdom of God. A good metaphor takes something as common as a flower and utilizes the mundane image to explain the intricacies of an idea as complex as Love. There is power in a metaphor; power that is lost in the literal use of language. When we take a metaphor (Love is a rose) and reconstruct it as an explicit statement (Love is temporary), we strip the ambiguity and therefore the power from the metaphor. In a similar sense, if the details of a story are added to a parable (characters built, plots complicated, details disclosed), then the language loses its power to impress upon the mind a greater Truth than can be explained through language alone. The form of the parable transmits meaning. There is an intrinsic opacity in parabolic speech;¹⁶ an obscurity in the form that allows the gospel writers to communicate beyond literal language, which forces the reader to participate in an *active* search for meaning within the text.

According to Aristotle, metaphor is a sign of genius; Aristotle defines a metaphor as “the capacity to perceive a resemblance between elements from two separate domains or areas of experience and to link them together in linguistic form.”¹⁷ The parables of Jesus link the experiences of human life to the mysteries of the Kingdom of God through the use of well-crafted metaphors. Funk describes the power of the parable as metaphor, which “because of the juxtaposition of two discrete and not entirely comparable entities produces an impact upon the imagination and induces a vision of that which cannot be

¹⁶ Kraftchick, August 25, 2011.

¹⁷ Howard Gardner, *Art, Mind, and Brain: A Cognitive Approach to Creativity* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 161.

conveyed by discursive or prosaic speech.”¹⁸ The parable teaches through word pictures. These images push our beliefs of God’s divine justice beyond our initial comprehension. The parables are more complex than a direct comparison between two objects. Sallie McFague understands the parable as an *extended metaphor* because “it holds in solution the ordinary and the extraordinary and unites language, belief, and life into a whole . . . Parables are stories about ordinary men and women who find in the midst of their everyday lives surprising things happening.”¹⁹ These *surprising things* are a disruption and reordering of reality. Parables take the familiar and make it unfamiliar: “It is not that the parable points to the unfamiliar, but that it includes the unfamiliar within its boundaries.”²⁰ The comfort of knowing and inferring how people will respond in a given situation is ripped away to reveal the reordering of the ordinary to divulge the divine.

The metaphoric narratives of a parable sound real, but they may not be the reality we desire. According to Ricoeur, “The parables tell stories that could have happened, but it is this realism of situations, characters and plots that precisely heightens the eccentricity of the modes of behavior to which the Kingdom of heaven is compared. The *extraordinary in the ordinary: this is what strikes me in the denouement of the parables.*”²¹ When we encounter a parable, we often do not see our own beliefs reflected back at us, but a new world order that disrupts our beliefs of justice and equality. Ricoeur argues, “Metaphor does not produce a new order except by creating rifts in an old order.”²² In order to engage the parables, we must be willing to have our beliefs

¹⁸ Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and the Word of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 136.

¹⁹ Sallie McFague, "Parable, metaphor, and theology." *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 42, no. 4 (December 1, 1974), 630.

²⁰ Ibid, 632.

²¹ Ricoeur, 115.

²² Ricoeur qtd. Crossan, "Paradox gives rise to metaphor," 23.

challenged and our worldview reordered. The *vividness* and *strangeness* of the parable leaves us at a crossroads, where we must either deny the power of the unexpected metaphor or allow our religious beliefs to be transformed by it.

The literary form of a metaphoric story may be found in various world cultures and religions, but the parable as used by the Gospel writers to recount the teachings of Jesus is unique. The Gospel writers preserved the parables of Jesus, thus preserving the means by which Jesus reveals the Truth of the Kingdom of God. The parable is itself a teaching method, told in response to a question or in order to expound upon a previous teaching. Mark explains Jesus' use of the parables as a coded communication between Jesus and his followers.²³ The ability to understand and interpret the metaphoric narratives came only through belief in and knowledge of the Kingdom of God. The parable is itself a form, or vehicle, through which the audience discovers a greater Truth. Donahue argues that the form of the parable itself carries meaning; he provides a contextual argument – the parables are the context for the Gospel.²⁴ The parables are intended to be pointers toward an idea, not holistic objects in and of themselves. Those who are not privy to such knowledge of the Kingdom of God and the teachings of Jesus remain ignorant to the depth of the parabolic teachings. The literary form in combination with the metaphoric language generates the force of a parable.

After two millennia of study, we cannot recover the *original* intent of the parabolic teachings.²⁵ As an interpreter of parabolic literature, I too acknowledge the extreme degree by which I am removed from the *meaning* of the text. I am separated by

²³ Mark 4.10-12

²⁴ Kraftchick, September 1, 2011.

²⁵ In examining the parables of Jesus, I will acknowledge the literary setting, but I will attempt to encounter the parables without intentionally constructing a historical Jesus.

my own worldview, which influences how I read and interpret the parables. The parables themselves are separated from the original oral traditions of the early church by both the author and his worldview; each Gospel writer retold the parabolic teachings of Jesus as a means to a religious end. The parables are a figurative teaching device used by Jesus as a means of revealing God to all those who listened and understood. Thus, the interpretation of a parable often reveals as much, if not more, about the interpreter than the historical figure or text being examined. Being thus removed from a parable, caution should be used when ascribing meaning to parabolic metaphor in a modern context. Schottroff is hermeneutical in her approach to the parables, examining how the church is able to talk about parabolic literature in a contemporary setting. Schottroff holds that there is no definitive interpretation of a parable; rather it is a construct of figurative language, which, like a picture, is able to do something that words are unable to. There is a depth and breadth to the parabolic metaphor that cannot be said to consist of a single meaning. Just because an interpretation fits, doesn't mean it can be declared "authorial intent."²⁶ We must approach the parables of Jesus as literature with the understanding that we cannot claim to have the *only* interpretation, but that we are seeking a *defensible* interpretation of the brief texts.

In addition, the brevity of the parables complicates their interpretation. According to Crossan, "Parable is a very short metaphorical narrative."²⁷ The brevity of the narrative is as much a part of the parable as the metaphoric language. In this short narrative we are removed from easy interpretation through metaphoric language and denied a clear resolution by brevity. This leaves *narrative gaps* that we, as the hearer and

²⁶ Luise Shottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 1.

²⁷ Crossan, "Paradox," 21.

interpreter, seek to fill.²⁸ Parables do not necessarily come to an end; there is often a stark lack of resolution.²⁹ The brevity of a parable leaves it feeling incomplete. It is this lack of resolution that unsettles our beliefs and forces us to question what we have just heard. Was Luke 15:11-32 a simple story about a father forgiving his prodigal son, or was there something more complex? And why are we left still standing on the front porch with the elder son? The brevity of a parable asks questions; one is often left with more questions than answers.

Like art, the parables simultaneously mimic, reveal, and obscure the realities of life. There are many inherent problems and limitations in our ability to know and understand God through the use of language, much as historical attempts to understand God through art have resulted in cries of heresy.³⁰ Crossan notes such a paradox:

It is, I would maintain, with the Jewish Jesus that the Jewish tradition forced the aniconicity of God onto the surface of language itself and, with inevitable paradox, announced that God could no more be trapped in the forms and genres of linguistic art than in the shapes and figures of plastic art.³¹

To say the Gospel created a full, comprehensive image of God would be to claim that we are able to construct a verbal image of God or the Kingdom of God. We must acknowledge the fragmented and partial understanding of God provided by the Gospel. Crossan draws together the paradox of describing the indescribable through the use of multivalent, metaphoric language. For Crossan, the real issue between narrative and world is that “language refers only to the linguistic world.”³² We are limited in our

²⁸ I will address these narrative gaps more thoroughly in chapter three, “Parable as Short Story: The Figurative and the Grotesque.”

²⁹ Kraftchick, August 30, 2011.

³⁰ I here reference the iconoclastic periods during which the church renounced the artistic depiction of God.

³¹ Crossan, “Paradox gives rise to metaphor,” 33.

³² *Ibid.*, 27.

interpretation of a parable by the ambiguity of both the metaphor and the language. The ambiguity is unsettling and prompts us to provide a clear answer to the parables by making explicit the implicit metaphors. Through overuse and stagnant interpretation in the church, the parables cease to shock us and rather remain dormant metaphors, waiting to be revived and renewed.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORGIVEN SONS: READING LUKE 15.11-32 THROUGH NEW EYES

Forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, which acts in the form of re-enacting against an original trespassing whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course.¹

An exegetical approach to parabolic literature allows us to encounter the literature in its most original form and context. Exegesis is the process of critically examining a text in order to discover its meaning. This is the common scholarly approach to encountering biblical literature, but such an approach is often unavailable to the lay members of a congregation. Exegesis is necessary to understanding Scripture, but how can we allow a congregation access to such pursuits without spoon-feeding them the exegetical corpse of a parable? The limits of exegesis lie in the limits of the exegete. Once a text has been stripped down to its language and reconstructed through scholarship, it effectively becomes a new text. For this reason, Christian congregations must come into direct contact with Scripture. Too often this endeavor is limited to knowledgeable clergy and biblical scholars. In *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, Birch and Rasmussen note, “one of the fundamentals of the Reformation was the right of the whole church, clergy and lay, to interpret Scripture.”² In order for congregations to

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 239.

² Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 116.

actively engage the Scriptures, they must partake in an exegetical examination of the text. This chapter will demonstrate the value of such an endeavor.³ Through a careful exegesis of the parables we can examine the content within the frame of form and context. I will conduct an exegetical examination of the often-overused parable of the Prodigal Son⁴ as an exemplar of forgiveness and an interpretive analysis of the parabolic dissonance between human and divine forgiveness by examining the Greek text, analyzing the narrative framework, and making ethical connections to the forgiveness of the father Luke 15.11-32.

Forgiveness is the essence of Christian communal life, but forgiveness is difficult. Various biblical and parabolic accounts may be used to help us understand what it means to forgive and be forgiven. According to Hannah Arendt, “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth.”⁵ Through his life and death, Jesus taught the world what it meant to forgive, but can we make the interpretive leap from the four gospel accounts of the life of Jesus in the Middle East to a modern understanding of forgiveness in Western culture? The texts themselves lack a cohesive definition of forgiveness, but the radical ethic of the New Testament does paint a picture of a Christian community that is called to emulate the divine forgiveness that God has granted them through Christ Jesus.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32) offers a unique example of forgiveness and reconciliation within the teachings of Jesus. Although a familiar concept within Christianity, the interaction between the father and his prodigal son does not follow the traditional pattern of repenting of sins. Neither does the parable itself say

³ In chapter four I will further address the role of the congregation in exegesis.

⁴ The use of this “title” demonstrates the overuse and communicative problem of this parable.

⁵ Arendt, 238.

explicitly that the son repents for his sins, nor does the father explicitly offer forgiveness to his prodigal son. However, the words themselves do not need to appear in the text, for “the entire narrative is quite evidently a dramatization of what forgiveness looks like and what it costs. The story *is* the verb.”⁶ What we do find in the Greek text is evidence of a son who comes to himself [εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν] and returns to his father with the hope of becoming a hired man [μίσθιος] in his father’s household. Likewise we find a father who is so moved by compassion [σπλαγχνίζομαι] for his son that he abandons all pretense, running to embrace and kiss [ἔπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ καὶ κατεφίλησεν] his son.

I. Translation

Luke 15.11-32 – (11) And he said, “There was a certain man who had two sons. (12) And the younger of them said to the father, ‘Father, give me the share of property which is coming⁷ to me.’ And he divided his living between them. (13) And not many days later, having gathered everything, the younger son traveled into a far land and there he squandered his property by extravagant⁸ living. (14) And after he had spent everything, a great famine came to that land and he began to be in want. (15) And he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that land, who sent him into his field to feed swine. (16) And he longed to gorge himself on the pods that the swine ate; yet no one gave him anything.

(17) And coming to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have a surplus of bread, but here I am dying of hunger! (18) Rising, I will go to my father and I

⁶ Peter S. Hawkins, “A Man Had Two Sons: The Question of Forgiveness in Luke 15.” *Ancient Forgiveness*. Ed. Charles L. Griswold and David Konstan (New York: Cambridge Univ Press, 2012), 161.

⁷ From the verb ἐπιβάλλω, referring to the son’s inheritance.

⁸ The adverb ἀσώτως “wastefully,” from ἄσωτος “profligate.”

will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in front of you, (19) I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.’” (20) And having risen, he went to his father. But while he was yet far away, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and running he embraced him⁹ and kissed him. (21) And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ (22) But the father said to his slave,¹⁰ ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and clothe him. And place a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. (23) And bring the fatted calf and slaughter it, that we may eat and make merry, (24) because *this*¹¹ son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was utterly lost and has been found.’ And they began to make merry.

(25) Now, his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. (26) And he summoned one of the servants and asked what this was. (27) And [the servant] said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he received him safely.’¹² (28) But he was angry and unwilling to go in. And his father came out to call him, (29) but answering he said to his father, ‘Behold, many years [I have been] your slave and never disregarded your commands, yet you never gave to me a kid that I may make merry with my friends. (30) But when *this* son of yours returned, who devoured your living with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ (31) But [the father] said to him, ‘Child, you are always with me, and everything that is mine is yours. (32) But it is fitting to make merry and be glad,

⁹ Literally “fell upon his neck,” which adds a sense of urgency to the embrace.

¹⁰ I have differentiated between *μισθιος* (hired men), *δοῦλος* (slave), and *παῖς* (child, servant) in my translation.

¹¹ I have added emphasis to *οὗτος* (vv. 24,30), and again to *ὁ ἀδελφὸς σου οὗτος* (v. 32).

¹² I have left this translation wooden to highlight the father’s act of receiving the son.

because *this brother* of yours was dead and he is alive; he was utterly lost and has been found.””

II. Greek Exegesis

[11-12] *Εἰπεν δέ* marks the beginning of this new parable, but Luke continues the same narrative situation from 15.1-10 in which Jesus is responding to the Pharisees’ critique of his fellowship with sinners.¹³ Luke does not begin the parable with *ἦ* as he did the parable of the lost coin, therefore Jesus is not simply adding a third version of the first two parables;¹⁴ he is offering a more complex parable along the same theme of finding the lost. The characters of this three-part parable are all introduced within the first verse. The father is a certain man¹⁵ having two sons. The sons define the father and the father defines the sons, because Jesus calls each one “son,” not “brother.” Each character is named only through this familial language.

The father, presumably a Jewish landowner,¹⁶ divides his living [*βίος*] between the sons upon the request of the younger. According to Jeremias, the son’s request for his share of the inheritance was not an unrealistic request, because the younger sons in antiquity commonly immigrated.¹⁷ Donahue echoes Jeremias when he describes the request as “legitimate, even if inappropriate,”¹⁸ because the father was free to give out his property during his lifetime, but the son’s intent to squander his inheritance made this request inappropriate. Bailey, on the other hand, argues that the son’s request is not

¹³ Luke 15.2

¹⁴ *NIB*, 300.

¹⁵ The phrase *ἄνθρωπος τις* is common in Luke’s gospel (10.30; 12.16; 14.2,16; 16.1, 19; 19.12).

¹⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1087.

¹⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*. 2nd ed (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1972), 129.

¹⁸ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 154.

legitimate and links the son's request to his disrespect for his father's life.¹⁹ The parable does not give attention to the situation that has prompted the son's request, but I agree with Snodgrass that his request and departure "would have been viewed negatively by all Mediterranean societies," even if technically legal.²⁰ As the parable begins the younger son desires his father's money over his father. This is evident in his request for the inheritance and his almost immediate departure. Although the proper use of possessions is a theme of the parable, and indeed of the Lukan narrative as a whole, the primary themes of the parable are compassion and celebration,²¹ which becomes increasingly more evident in the third segment of the parable (vv. 25-32).

It is unclear whether the elder son received his inheritance in verse 12. Although the inheritance has been distributed,²² the father appears to retain control over his money. In v. 22 he calls a servant, which "would seem to imply that the father was still in some sense the master of the household and owner of the property."²³ The parable does not lead us to believe that the older son takes his inheritance in v. 12. If he did receive the inheritance, then the father's compassion for the younger son in vv. 22-23 must come out of the remainder of the father's property, which is the elder son's inheritance. Yet, this scenario makes little sense of the elder son's hyperbolic complaint of being given nothing in vv. 29-30 and the father's rebuttal, "Everything that is mine is yours."²⁴ This

¹⁹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub, 1984), 158-68.

²⁰ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub, 2008), 131.

²¹ See John Nolland, "The Roll of Money and Possessions in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32): A Test Case," *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 178-209.

²² The verb ἐπιβάλλω refers to the son's inheritance, the portion of the father's possessions that will belong to him.

²³ Fitzmyer, 1090.

²⁴ Luke 15.31

interaction between the father and the eldest son is used as a part of Luke's narrative and cannot be used to examine the legal platform of inheritance laws. Luke only tells us that the eldest son continued to live with the father, while the father retained control of his property.

[13-14] In v. 13 the son's disrespect for his father is emphasized by his almost immediate departure to a far away place [χώραν μακρὰν]. According to Snodgrass, the ancient world took the disrespect of parents as an imprisonable offense, associating the respect of the parents with "respectability, honor, and, conversely, shame."²⁵ In addition to this extreme disrespect of the father, it is the son's departure and subsequent ἀσώτως²⁶ that become his sin [ἀμαρτάνω] in vv. 18 and 21. At this point in the parable, "we are not told what this dissolute manner of life was; in v. 30 the elder son describes it as devouring 'your estate with prostitutes.'²⁷ The specific details of the younger son's διασκορπίζω are not given in the parable and are therefore unimportant for interpretation. For Lucian, "prodigality was a crime that entitled a father to disown his son and, along with neglect of the father, a basis for censure by society."²⁸ The son's disrespect of his father violates God's commandment²⁹ and is the primary sin against heaven.

[15-16] Throughout the parable, Jesus uses terms such as πορεύω to refer to "a change in place and, implicitly, of situation."³⁰ This change in situation is seen in the son's transition from living in excess [ζῶν ἀσώτως] to being in want [ἰστέρεισθαι]. In

²⁵ Snodgrass, 125.

²⁶ See also Ephesians 5.18, in relation to drunkenness; Titus 1.6, in relation to rebelliousness; and 1 Peter 4.3, in relation to Gentile debauchery.

²⁷ Fitzmyer, 1088.

²⁸ Lucian, *Abdicatus*, 21 qtd. Snodgrass, 126.

²⁹ Exodus 20.12

³⁰ J. Reiling and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Translator's Handbook on The Gospel of Luke* (London: United Bible Society, 1971), 548.

his great need, the son takes “an occupation no Jew would assume;”³¹ he feeds the unclean swine. Such a livelihood was “viewed with disdain even in the Greco-Roman world, but Jews were prohibited from raising swine at all”³² due to legal restrictions that unclean animals be neither eaten nor touched.³³ Thus, we see the son utterly dejected after his decline from extravagant living. Donahue describes this degradation as evoking “evils worse than physical death” in the minds of Luke’s Jewish audience.³⁴ Not only has he taken on degrading work, but the son has also “lost his familial, ethnic, and religious identity.”³⁵ The familial ties are destroyed by the younger son; “By dissipating the property, the younger son severs the bond with his father, with his people, and hence with God; he is no longer a son of his father and no longer a son of Abraham.”³⁶ The parable reveals the son in his lowest point, emphasizing his desire to feed on the pig slop—an unholy and unsavory meal. Not only is he tending these unclean animals, but now he has fallen even lower than these unclean beasts.

[17-19] *εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν* is a “pregnant phrase” that implies a revelation within the younger son, though much is left to the reader’s imagination.³⁷ The word *μετάνοια* is not used in the parable, although he is described as having a new mindedness in that he *comes to himself* and identifies his actions as sinful. But with the internal dialogue we are able to see into the heart of the son and his somewhat selfish³⁸ notions are revealed. The son has experienced a change of heart, but is this a kind of repentance? Jeremias equates *εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν* with an Aramaic expression for “repentance,”

³¹ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 153.

³² Snodgrass, 126.

³³ See Leviticus 11.7-8; Deuteronomy 14.8; Isaiah 65.4; 66.17

³⁴ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 153.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 154.

³⁷ *NIB*, 302.

³⁸ The son’s motivation to return is his own hunger (Luke 15.17).

suggesting that the Lukan audience would read it as such.³⁹ Bailey, on the other hand, argues that the description of the son's motivation as "repentance" is too strong.⁴⁰ I would agree with Bailey that the characterization of the son as repentant is a leap from the language of the parable, but when the parable is read in connection with the two preceding parables the link between the son's return and the repentant sinners [ἄμαρτωλῶ μετανοοῦντι]⁴¹ is evident. The son has acknowledged his actions as a sinner⁴² [ἥμαρτον], and he has chosen to leave his place of disgrace among the pigs and return to his father.⁴³ But in the words of Snodgrass, "We may no more draw an accurate picture of repentance from it than draw guidelines on inheritance questions from it."⁴⁴ The son is an example, rather than a model.

[20-21] Although the character of the father is not developed in the parable, his "actions allow the narrative to unfold and provide its crucial turning points;" his discourse with the sons provides the key for interpretation.⁴⁵ The parable is about the father's forgiveness; "while the father does not search for the prodigal, he does go out to both sons."⁴⁶ This forgiveness is the parabolic mirroring of the divine forgiveness.

When the father sees his son, he is moved by compassion [ἐσπλαγχνίσθη] and runs to embrace him [δραμῶν]. Snodgrass suggests that the actions of the father "are not so exaggerated and unexpected that they fall outside the range of human behavior."⁴⁷ Yet, the *New Interpreter's Bible* argues that, "No other image has come closer to describing

³⁹ Jeremias, 130.

⁴⁰ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 173-175.

⁴¹ Luke 15.7, 10

⁴² According to Snodgrass, first-century Jews and Greeks alike would have found the son's leaving, squandering, lifestyle, and neglect for his father reprehensible and unethical (131).

⁴³ The *NIB* emphasizes the essence of the son's return as "to his father" (302).

⁴⁴ Snodgrass, 139.

⁴⁵ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 152.

⁴⁶ Snodgrass, 95.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 133.

the character of God than the waiting father, peering down the road longing for the son's return, then springing to his feet and running to meet him."⁴⁸ It is within the realm of human behavior to express compassion toward those who have wronged us, but it is uniquely divine to do so without stipulation or hesitation. The image is poignant and startling. Donahue stresses the image of the father running to welcome the son as a narrative shock, which "prepares the readers for the subsequent religious shock."⁴⁹ Running brought with it a loss of dignity, which the father casts aside when he is moved with compassion for his son.⁵⁰ The uniqueness of the father's response doesn't come from the running itself, but from the compassion [*σπλαγχνίζομαι*] that prompted it.

It is compassion [*σπλάγγνον*] that moves the father to action. *σπλαγχνίζομαι* is a verb that "goes to the visceral core of a person, meaning literally 'to have one's bowels yearning.'"⁵¹ The characteristic of *σπλάγγνον* is linked to Jesus in the gospel traditions as well as in the epistles of Paul. The gospel of Mark uses *σπλάγγνον* to describe Jesus' reaction when he is moved with pity by the leper,⁵² when he has compassion on the five thousand,⁵³ and when he again has compassion on the four thousand.⁵⁴ Matthew and Luke both use the verb *σπλαγχνίζομαι* in the mouth of Jesus when he is telling the parables of the king who is moved with compassion for his servant,⁵⁵ when the father of this parable has compassion on his lost son,⁵⁶ and when the Samaritan has compassion for

⁴⁸ *NIB*, 302.

⁴⁹ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 155.

⁵⁰ *NIB*, 302.

⁵¹ Hawkins, 169.

⁵² Mark 1.41

⁵³ Mark 6.34

⁵⁴ Mark 8.2

⁵⁵ Matt 18.27

⁵⁶ Luke 15.20

the beaten man.⁵⁷ Mark even uses the phrase *βοήθησον ἡμῖν σπλαγχνισθεῖς ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς* (feeling compassion for us, help us) in the mouth of a father as he pleads with Jesus to heal his son of an unclean spirit.⁵⁸ Dunn notes that when Paul uses the phrase *σπλάγγνοις Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ*, he may be echoing “a term characteristically and distinctively used of Jesus’ emotional response at various points during his ministry.”⁵⁹ Jesus frequently has compassion for the crowds who wish to hear him speak (Matthew 9.36; 14.14; 15.32; Mark 6.34; 8.2). Jesus takes pity on the two blind men in Jericho (Matthew 20:34) and on the leper in Galilee (Mark 1.41). He has compassion for the widow in Nain and raises her son from the dead (Luke 7.13). The verb *σπλαγγνίζομαι* is also used in the mouths of those requesting healing from Jesus; the father of the boy with an unclean spirit in Mark 9 implores Jesus to take pity on his son and offer healing (Mark 9.22). If the term is linked specifically to the character of Jesus, then the uses of *σπλαγγνίζομαι* in Luke 15 may emphasize the allegory of the father as the God figure.

[22-24] The father reverses the status of the son from his self-assigned place as *μίσθιος* to a son who wears the robe, ring, and sandals of a free man.⁶⁰ According to Donahue, “He is not only restored as son but symbolically raised to a position greater than when he left with his share of the property.”⁶¹ The ring brings an elevated status to the son, although the type of ring is not specified in the parable. According to Fitzmyer,

⁵⁷ Luke 10.33

⁵⁸ Mark 9.22

⁵⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Pub, 1998), 193 n 53.

⁶⁰ Jeremias suggests that the sandals symbolize the son’s transition from indentured servant to a free man (130).

⁶¹ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 156.

the father “treats his younger son not as he asks to be treated (as a day laborer), but as an honored guest.”⁶² The son did not expect to be greeted with such a lavish welcome.

The father says that his son was dead because “he had broken his relationship with the family, dishonored his father (treating him as though he were dead), and left his land to live with Gentiles.”⁶³ This description of the son as lost is emphasized by its repetition in v. 32. This phrase, “was lost and now found,” is emphasized because it is “the catchword bond uniting this parable to the two preceding.”⁶⁴ This phrase draws the narrative framework of the parables in Luke 15 together.

[25-28] For the first time we encounter the elder son as an active character in the parable. The parable links the elder son to his work in the field, which indicates his ties to the household. The field is presumably still the property of the father, but is “destined as a result of the division to come to this son at the death of the father.”⁶⁵ He is thus able to return to the house and give orders with a level of authority akin to the authority that has been bestowed by the father to the younger son in v. 22.

The anger of the brother stands out in the parable, because we are unaware of what has provoked such a response. The father emerges to speak with his elder son when he refuses to enter the party. Donahue suggests that this “upsets the cultural expectation of the audience no less than his earlier running.”⁶⁶ As with the younger son, the father physically goes out to the elder son. Although the father does not seek the lost in the same manner as the shepherd and woman of the previous parables, the parable of the prodigal son portrays him as sympathetically going out to *both* of his sons in turn.

⁶² Fitzmyer, 1090.

⁶³ *NIB*, 303.

⁶⁴ Fitzmyer, 1090.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 156.

[29-30] In many ways the conversation between the elder son and the father is the climax of the parable. He does not address his father by name, but rather with the impersonal exclamation *ἰδοῦ*. The elder son then compares himself to a slave [*δουλεύω*]. While the younger son expected to be a servant and was treated as a son, the elder brother expected to be treated as a son, but instead views his place in the household as that of a slave. The elder brother compares the fatted calf that was killed for his brother⁶⁷ to a much less valuable kid. There is a contrast between the two sons. There is also a contrast between the disdain of the elder son and the celebration of the father. The elder son is “recognizing that virtue is worse rewarded than vice.”⁶⁸ His loyalty does not place him above his prodigal brother.

[31-32] The father addresses the elder son as child [*τέκνον*], emphasizing the familial tie between them. According to Donahue, the father treats the elder son “as equal in authority and dignity and counters angry and divisive language with images of reconciliation and unity. The father summons the elder son also to a feast of life.”⁶⁹ With the phrase “everything that is mine is yours” [*πάντα τὰ ἐμὰ σὰ ἐστίν*] the father suggests that the elder son is, and has always been, with the father [*σὺ πάντοτε μετ’ ἐμοῦ εἶ*]. The father goes out to the elder son, but he does not express the same concern for the elder as for the younger. The father does not seek reconciliation with the elder son. The son must decide whether or not he will participate with the father in the forgiveness of the younger son.

The closing element of the story is omitted, which leaves the reader questioning the final decision of the elder brother. The father has come to invite him in, but does he

⁶⁷ Luke 15.27

⁶⁸ Fitzmyer, 1091.

⁶⁹ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 157.

enter the banquet and follow his father in forgiving the younger son, his brother?⁷⁰ Or does he remain on the patio in his self-inflicted separation from the celebration and his family? The open-ended parable prompts the reader to see him or herself in the character of the elder brother, left to react to the radical forgiveness we have witnessed.

III. Narrative Framework

The location of the parable of the lost son within Luke's narrative is of contextual importance. Luke "makes connections between events, so that a thread of purpose runs through his narrative."⁷¹ From 14.1-17.10 Luke "focuses on the gospel for the outcasts."⁷² Within his gospel for the outcasts, Luke arranges the three parables of chapter 15 for rhetorical effect, developing an emphasis on God's compassion for the lost and God's celebration of their return.⁷³ In each of the parables of Luke 15 "the stress is on the one who finds rather than on what is lost."⁷⁴ Luke frames the parables of the lost (sheep, coin, son) as Jesus' response to both the tax collectors and the sinners who were gathering to hear him, as well as the Pharisees and scribes who provoke the parables by saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."⁷⁵ The verb ἀκούω gives narrative cohesion to Luke's transition into the three parables of 15, appearing in both 14.35 and 15.1. Some in the audience hear willingly (sinners), while others do not (Pharisees),⁷⁶ but both the willing and unwilling are being addressed by Jesus in chapter 15.

⁷⁰ In my translation I have emphasized the elder son's use of οὐτός in v. 30 to describe the younger son. He disassociates himself from the younger son by never referring to him as brother. The father forces the elder son to encounter the younger as his brother.

⁷¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. 3rd ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 190.

⁷² Snodgrass, 94.

⁷³ Ibid, 93-95.

⁷⁴ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parables*, 158.

⁷⁵ Luke 15.1-2

⁷⁶ Snodgrass, 124.

With this audience of sinners and Pharisees in mind, how are we to interpret the parable? According to Johnson, Luke uses the parables when Jesus addresses his opponents to “warn of their rejection.”⁷⁷ Jesus thus uses the three parables of the lost (sheep, coin, son) “because [the Pharisees] had objected to his attracting sinners and tax collectors.”⁷⁸ The parable becomes an allegorical response to the rejection of his ministry. According to Snodgrass, “Jesus’ association with toll collectors and sinners is one of the surest—and to the religious authorities most unacceptable—features of his ministry.”⁷⁹ Snodgrass goes on to identify three purposes of the parable: to emphasize the compassion of the father and God, to extend an invitation to join in the celebration for repentant sinners, and to defend Jesus’ socialization with sinners.⁸⁰

The Pharisees frame the reading of the text, though the three parables also address the crowd of outcast sinners. Jeremias thus sees in the parables a double application; the sinners find their welcome in the character of the younger son, and the Pharisees reflect on themselves as the righteous elder brother.⁸¹ Snodgrass suggests an “inclusio . . . between the grumbling of the Pharisees in vv. 1-2 and the grumbling of the elder brother in vv. 29-30.”⁸² He goes on to draw an additional link between the eldest son’s claim to have never transgressed a command,⁸³ and the righteousness of the Pharisees who do not need to repent.⁸⁴ The Pharisees have their grumbling met with a series of parables that highlight the compassion of God, and God’s celebration when the lost have been found.

⁷⁷ Johnson, 204.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 205.

⁷⁹ Snodgrass, 94.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 140.

⁸¹ Jeremias, 131.

⁸² Snodgrass, 95.

⁸³ Luke 15.29

⁸⁴ Luke 15.7; Snodgrass, 95.

However, Snodgrass argues, “This parable has no intention of describing the Pharisees’ relation to God or their status with regard to the kingdom. It contrasts the *attitude* of the father (God) and the *attitude* of the elder son (the Pharisees) *toward the repentant*.”⁸⁵ Although imperfect, the parable is an allegory that holds up a mirror to those who hear. If we examine the parable in the context of Luke 15, then the mirror being held up to the audience reveals the elder brother as symbolic of the Pharisees. It is only when we remove the parable from this context that this interpretation loses its value. When allowed to speak beyond its context, the unrestricted compassion of the father is juxtaposed with the critical rejection of the elder son.

While the parable raises many questions about the historical context and implications of the narrative details, I must agree with Snodgrass that giving exhaustive attention to such considerations “would be pedantic and diminish the drama.”⁸⁶ This is not to say that pertinent cultural information should not have influence over our reading of the parable, but such details are trivial. Kenneth Bailey makes several such leaps when he reads the *qetsatsah* ceremony into the parable to signify the younger son’s communal cutting off.⁸⁷ The details of the parable itself do not support such a reading. Even in a critical exegesis of the text, the parable must remain intact as a literary form and a contextualized metaphor.

IV. Forgiveness of the Father

No matter how thoroughly one exegetes a text, a single examination and interpretation can never exhaust the full potential of a parable. Having waded through an exegetical examination of the text, let us turn to an interpretive analysis of the themes

⁸⁵ Ibid, 135.

⁸⁶ Snodgrass, 125.

⁸⁷ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), 121-122.

found within the parable. The parable is presented in Luke in combination with the parables of the lost coin and lost sheep. The parable itself transforms God and God's divine forgiveness into a contextualized metaphor for human forgiveness. Yet, there remains a dissonance between human and divine forgiveness. Let us examine the theme of forgiveness in three parts: the parables of Jesus, God who forgives God's followers, and the human's who attempt to emulate such forgiveness.

The unquestioned compassion of the father for his son in the parable becomes exemplary of the divine forgiveness of God and the ideal for Christian forgiveness. I will try to illustrate the possible aspects of forgiveness in the parable, in Greco-Roman society, and in the church. Bash uses the Prodigal Son as an example of how his five features of forgiveness can be held together.⁸⁸ The father's *response* is deliberate, thoughtful, and direct. Both the father and the son recognize the son's actions as morally *reprehensible*. The son recognizes and *repents* of his transgressions. The son then seeks to *restore* his *relationship* with his father. The parable ends with the father explaining how his forgiveness is *just*, because his son was lost and is now found.

A parable that models divine forgiveness must be interpreted and translated before it can be applied to the messy and complicated process of human forgiveness. In his book on forgiveness, Konstan also wrestles with the parallel of divine forgiveness:

God is stern, but also kindly toward his creatures and mercifully disposed toward honest repentance or a change of ways. But God is not an ordinary person: he does not go through a process of overcoming his resentment and mistreatment, or work through doubts about the authenticity of apologies and promises.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Anthony Bash, *Just Forgiveness: Exploring the Bible, weighing the issues* (Great Britain: SPCK, 2011), 33.

⁸⁹ David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123-124.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus presents the unconditional, undeserved, and incomprehensible forgiveness of the father for his son, but if we stop reading with the return of the younger son we amputate a portion of the parable. In her essay “God and Forgiveness,” Anne Minas argues that it is impossible for God to forgive because it is the fallibility of humanity that makes forgiveness both necessary and possible,⁹⁰ but what she ends up proving is that there is a distinction between human and divine forgiveness. The father rushes to greet his prodigal son, but the elder son does not respond in kind. He is unable to see the justice in the celebration of his disloyal brother’s return. It is the elder brother who brings into the parable the difficulties of forgiveness and reconciliation on a human level.

The concepts of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the New Testament are highly influenced by the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, which provided the cultural frame for the development of Christianity. Although Konstan argues that the Greco-Roman society did not believe in repentance as a “sudden change of life-orientation,” the repeated occurrence of *μετάνοια* in the Greek texts suggests that the Greco-Roman society held some concept of “new mindedness,” even though it cannot be directly equated to our modern translation of *μετάνοια* as “repent.” According to metaphor theory, we begin our understanding from physical experience and understand abstract symbolic concepts through analogy. It is only through our knowledge of human forgiveness that we are able to understand divine forgiveness. Likewise it is only in contrast to secular society that the Christian ethic of forgiveness can emerge. In the Greco-Roman society, forgiveness was seen as a form of weakness. To confess your sins

⁹⁰ Anne Minas, “God and forgiveness” (*Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 32-45.

was to accept the shame of your dishonor. According to Konstan, “The protagonists of the biblical narrative, unlike those of the ancient Greek novels, are not innocent.”⁹¹ When the protagonists are flawed and sinful, we are able to relate to them through our understanding of a flawed and sinful humanity.

While the parable of the Prodigal Son consists of three individual characters, each becomes representative of a collective. The emphasis in the New Testament is on the individual and his or her particular sins and faults, rather than on the Hebrew Bible’s preoccupation with the transgressions of an entire people.⁹² When the parable ends, we are left not knowing if the older son is able to forgive the younger. The older brother has been representative of different collective groups at different times of interpretation. In the gospel narrative, the ability of the Pharisees to reconcile with the sinful is brought into question. When the gospel itself was written, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles was in question. Can the Christian Church reconcile itself with God and join God in welcoming the prodigal children, or will we remain petulantly on the porch?

Although the father offers forgiveness with neither rebuke nor repentance, the elder brother seeks persuasion to forgive. The elder brother may give us a more accurate human response to our prodigal counterparts. Why should the faithful continue to work while the sins of the disloyal are celebrated in excess? There is a distinction between divine and interpersonal forgiveness within a group:

Interpersonal forgiveness requires humility . . . Divine forgiveness is based on Divine truth, justice, mercy, and love, which are granted from an omniscient, merciful, and just God . . . Non-omniscient humans are called to forgive unconditionally.⁹³

⁹¹ Konstan, 123.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Everett Worthington, “Just Forgiving: How the Psychology and Theology of Forgiveness and Justice Inter-relate,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (2006. Vol. 5 No. 2), 160.

Worthington highlights the distinction between the forgiveness of an omniscient God and the human struggle to forgive in the face of adversity. The authors of the New Testament (primarily the gospel writers and Paul) have each offered their individual perspectives on how to reconcile the exemplary forgiveness of God with the imperfect forgiveness found in the Christian community.⁹⁴ The individual perspectives differ primarily because each author addresses the topic in a unique context.

Matthew uses the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18.23-35) to draw a direct connection between the forgiveness of God and the interpersonal forgiveness of humans. Matthew places this parable in response to Peter's question of how many times he should forgive a brother who sins against him,⁹⁵ but the king in the parable only forgives the servant once. When the king observes the unforgiving servant, he no longer offers forgiveness. This parable is not an example of forgiving your brother not seven times, but seventy times seven;⁹⁶ instead this parable draws back to the principles of Matthew 6.14-15. There is a one-to-one correlation between your forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of you; "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."⁹⁷ This same principle is exemplified in the parable of the unforgiving servant. Although the king has compassion (*σπλαγχνίζομαι*) for his servant and forgives him (*ἀφήκω*), the servant does not emulate such forgiveness to his own debtors.⁹⁸ The most human characters of the parables struggle to forgive, even when

⁹⁴ Primary verses on forgiveness include: Matthew 6.9-15; 26.28; Mark 11.25; Acts 3.19; and Hebrews 10.17.

⁹⁵ Matthew 18.22

⁹⁶ λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ. (Matthew 18.21-22)

⁹⁷ Matthew 6.14-15

⁹⁸ Matthew 18.27

presented with a model of divine forgiveness. The elder son is still angry with his younger brother⁹⁹ and the servant does not forgive his debtors even after his own debts have been forgiven.¹⁰⁰ These parabolic characters are left unable to follow God's model of forgiveness. The New Testament authors offer divine examples of forgiveness, but forgiveness is not limited to Christianity.

Societal studies can give added insight into our study of societal forgiveness in the biblical texts and in the living Church. According to Worthington, "It can reveal much that can supplement Scripture (where Scripture is silent) and can help us interpret Scripture when Scripture speaks."¹⁰¹ In behavioral research, the ability of an individual to forgive has been shown to improve that individual's chances of prospering.¹⁰² Likewise, when an entire society exemplifies the ability to forgive and reconcile, that society prospers beyond the rest.¹⁰³ Forgiveness and reconciliation require altruistic concern for the society. General altruism is a mystery, but the effects of altruism are beneficial to both the individual and the society. In a computer simulation, the groups that exhibit the ability to forgive prosper exponentially, while the groups that refuse to forgive eventually die out.¹⁰⁴ These simulations also show that those who offer unconditional forgiveness run the risk of being victimized by those who do not forgive. Although God's love and forgiveness are unconditional, the human imitation of this forgiveness necessarily requires "conditions." Although societies who forgive too easily may be abused, research has shown that forgiving can have health benefits as well as spiritual. According to

⁹⁹ Luke 15.25-32

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 18.28-30

¹⁰¹ Worthington, 165.

¹⁰² Robert M. Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York:Basic Books, 2006).

¹⁰³ Rikard Roitto, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation" (Lecture, Teologiska Högskolan Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden), April 13, 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Kazen, this "humanitarian behavior is very much grounded in human biology and empathy is a result of evolution because of its selective advantage."¹⁰⁵ Forgiving can lower stress, increase happiness, lower blood pressure, improve the immune system, decrease depression, and raise self-esteem, which all lead the forgiving person to live a healthier life and presumably happier life. Such advantages may be seen in the study of forgiveness within societies.

There is an inherent difficulty to forgiveness. Bash begins his book by drawing the reader's attention to this difficulty, "Whether we want to admit it or not, to forgive is not an easy thing to do."¹⁰⁶ This may appear obvious at first, but true forgiveness isn't simply an utterance of three little words—*I forgive you*. To forgive someone is to reconcile yourself to the events of their transgression. According to Hawkins, the parable of the Prodigal Son does not work out the "terms of reconciliation that true 'forgiveness' entails; it does not offer a philosophical exploration, and it lacks the specificity of injunctions about whom to forgive, or how to do so."¹⁰⁷ Yet, the parable prescribes a Christian ethic of forgiveness that the Church is to emulate. We fall short in our emulation and at times we continue to stand petulantly on the porch with the elder brother demanding justice. In his article on forgiveness and justice, Worthington suggests that justice and forgiveness are not diametrically opposed ideas; "the more justice people [get]--that is, the more apology and restitution--the more people [forgive]."¹⁰⁸ Primary in

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Kazen, "Justice, Integrity, Compassion and Reconciliation: A Psycho Biological Approach to Self-Preserving and Other-Oriented Concerns in the Jesus Tradition," Eng. Trans. of "Moralische Emotionen in der Jesusüberlieferung. Ein psycho-biologischer Beitrag zum Verhältnis von Selbsterhaltung und Nächstenorientierung," *Evangelische Theologie* 71), 288-306.

¹⁰⁶ Bash, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Hawkins, 175.

¹⁰⁸ Worthington, 156.

reconciling forgiveness and justice in a Christian ethic is acknowledging that God's justice is not restricted to our own perspectives.¹⁰⁹

What I have here called a Christian ethic calls us to act in accordance with God's justice and not our own. The perspectives of forgiveness and reconciliation held by the authors of the New Testament texts were heavily influenced and limited by their Greco-Roman society. Yet, according to Worthington, "the more that theology is contextualized to the time and place where Scripture was written, the less likely it is to apply to different contexts today. Theology requires generalization across time, location, and culture."¹¹⁰ The parable of the Prodigal Son was shaped by early Christian culture, but the forgiveness of the father in the parable is not limited to those who lived in the first century. Forgiveness may be defined as "granting pardon for an offense" or "forswearing revenge," but this form of forgiveness exists outside of the Christian ethic presented in the New Testament. The Christian ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation challenges us to go beyond the evolutionary impulse to empathize with our neighbors. Forgiveness is, Arendt says, "the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven."¹¹¹ This radical ethic of forgiveness in the New Testament calls Christians to emulate the divine forgiveness that God has granted them through Christ Jesus.

¹⁰⁹ In Luke 20.1-16 we find a parable about workers in a vineyard. Although those who have worked the hardest feel that they have been treated unjustly, the landowner expresses justice through his generosity.

¹¹⁰ Worthington, 156.

¹¹¹ Arendt, 241.

V. Reframing the Parable

Luke is writing to a community familiar with the good news of Christ Jesus. In the opening verses of his gospel, Luke reveals that he writes “so that you may know the truth about the things which you have been taught.”¹¹² He writes Luke-Acts to shed light on the truth of the gospel tradition for an audience who has already heard the *εὐαγγέλιον*. Beginning to read the parable, the audience is lead to identify with one of the two sons, since “identification with the father is closed off at the outset.”¹¹³ Being members of a Christian community, early readers likely identified themselves with the younger son. Like the *ἁμαρτωλοί* who drew near to hear Jesus in v.1, their community is comprised of those who have been found by God. Like the younger son, they have come to the father [*ἦλθεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα*] and have been greeted as children.

The early readers of Luke-Acts were not limited by what has become the traditional title of the parable. They read Luke’s account of Jesus without the influences of church tradition and without two thousand years of accumulated critique on the parable as the “gospel within the Gospel.” They read it through the eyes of those seeking the truth of the *εὐαγγέλιον*. They did not over analyze every last detail of the Jewish history of the text, for they already had a much clearer understanding of inheritance law and the uncleanness of swine than a modern audience could ever hope to achieve. They already understood Israel’s deep-rooted tradition of rivalry between siblings and their father.¹¹⁴ They experienced a sincere lack of overanalyzing.

¹¹² Luke 1.4

¹¹³ *NIB*, 301.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 300. See Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his elder brothers. The younger son is favored in each of these stories.

When the parable is read without the weight of church history it ceases to be a “gospel within the Gospel” and is revealed as an evolving parable about God’s unconditional forgiveness for the repentant sinner. I have renamed my translation of the parable “The Forgiven Sons” in light of this stark reading. The adjective “forgiven” is a reference to the father, and thus the title “The Forgiven Sons” centers the parable around the action of the father, though his name does not appear in the title. The plurality of “Sons” keeps the reader from excluding the climactic reaction of the elder son from interpretation. By renaming the parable I hope to exchange the lens of prodigality for a lens of forgiveness.

Through an exegesis of the text I have been able to encounter the parable in a new light. As a reader I was driven to discovery through a quest for answers and an engagement of the text. Exegesis allows the exegete to be shaped by the text, but it also allows the text to be shaped by the exegete. When a pastor performs an exegesis in a secluded setting, the congregation benefits from the knowledge of the preacher, but they are limited by to a single perspective. Interpreting a parable for a congregation separates them further from the gospel narrative. Exclusionary exegesis, no matter how carefully executed, inhibits the congregation from making unique connections with the text. No exegesis can ever exhaust the full potential of a parable, no matter how thoroughly performed. Renaming a parable presents a congregation with a new lens for examination, but this is equivalent to giving a man a fish. We must teach our congregations to fish.

CHAPTER THREE

PARABLE AS LITERATURE: THE FIGURATIVE AND THE GROTESQUE

*God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.*¹

Parabolic literature is precisely that—literature. Parables are metaphoric works of fiction that Jesus uses to teach his followers, and fiction is often more powerful than fact. T. S. Elliot writes in *Religion and Literature*, “The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not.”² There is transformational power in the fictional narrative form. The narrative approach to teaching morals and lessons is not unique to the Christian faith. The popularity of such metaphoric parables, songs, novels, dramas, and poems in global culture tells us that such an approach to education is more effective in teaching the masses than an eloquently worded dissertation. According to Crossan, “How a speaker or singer or artist does is no subordinate dimension of what he or she does. How they do is what they do, and what they do is how they do it. A song is a song, a story is a story, a syllogism is a syllogism, and a parable is a parable.”³ It is impossible to separate the meaning of a piece of

¹ Aeschylus, “Agamemnon,” *The Best-Loved Poems of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 149.

² T.S. Elliot, “Religion and Literature,” *Religion and Literature*, Ed. Robert Detweiler and David Jasper (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Know Press, 2000), 11.

³Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2002), 9.

literature from the literature itself. Like the parable, the power of the short story comes in the ambiguity and the carefully allowed narrative gaps.

One author who has mastered the short story is Flanner O'Connor. O'Connor wrote thirty-two short stories, each with a touch of the *grotesque*. O'Connor wrote about what she knew—the Southern United States, Georgia in particular. Although O'Connor's stories deal with “every day” life (going to church, family vacations, door-to-door sales men), she takes the stories a step beyond what we wish to acknowledge as the ordinary. O'Connor pushes the boundaries of the short story, much as Jesus pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable with his parables. When Flannery O'Connor writes, she does not waste words painting an intricately woven tapestry of detail for her readers to experience. She writes in a similar method to the parabolic literature of the New Testament, forcing her reader to go beyond their comfort zone while reading *brief*, metaphoric narratives. The metaphoricity of parabolic literature may be seen and understood outside of the genre when one examines well-crafted, intentionally written literature.

Brevity is key in both literary genres. When a short story receives the linguistic attention of a novel, the illuminating narrative gaps and metaphoric ambiguity of the text are lost. For example, if Jesus had drawn the parable of the Prodigal Son⁴ in Luke 15 to completion with a fourth pericope, we would no longer be left outside of the party wondering what happens to the elder brother as he contemplated his father's forgiveness of the prodigal son. If the story performs a self-analysis for us, filling in narrative gaps with details and making implicit teachings explicit, then it forces the limitations of

⁴ I will refer to Luke 15.11-32 as “The Prodigal Son” in this chapter to clarify the parable to which I am referring.

language upon the parable. In lieu of mystery, such details exclude the reader from interpretation by simply providing a resolution. According to Crossan, the parabolic metaphor is “untranslatable,” but “every metaphor, save the momentarily jaded or temporarily dormant, is but a localized indication and instance of the ultimate ubiquity and radical universality of metaphor itself.”⁵ In order for a metaphor to achieve its “full potential,” it must be given to the audience untranslated.

There is metaphoricity in the language of a parable. In its original form, a parable contains potentiality—an unadulterated meaning waiting to be discovered. Once we begin to translate a parable or short story beyond its original language and context we render the language monovalent, while the parable has an intrinsic plurivalence.⁶ The medium of literature allows an author to communicate the incommunicable in spite of the limitations of language. The power of the short story comes from the medium of narrative fiction, the intentional narrative gaps, and the audience who supplies the information for each elision in the narrative. When literature is given the opportunity to express Truth through unrestricted fiction, the author and reader both participate in the narrative to engage the divine.

I. Flannery O’Connor

Great literature is created when an author infuses the literature with themes of morality. O’Connor writes, “In the greatest fiction, the writer’s moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense, and I see no way for it to do this unless his moral judgment is part of the very act of seeing, and he is free to use it.”⁷ The moral beliefs of an author are infused in literature in order to communicate beyond the narrative. Literature is not

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, “Paradox gives rise to metaphor,” *Biblical Research* 24, (1980), 24-25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 31.

merely aesthetically and melodically pleasing; it contains the thematic secrets of human existence. According to O'Connor, "Fiction begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses—and every fiction writer is bound by this fundamental aspect of his medium."⁸ Language both limits what an author is able to communicate and allows such communication. It is only by employing a skillful narrative that an author may communicate divine truths in spite of the limitations of language.

O'Connor pushes the limits of language by implementing what she terms the *grotesque*. She writes stories that leave her audience in disbelief, appalled by the horrifyingly violent events that have transpired. O'Connor explains the necessity of such shock in her nonfiction work, *Mystery and Manners*:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.⁹

Through O'Connor's nonfiction we are able to confirm that she wishes her reader to encounter the mystery of the divine in her short stories. O'Connor uses fiction and the grotesque to force her readers to encounter their own need for the mysterious and awful grace of God. The *grotesque* is often revealed in O'Connor's work through violence, but it is something beyond violence that becomes the metaphoric vehicle for O'Connor's stories. According to Marshall Gentry, "O'Connor desired a life lived in the moment when redemption and the grotesque are bound."¹⁰ It is only in this paradoxical moment

⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰ Marshall Bruce Gentry, *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1986), 19.

that the reader, like the characters of her stories, can move beyond themselves to accept the divine.

The power of the parable lies in its ability to shock and amaze us, leaving us to pick up the pieces of what we thought we knew. O'Connor intentionally shocks her audience into the realization of their own position in the world and their intrinsic need for the grace of God. Much like a parable, when a writer employs grotesque fiction, "he's looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees."¹¹ O'Connor uses her metaphoric literature to shock her audience into a recognition of what they believe, often belying what they thought they believed. Jesus utilizes the parabolic vehicle of seemingly unjust human interactions to reveal the radical justice of God;¹² O'Connor uses the grotesque as the metaphoric vehicle for God's grace. Her work embodies the "fear and trembling" prescribed to Christian belief by Søren Kierkegaard,¹³ though O'Connor takes these words quite literally. O'Connor writes that she uses violence in her fiction because, "violence is strangely capable of returning [her] characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace."¹⁴ It is this violence in the stories that also enables the audience to accept their own need for God's grace. Such grace is uniquely revealed in O'Connor's grotesque juxtaposition of a self-righteous grandmother and an escaped serial killer.

¹¹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 42.

¹² Parable of Vineyard Workers (Matthew 20.1-16) and The Forgiven Servant (Matthew 18.21-35).

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author," *Religion and Literature*, 9.

¹⁴ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 112.

In O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," the grandmother tries to convince her son, Bailey, to take a family trip to Tennessee instead of Florida, where a recently escaped serial killer who calls himself The Misfit is thought to be hiding. Her attempts are to no avail, and the next morning, out of protest, the grandmother awakes early and waits in the car clothed in her best blue dress; "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady."¹⁵ Along with her big black valise, the grandmother also packs her cat, Pitty Sing, into a basket at her feet, because she cannot bear the thought of leaving him alone.

No sooner has the trip began, the grandmother discovers that children are not quite as respectful as she remembers. "In my time," the grandmother says, "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents, and everything else. People did right then."¹⁶ Children aren't the only ones who grow increasingly inadequate in the eyes of the grandmother. While dining at The Tower, the grandmother finds a kindred spirit in the owner, Mr. Red Sammy Butts. "These days you don't know who to trust," says Red Sam to the grandmother. "People are certainly not nice like they used to be," replies the grandmother, ". . . It isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust, . . . and I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody."¹⁷ As it turns out, finding a good man in this terrible world is quite the challenging feat.

Back in the car, the grandmother begins to daydream about a plantation she visited as a child, and, as chance would have it, the road to said plantation is along their southbound rout. In an attempt to persuade her dear Bailey to take a detour, the

¹⁵ Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 118.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

grandmother feeds the children a lie or two about secret panels and treasure hidden in the old house. The promise of adventure does the trick and the two children, John Wesley and June Star, torment their father into turning off the main road. It is only after causing the family to drive significantly out of their way that the grandmother comes to a horribly embarrassing realization—the plantation is actually in Tennessee. She is so startled that she knocks the cat out of his basket. Suddenly free, Pitty Sing springs onto Bailey's shoulders and causes quite a dramatic car accident.

Now stranded on a road that has gone untraveled for months,¹⁸ the grandmother waves down a “big black battered hearse-like automobile.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, the grandmother recognizes The (shirtless) Misfit almost immediately. Quickly, she begins to employ a strongly pathetic appeal, saying, “I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood.”²⁰ Seemingly unfazed by the grandmother's selfish flattery, she pleads for him to pray to Jesus. Nevertheless, the Misfit and his henchmen continue to escort her family members politely into the woods to be shot. This affords the grandmother and The Misfit the opportunity to converse a bit about his childhood and he reveals that he could have believed in Jesus, if only he had been there to see the miracles first hand; “It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known . . . and I wouldn't be like I am now.”²¹ The grandmother's head clears and she reaches out to touch The Misfit saying, “Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!”²² As if bitten by a snake, The Misfit quickly fires three shots through her chest. “She would have been a good woman,” says The Misfit, “if it had been

¹⁸ “The road looked as if no one had traveled on it in months” (Ibid., 124).

¹⁹ Ibid., 126.

²⁰ Ibid., 127.

²¹ “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Romans 6.1 (RSV)

²² O'Connor, “A Good Man,” 132.

somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”²³ After six murders on the side of the dirt road, The Misfit reveals to his henchmen, “It’s no real pleasure in life.”²⁴

The Misfit originally proposed that the only real pleasure in life was in “meanness,”²⁵ but he has found his own moment of grace in the instant prior to the grandmother’s murder. In response to the extreme violence in the story O’Connor writes, “This story has been called grotesque, but I prefer to call it literal.”²⁶ O’Connor has not added violence to life; she has simply made the violence of life explicit in this brief, yet poignant story. The characters of O’Connor’s stories are much more developed than those of the parables, but her narratives are similarly *brief*. Her use of brevity leaves little room for in-depth character development, yet she is able to portray the vaguely named “grandmother” and The Misfit—“her *Doppelgänger*, her shadow, her second and secret self.”²⁷ Both characters need redemption—the self-righteous grandmother and The wayward Misfit. With grace couched in the grotesque, the grandmother gains compassion and The Misfit gains hope.

The irony of the story is that both The Misfit and the grandmother preach grace to the other. The Misfit does not begin his conversation with the grandmother as anything more than entertainment, but he is affected by their exchange; “One might even say that the conversation is potentially redemptive *because* it gets out of anyone’s control . . . The narrator, like the grandmother and The Misfit, then, is thrown off balance by the material

²³ Ibid., 133.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He did, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness” (Ibid., 132).

²⁶ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 113.

²⁷ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 39.

of the story.”²⁸ The grandmother believes she can save herself, but The Misfit does not believe in salvation. It is only in the brief moment of grotesque honesty that each is able to become a means of grace for the other. In her dying moments the grandmother finally “tells the truth: she is not a good woman; he is not a good man; they both are in terrible trouble, and they both need radical help.”²⁹ In the face of the grotesque the grandmother is finally honest with herself.

Through her fiction, O’Connor provides metaphoric insight that reaches to the spiritual core of the reader. According to McFague, “Metaphoric insight never takes us ‘out of ourselves,’ but it returns us to ourselves with new insight; it is not a mystical, static, intellectual vision, but an insight into how ordinary human life and events can be made to move beyond themselves by connecting them to this and to that.”³⁰ As readers, we make three primary types of connections: text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world. These connections allow us to make applicable meaning of what we read. Our ability to make connections between fiction and reality is what allows us, as the reader, to find Truth in a text composed as a fiction. According to O’Connor, novel writers are realists, but this is a kind of realism “which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth.”³¹ Through the distortion of reality an author is able to peel back a superficial reality and reveal the innate Truths of the human condition. Often Truth is better revealed in the ambiguity of narrative, than in the specificity of fact.

²⁸ Gentry, 38-39.

²⁹ Wood, 39.

³⁰ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 137.

³¹ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 179.

II. Narrative Gaps

Literature gains power not only from what is said, but also from what is left *unsaid*. The literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser, proposes that the reader takes an active role in reading by filling what he terms *gaps* in the literature. These *gaps*, or *elisions*,³² are details that an author has intentionally or unintentionally left within the literature. As a reader, when details of a story are not explicitly provided, we fill them in ourselves—often unconsciously. This can account for many of the differences in literary interpretation.

One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled.³³

Iser places the power for literary interpretation into the hands of the *reader*. By necessity, the reader becomes a part of the narrative process. The text is incomplete without someone to read it. It is important to note Iser's claim that "no reader can ever exhaust the full potential" of a text. To apply this to the topic at hand, no exegetical examination or sermon can ever exhaust the full potential of a parable.

Parables are riddled with narrative gaps. As we read and interact with parables, we unconsciously fill in the gaps with our own characteristics, knowledge, and beliefs. We often go so far as to restructure the two-dimensional characters of the parables in our own image. I do not mean to suggest that any such constructions are intentional. With the help of the narrative gaps and parabolic ambiguity, we often participate in an

³² I here include the alternate term *elision* to better communicate the possible intentionality of the "gaps" described by Iser. It is not that the author failed to notice gaps within the narrative itself; the author has left room for connection to and interpretation of the characters and events.

³³ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 280.

interpolation of the biblical texts. We give characters motives, recontextualize them with back-stories, and try to make them realistic snapshots of historical Palestine.³⁴ The act of interpolation is not reprehensible, in and of itself. Iser would argue that it is indeed unavoidable. To return to Iser's definition of the narrative gap, it is the *reader* who must fill the gaps within the narrative framework, and "as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled."³⁵ We must let the gaps stand and allow the language of the parabolic literature to create a frame for the narrative. It is within this frame that the autonomous reader encounters and scuffles with metaphor. God is a mystery, not a puzzle to be solved; we must allow God the freedom to do things differently.

As readers our metaphoric interpretation is based on an unconscious interaction with the text, during which we rebuild the text in our own image by filling the narrative gaps with our own assumptions. When we don't know something, our brain automatically fills in the narrative spaces. The narrative gaps of O'Connor's short stories and the parables of Jesus force a high level of reader involvement. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor toys with the line between what is said and what is left unsaid. After the grandmother recognizes The Misfit and guarantees the execution of her entire family, her beloved son, Bailey, "turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened." O'Connor does not tell us what Bailey said to his mother, but we know it was shocking enough to make even a convicted killer blush. "Lady," says The Misfit trying to comfort the grandmother, "don't you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don't

³⁴ Steven Kraftchick, "Parables of Jesus," Lecture, (Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, GA), August 30, 2011.

³⁵ Iser, 280.

mean. I don't reckon he meant to talk to you thataway."³⁶ Through the elision of Bailey's actual insult, O'Connor allows the imagination of the reader to push the narrative as far as possible, far beyond the possibilities of language. Nothing O'Connor could have written would be as shocking to the reader as the most shocking thing he or she can imagine. The reader is left to complete the dialogue. Iser calls this act of completion the closing of narrative gaps. The size and frequency of the narrative gaps in a story determine the depth to which the reader is involved in co-authoring the text.

The author controls the way in which a reader interacts with the text by providing or denying details in the narrative. Shakespeare may explicitly question *what's in a name*,³⁷ but O'Connor *implicitly* destroys our understanding of the importance of a person's name. Would *The Misfit* by any other name still be as poignant? The children's mother is never given a name, yet we are aware of her physical appearance. As the story begins, O'Connor describes her as "a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit's ears."³⁸ The mother is only described in relation to her children and she does not participate in the dialogue of the story; she is merely a presence. The children have first and middle names, John Wesley and June Star, but they are only minor characters in the story, annoying the grandmother up until the moment of their execution.³⁹ The two main characters of the story remain equally as ambiguous to the reader. *The Misfit* never receives a complete name, but his title receives two capital

³⁶ O'Connor, "A Good Man," 127.

³⁷ "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet. / So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, / Retain that dear perfection which he owes / Without that title" [William Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet," *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 924].

³⁸ O'Connor, "A Good Man," 117.

³⁹ "'We've had an ACCIDENT!' the children screamed" (Ibid., 126).

letters, where the grandmother receives none. Our level of familiarity with each character is varied. Knowing their name does not mean we know them and not knowing their names may enable us to encounter the characters more clearly.

The parable of The Prodigal Son⁴⁰ also pushes the boundaries of the power of a name. The two children are each referred to as “son” (ὁ υἱός), expressing a familial tie to the father, but not to each other. Likewise, the father is understood through his paternal relation to the sons, referred to as “a man who had two sons” (ἄνθρωπός τις εἶχεν δύο υἱούς)⁴¹ and “father” (πάτερ). Although the reader is not forced to give a Christian name to each of the characters in The Prodigal Son or “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the reader is left to define what is in the nominals *father*, *son*, *grandmother*, and *The Misfit*. We each read the story with a preconceived notion of what it means to be a father, and the parabolic narrative challenges these preconceptions. Likewise, we each have an idea of how a *grandmother* should behave; yet O’Connor forces us to acknowledge the inconsistencies between our conception of a grandmother and *the grandmother* of the narrative. Through carefully choosing what details to include and what gaps to leave, O’Connor and the Gospel writer push the interpretation of the story back onto the reader.

III. Reader as Meaning Maker

The imagination of a reader is engaged in the interpretation of the story itself and the metaphoric function it serves. Through the act and power of imagination readers participate in the literature. According to Maxine Greene, “Writer and reader both are responsible for the universe brought into being through the act of reading.”⁴² The writer

⁴⁰ See Note 4

⁴¹ Luke 15.11

⁴² Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 77.

may compose the text, but the reader reanimates the words and becomes a co-creator of meaning. The act of reading brings the reader into the literature.

At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed.⁴³

The act of reading pushes the reader to participate in the literature through imaginative engagement, which allows the reader to see and hear anew. Thus, who we are affects how we read and understand parables and short stories. Greene upholds the power of art in the process of discovery. She writes, “Art offers life; it offers hope; it offer the prospect of discovery; it offers light.”⁴⁴ The metaphoric language of parables and short stories brings the readers in as meaning maker through the engagement of their imagination.

Both the parables of Jesus and the short stories of Flannery O’Connor use metaphoric language to force the reader to draw conclusions. According to Robert Funk, “The parable is a ‘language event’ in which the hearer is drawn into the parable because it is metaphorical and puts together two fundamentally unlike referents that force the imagination to draw connections.”⁴⁵ The parabolic form *forces* the reader to draw conclusions. In *The Prodigal Son*⁴⁶ the reader is forced to play out the metaphor of the forgiving father in order to better understand the Kingdom of God. When a reader grants a text authority, or normative status, they are compelled to engage in “meaning making” and so must deal with contradictions. In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the reader is

⁴³ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁵ Robert Funk qtd. Steven J. Voris, *Preaching Parables: A Metaphorical Interfaith Approach* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2008), 4.

⁴⁶ See Note 4

compelled to reconcile the grotesque murder of the grandmother and her family with the mystery and necessity of God's grace. The reader engages the text in order to make meaning. McFague writes of metaphor as "a way of *knowing*, not just a way of communicating. In metaphor, knowledge and its expression are one and the same, there is no way *around* the metaphor, it is not expendable."⁴⁷ The reader and the text, either metaphoric parable or short story, work together to create meaning; one cannot wholly possess meaning without the other.

The literal understanding of figurative language implies that something conceptually known . . . is to be communicated by means of non-literal language: the figure is a vehicle for a univocal tenor. The metaphor, by contrast, is the means by which equivocal because pre-conceptual knowledge is discovered to both speaker (writer) and hearer.⁴⁸

The metaphor makes explicit a conceptual Truth. The narrative is the vehicle for the metaphoric tenor. If we change our understanding or the parabolic vehicle, we change the meaning of the metaphoric tenor.

The first task of the reader is to interpret the parabolic vehicle into metaphoric meaning through imaginative engagement. The second task of the reader is to close what we have called the "narrative gaps" in the literature. These gaps can include the personalities, backgrounds, and even ethnicities of the characters in a story. When we are not explicitly told why a character behaves in a certain way, we must combine our prior knowledge with details from the narrative in order to make an inference. Active readers are frequently performing this act of prediction and inference. In a simple narrative, these predictions and inferences may lead us to solve a crime alongside Sherlock Holmes or unfold the mysteries of Middle Earth with Frodo, but in parabolic literature the

⁴⁷ McFague, "Parable, metaphor, and theology," 632.

⁴⁸ Funk, "Good Samaritan," 75.

predictions we make are often wrong. Historical ignorance, cultural prejudices, and world views contradictory to that of the parable can all contribute to a misperception of the parable and “wrong” predictions. These “wrong” interpretations can be countered with critical engagement of the text. According to Ricoeur, “The self contradiction of literal interpretation is necessary for the unfolding of metaphorical interpretation.”⁴⁹ It is the realization of contradiction that transfers the power of interpretation to the reader. The power of literature comes when we are unable to make perfect sense of a literal interpretation. When our predictions fall through and the characters we have constructed prove to be inaccurate, our worldview is challenged; boundaries are pushed.

The reader is central for the interpretation of a narrative, be it Gospel or O’Connor. The reader fills the narrative gaps in a story with his or her knowledge of human nature. Readers make the connections in order to complete and interpret the metaphor. Meaning is created when the reader interacts directly with the text. Without the reader, the text remains an uninterpreted metaphor with incomplete characters. A story without a reader ceases to exist. Therefore, the reader must be active and attentive, rather than slothful and dependent on prefabricated translations.

In the Gospels, Jesus uses the ambiguity of the parables to teach his followers and O’Connor uses the grotesque reality of her short stories to shock her readers into a new understanding. When we interpret the parables for a congregation, we separate them even further from the gospel narratives. Our interpretations, no matter how carefully crafted, inhibit the reader from engaging the text through imagination and making unique, personal connections with the ambiguity of the text. The individuality of the reader leads

⁴⁹ Ricoeur qtd. Crossan, “Paradox gives rise to metaphor,” 24.

to individuality of interpretation. When we remove the original literature from the conversation, we limit the potential interpretations.

Parabolic literature, much like poetry, uses figurative and metaphoric language to express greater Truth than can be understood through unimaginative, factual composition. Matthew Arnold writes, “More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete . . .”⁵⁰ The parables similarly compliment our interpretations of religion. Without the power of parables to challenge stagnant religious ideas, our understanding of the grace and the Kingdom of God is incomplete.

Readers must interact with the text directly in order to be altered by the narrative. O’Connor shocks her readers with the *grotesque* realities of life. Much like O’Connor’s *grotesque* short stories, parables are meant to disturb as well as comfort. In his book *Overhearing the Gospel*, Fred Craddock examines the power of parabolic literature:

By means of brief narratives containing vivid and arresting metaphors, Jesus lured his followers into listening and then caught them in a new vision, a new perspective, an alternative way of seeing life and the kingdom . . . Grace shatters the calculations of legalism and comes to us as a surprise.⁵¹

The parables force the listener into a new vision, new perspective, and a new way of seeing life and the Kingdom of God. The Church asks a congregation to encounter extremely powerful literature that has been preserved for two thousand years, yet often gives them explicit instructions not to touch it. If the parables are preserved behind pastoral interpretations and church tradition, the congregation is unable to be lured by Jesus into a new vision. The language of the parable is rendered mute.

⁵⁰ Matthew Arnold, “The Study of Poetry,” *Religion and Literature*, Ed. Robert Detweiler and David Jasper (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 7.

⁵¹ Craddock, 74.

CHAPTER FOUR

TEACHING METAPHORIC LANGUAGE IN THE CHURCH

*A parable is a brief tale of real things and persons,
 carrying along with it (or beside it) a deeper meaning.
 It suggests a hidden picture to the mind's eye.
 It whispers a message to the inward ear.¹*

A reader of the parables becomes the coauthor, making meaning of the language by imaginatively and personally completing the metaphor. A parable is more than a story; it is not a form of literature that can be extrapolated and neatly packaged into a twenty-minute homily on a sleepy Sunday morning. The parable is something that must be grappled with throughout the development of one's faith. Faith grows and changes over a lifetime. Each time you return to the parable, you can (and should) encounter something new. The parable does not change; the reader does—but who is this reader? How is this reader affected by the reading collective who influences what the individual reader sees as typical, normal, and acceptable? I will examine the reader as parabolic interpreter in light of both their psychological and their religious development.

James Fowler proposes that all humans, and subsequently all parabolic readers, progress through specific stages of faith. Examining these stages of faith will help determine how parabolic literature can be taught effectively in the Church at different stages in an individual's faith development. Faith changes with age; when aligned to the

¹ Henry Van Dyke qtd. Steven J. Voris, *Preaching Parables: A Metaphorical Interfaith Approach* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2008), 4.

developmental psychology of Erik Erikson, it is evident that the faith we have as a child should not follow us into adulthood unchanged. Our psychology develops alongside our faith. One cannot mature without the other. We naturally pursue religious answers throughout life and at each stage we ask new questions and seek new comforts. The continual reexamination of the parables throughout life challenges what is “known” and forces us to take a new orientation toward the metaphor. As we grow and develop, so our understanding of the world is modified, producing an ever changing hermeneutic of life. The way in which we interpret our world is determined by our understanding of our place in the world. A book, when reread as an adult, is not the same story read as a child. If our faith does not progress with us as we age, we are left with the fractured, unintelligible remains of a childish faith. Faith is not something encountered as a child and permanently ingrained; faith is an ever evolving, ever adapting understanding of God and God’s presence in the world. Our experiences and perspectives shape our faith.

I. Erikson’s Stages of Development

Erik Erikson developed an eight-stage theory of psychological development. Although religion is not always explicit in Erikson’s discussions of psychology, it is always influential. It defines how we understand our morals and interpret our place within the world. Erikson’s theory of development suggests that we continually develop throughout our lives, and his biographies of Luther and Gandhi further his claim that it is our childhood influences that guide us into adulthood.² For this reason, the development of children within the church is important in their ethical and religious progression into adulthood. What we teach children becomes the foundation for their fundamental theology. When we teach children, we teach the present and future church.

² See Appendix A for an outline of Erik Erikson’s eight Stages of Development.

The influence of religion in the development of the individual is transformational, yet this influence is limited by our ability to interpret religious literature. The parables of Jesus are formative in Christian education. Parables use the vocabulary of a *living language* that is ever changing as the reader develops. According to Erikson, “living languages must be considered one of the most outstanding forms of ritualization in that they express both what is universally human and what is culturally specific in the values conveyed by ritualized interplay.”³ The language of scripture expresses not only what it means to be human, but also what it means to deny our base human instincts and pursue the Kingdom of God. Through the mundane we are able to glimpse the divine. The Gospel of Mark suggests that the parables are ritualizing in their literary form, because only those who are a part of the community may understand.⁴ However, the power of the parable stands free of habitual interpretation. Parables use language and imagery that is utterly human to reorient our understanding of God’s justice. As a living language, parables redefine how we interact with our contemporary society and world. We are taken into the language and transformed.

Erikson examines ritualization as a psychosocial experience that develops from the child’s interaction with his or her expanding social context. Ritualization is a still informal and yet prescribed interplay between the child and his or her society that occurs at meaningful intervals and in recurring contexts. Ritualization is an important part of the development of the individual and helps him or her to understand the place of the self in the greater context of the society. The individual uses ritualization to understand both the existence of a primary other and the self in light of the other. Christian children in

³ Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 58.

⁴ Mark 4.10-12

Christian communities become oriented toward the Christian church. Parabolic literature provides guidance for seeking the Kingdom of God in this context. The way in which the community interprets the metaphoricity of the parables shapes the environment in which the children mature.

For Erikson, religion is linked with existential questions and holds an important place in psychological development. In *Childhood and Society*, Erikson writes of religion as a coping mechanism. As we try to understand our existence, we must also find ways to cope with our existence in the world. At this level, religion functions in individual and communal development. Religion becomes a reaffirmation of trust and guidance for autonomous existence, contributing to our development. *How* we interact with religion affects *how* we develop. Religion is often used to encounter the Truth of life. According to Erikson, “Truth . . . is never purely objective;” rather, “Truth can only be acknowledged as ‘truth in action.’”⁵ This quest for Truth extends into his search for the *I* in the *we*, in which he encounters the idea of God as the “ultimate other.”⁶ The *I* is never isolated from the *we*; and with God as the ultimate other, the *we* is never isolated from God. It is in the interchange between the development of the self in the community and the community’s understanding of itself in relation to God that one is able to see the importance of religion during the life-long development of the self.

Prior to Erikson, Freud focused his psychological analysis on the negative effects of the societal influences of human interactions with their world. Freud suggests, “The danger of pathological development is always imminent;” Erikson takes a more positive

⁵ Hetty Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern: Erik H. Erikson’s Contribution to the Psychology of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

approach, looking for “potential strength and potentials for health.”⁷ According to Zock, Erikson’s theories keep the development of the *ego* from being “conflict born,” giving the *ego* autonomy in its formation.⁸ Unlike Freud, Erikson’s *ego* “functions not only serve defense, but also *adaptation*,” and for Erikson, “adaptation is a creative, not necessarily conflictual, process which implies a reciprocal relationship between individual and environment.”⁹ By looking at the effects of the *positive*, Erikson is able to place individuals within their greater communal setting (family, community, religion) and observe the multitude of influences on their psychological development. The conflict is observed and its influences noted, but this same attention is given to the positive and even the mundane influences on a person’s development. This allows for a more holistic examination of the development of the *ego*. Unlike Freudian psychology, Erikson offers an explanation of positive influences. The adage, “It takes a village to raise a child,” rings true in Erikson’s psychology of development. The church becomes the influential village, guided by the community leaders. The individual is shaped within this community by even the most mundane interactions.

The actions of both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther were influential enough to alter the course of history. These great men were both heavily influenced by their societies as they progressed through all eight of Erikson’s stages of psychological development. Erikson’s books on Gandhi and Luther are both examples of the complex relationship between psychological development and religious development. The essence of each man extends beyond a mere religious conviction or a psychosocial influence;

⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹ Ibid., 55.

their religious convictions are so entwined with their psychological development that an examination of their lives is necessarily an examination of their faith.

Erikson published a psychological profile for Martin Luther in 1958 in his book *Young Man Luther*. Erikson is able to show that Martin Luther's understanding of God develops as he himself develops. As an adolescent, Martin¹⁰ equates God with his own father. This anthropocentric view of God is not uncommon in the adolescent development of religious views during a stage of concrete thinking. As Martin becomes Luther, his views of God transcend the anthropocentric and he is able to reimagine who God is and how God interacts with humankind. Luther's psychological and religious understanding of God changed as he changed. In addition to interactions with his society, Martin's personal interactions with the Divine prompted change. Prayer was a vehicle for this change; "the result of God's working in the inner life is the rebirth of man during the process of prayer."¹¹ Faith develops as the individual matures, but humans are also changed through divine transformation. In *Young Man Luther*, Erikson views such transformations as the direct result of prayer. The ability for humankind to be changed through prayer and to interaction with God is a significant contribution Luther made to the development of the Church. The Reformation made God accessible to both clergy and lay members alike. Interacting with God is personal and transformational. Erikson proposes that it was Luther's existential crisis and his development as something Erikson termed a *homo religiosus* that allowed Martin to become Luther and to lead the church with him as he reformed his own religious beliefs.

¹⁰ He is not yet Luther, for he has not formed into the historic figure that lead the church into reformation. Like Erikson, I will use the name Martin to denote the person and Luther to denote the historic figure.

¹¹ Zock, 143.

Erikson identifies Martin Luther as a *homo religiosus*. Zock summarizes, “As a homo religiosus [Luther] is intensely occupied with existential questions, and therefore he is more sensitive both with respect to everyday conflicts and to the existential conflicts of his time (Chapter IV).”¹² Because of his existential conflict, Martin emerged in society as Luther. Luther is able to formulate a new ideology: “his theology of justification by faith which contained a redefinition of man’s relationship with God.”¹³ Because of his existential experiences as a *homo religiosus*, Luther is able to reform his faith and impact the future of Christianity. Luther is not changed by his own psychological and faith development alone; God is also working to transform him. Luther is a man redefined by God, much like the parables are the Kingdom of God redefined through Jesus.

In 1969, Erikson again sought to unfold the psychological profile of a highly influential religious leader in his book *Gandhi’s Truth*. Erikson begins his inquiry into the psychology of Gandhi with his childhood; “The fundamental presupposition here is that there is always a continuity in a man’s life, a ‘leitmotif.’ Hence a man’s childhood must be considered ‘as part of what he became.’”¹⁴ During his childhood, Gandhi was deeply influenced by his mother’s religiosity, his father’s ambivalence, and his friend Sheik Mehtab’s negative identity. Erikson identifies these three relationships as highly influential during Gandhi’s childhood and youth as he sought to form his identity and find his vocation in life. Neither Gandhi nor Luther was born a historic figure. Childhood is central to what we will become; reflecting on childhood tells us how we became who we are. Both Luther and Gandhi become exemplars of Erikson’s theory of development.

¹² Ibid., 122.

¹³ Ibid., 121.

¹⁴ Erikson qtd. Ibid., 152.

Gandhi was an extremely religious man, though he was influenced by two religious views. The first was that of his mother, who was a tolerant religious woman. Her religious faith was an integration between the Koran and Hindu scriptures, which proclaim that something “‘unseen and silent’ can never be adequately represented.”¹⁵ This gives Gandhi a more universal view of religion, which leads to his second influence: Jainism—“the manyness of outlooks.”¹⁶ Gandhi upholds that Truth can be found in many different religions. He learns from his guru, the Jainist philosopher Raychandbai, how to hold his own tradition and other traditions in harmony without denying truth. Gandhi found different meaning in religion at different stages in his own life. Erikson uses Gandhi’s quotation that “he who would be friends with God must remain alone or make the whole world his friend”¹⁷ as an example of Gandhi’s generativity. Gandhi places the value of generativity before his own self and spends his life fighting for a better future. This is the ideal final stage in development.

Both Gandhi and Luther complete all eight stages of Erikson’s life cycle of psychological development, which is a rare accomplishment. They end their lives with an intense faith and a desire for generativity. This stage of generativity is unreachable for a child; a child is yet unable to see far beyond herself to empathize with the other. Yet the faith of this final stage is a return to the hope experienced by a child. Hope, for Erikson, is a defining feature of religion. Although hope can exist outside of religion, it is always linked to the religious aspect of the *non*-religions, no matter how small. The emergence of Erikson’s understanding of religion as a reaffirmation of hope and faith comes with the impact of his theory of human strength. Hope is not the same as trust: “it refers not

¹⁵ Ibid., 167.

¹⁶ Erik Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 176.

¹⁷ Ibid., 139.

primarily to psychosocial but to existential development.”¹⁸ Hope is more basic than trust. James Fowler shares Erikson’s view of the importance of childhood hope for the faith of an individual:

Hope is both the earliest and most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. Others have called this deepest quality *confidence*, and I have referred to *trust* as the earliest positive psychosocial attitude, but if life is to be sustained hope must remain, even where confidence is wounded, trust impaired.¹⁹

Erikson’s concept of hope holds a central role in his understanding of religion and its interplay with psychology. Religion breeds hope. Hope leads to faith.

II. Fowler’s Stages of Development

Faith develops. It is not something achieved at the moment of conversion and maintained until death; faith forms, grows, develops, influences, and is influenced throughout life. It develops as we develop, and God’s divine transformation is ever out of our control. Both Erikson and Fowler look at the development of faith within the individual. At each stage in our development we hear a different Gospel because we *need* a different Gospel. In examining *faith*, Fowler is examining what he calls a “human universal.”²⁰ In his introduction to *Stages of Faith*, Fowler writes, “I believe faith is a human universal. We are endowed at birth with nascent capacities for faith.”²¹ We are born with the beginnings of faith in our childish hope. The hope of a child develops into faith through the influences of environment; “Faith is interactive and social.”²² Although we are all born with the nascent capacities for faith, it is our community that influences the development of our beliefs. As we change, so do our experiences with religious

¹⁸ Zock, 95

¹⁹ Erikson qtd. *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁰ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), xiii.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

language. By examining Fowler's Stages of Faith, we may better understand the capacity of the individual for parabolic interpretation at each stage.

Pre Stage: Before outlining his stages of faith, Fowler explains the pre-stage of *Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith*, during which a child develops "trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites)."²³ At this age (birth until age two) a child is unable to differentiate faith, but the foundation of faith is developed. When a child experiences the comforts of love, trust, and hope, he or she is able to deal with the sensed threats of abandonment and fear. Although this is not one of Fowler's observable stages of faith, it is an essential pre-stage that influences the faith of the child as he or she grows into adulthood. The role of the church during the pre-stage of development is to show the child the unconditional love of family.

First Stage: Fowler calls the first stage *Intuitive-Projective Faith*. During this stage (ages 2-7), the child's understanding of how the world works is "dominated by relatively inexperienced perceptions and by the feelings these perceptions arouse."²⁴ Children are unable to see beyond themselves and interact with faith due to a concrete understanding of symbolism. The child can be "powerfully and permanently influenced" by examples, moods, actions, and parables.²⁵ The child is hugely vulnerable to the influences of the community during these first two stages of faith development. During Fowler's first stage, the way in which children construct meaning is unpredictable. It is crucial that "parents and teachers . . . create an atmosphere in which the child can feely express, verbally and nonverbally, the images she or he is forming."²⁶ This means there

²³ Ibid., 121.

²⁴ Ibid., 123.

²⁵ Ibid., 133.

²⁶ Ibid., 132-133.

is a “tremendous responsibility for the quality of images and stories we provide as gifts and guides for our children’s imaginations.”²⁷ Teaching the parables should guide the imagination, not confine it to ideas already imagined. We cannot form ideas *for* our children. You can tell someone to love their neighbor, but such ethical ideals require contextual practice and advanced cognitive abilities. Rather, the early development of the child should center around free expression and engagement of the imagination.

Second Stage: Fowler’s second stage, *Mystic/ Literal Interpretation*, takes place during the faith development of school-aged children. During the second stage, the child begins to adopt the beliefs, stories, and observances of the faith community. At this stage the important figurative and metaphoric devices of religious literature are one-dimensional and literal. At this age, children often have an anthropomorphic image of God as an old man with a white beard who lives above the earth.²⁸ The literal interpretation of scripture causes religious interpretation to be contradictory and therefore extremely difficult to understand. This stage is not limited to children; many adults do not develop their faith beyond this stage. During this stage an individual composes a “world based on reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity.”²⁹ The parabolic narratives of the Gospels were written to upset this worldview. Although this is a stage of narrative experiences, the meaning of the narrative is both carried by and “trapped” in the language.³⁰ While this is a natural stage in development for a child, it is through a direct encounter with the parabolic material that an adult in this limited stage of faith may be startled into a realization of necessary mobility in belief.

²⁷ Ibid., 132.

²⁸ Ibid., 139.

²⁹ Ibid., 149.

³⁰ Ibid.

Third Stage: The third stage of Fowler's faith development is the *Synthetic, Conventional Stage*, which naturally occurs as the child enters puberty. During this stage, the person needs to see his or her beliefs reflected in others. The mind is now able to develop possible realities and futures, thus "there can emerge the complex ability to compose hypothetical images of myself as others see me."³¹ The individual is desperately trying to form and understand the self. This need to see and be seen by others as belonging extends to their perception of God. Individuals develop a "religious hunger . . . for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith."³² Yet unable to demythologize religion, attempts to reason are still seen as potential threats to the faith of the individual and his or her community.

During the third stage of faith development, the individual is also unable to demythologize the parables. The symbol takes on the elements and importance of the symbolized. Individuals have a tacit system of meaning, which does not allow room for intrusive questions.³³ People in the third stage, both adolescents and adults, resist transition to the fourth stage of faith. Instead, "They reaffirm their reliance on external authority and their commitment to the particular values and images of which they are aware."³⁴ An individual in the third stage of faith is strongly committed to his or her beliefs. They seek a place of belonging within the community. Many adults are still in this stage. The shocking reversals of the parables of Jesus are meant to directly address such examples of faith.

³¹ Ibid., 153.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 155.

³⁴ Ibid., 162.

Fourth Stage: Fowler's fourth stage is *Individuative-Reflective Faith*. This is an autonomous formation of faith that forces the individual to break away from external sources of authority. Ideally, this stage is reached by the early to mid-twenties, but many adults never reach this stage of faith. This stage requires "the critical distancing from one's previous assumptive value system and the emergence of an executive ego."³⁵ During the fourth stage, an individual must break away from the particularity of religious language. This can cause the reader to dwell on the individual elements of the parabolic form. There is something scandalous in the particularity of religion. According to Fowler, "These particulars are scandalous precisely because something of transcendent and universal moment comes to expression in them or through them."³⁶ During the fourth stage the symbols of religious faith are acknowledged as symbols, which may diminish the power of the symbol. Although symbols may be lost, "meaning previously tacitly held becomes explicit,"³⁷ which forces the individual to gain responsibility for his or her own beliefs. It is, therefore, not the particular symbols, scriptures, and parables that are transcendent; they take on the transcendence through their inseparable divine qualities. The role of the pastor is to help *every* adult in the congregation advance into the fourth stage of faith and beyond. Prior to this stage, adults have ill-formed and naïve faith based on memories of childhood rather than the experiences of adulthood.

Fifth Stage: Fowler calls the fifth stage of faith *Conjunctive Faith*. The few adults who achieve this level of faith seek dialogue that allows Truth to be encountered from multiple perspectives, often through interfaith exploration and support. This does not imply a lack of commitment to one's own faith tradition; Conjunctive Faith's "radical

³⁵ Ibid., 179.

³⁶ Ibid., 207.

³⁷ Ibid., 181.

openness to the truth of the other stems precisely from its confidence in the reality mediated by its own tradition and in the awareness that that reality overflows its mediation.”³⁸ In this stage, faith is able to develop what Paul Ricoeur calls a “second naïvete” in which “symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings.”³⁹ Symbolism is no longer locked within the symbol, but merely encountered within the symbol. The fifth stage is an ideal faith for parabolic interpretation. Faith is “alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions,” and is thus able to “[strive] to unify opposites in mind and experience.”⁴⁰ Religious faith has not been cleared of paradox, but the person is now able to hold the paradox together. Parables and paradox are faithfully held in tension.

Sixth Stage: The sixth and final stage is *Universalizing Faith*, and Fowler has reserved this esteemed stage for a rare few. Fowler assigns to this stage the criteria “of inclusiveness of community, of radical commitment to justice and love and of selfless passion for a transformed world, a world made over not in *their* image, but in accordance with an intentionality both divine and transcendent.”⁴¹ Fowler’s sixth stage of faith is reserved for the rare, selfless individuals who have fully committed to the “radical ethic of the Kingdom of God,” or its equivalent, in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Representatives of stage six include Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. These are the individuals who have encountered the justice of the Kingdom of God through the parables and now actively seek the fulfillment of the Kingdom on earth. These selfless individuals may not be perfect, but their experiences allow Fowler to explain a faith that is nearly indescribable.

³⁸ Ibid., 186-187.

³⁹ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 198.

⁴¹ Ibid., 201.

Each of Fowler's stages builds on the previous, although every individual does not necessarily reach the sixth and final stage. During adulthood it is especially common for individuals to shift in and out of a synthetic-conventional faith. Although Fowler's model of faith development does not provide a comprehensive guide, he is able to provide us with a working model through which we may better understand the interactions between the psychological development of individuals and their understanding of faith. In his essay "Faith and the Developmental Cycle," LeRoy Aden concludes, "Faith is not just a passive reaction to a developmental crisis but is also an active and profound answer to that crisis. It is an answer that heals and transforms, because it is attentive to both God's salutary grace and humanity's deepest need."⁴² Aden finds Faith development and psychological development to be irreconcilably intertwined. Both develop together and each depends on the other for progression. Faith is an answer to each new crisis in life: new stage of life, new crisis, and new answer found in religion. It may also be described as an "epistemic rapture," where the previous worldview or stage no longer aids the person in adequately comprehending new information or problems. The role of the church is to grow the faith of the community through active engagement with parabolic literature and to openly acknowledge that faith is ever evolving.

III. Teaching the Parables

When a preacher steps into the pulpit, she stands before a diverse congregation. She must teach to and for a range of individuals with the understanding that each member of the congregation is a unique interpreter of scripture. The leaders of the church are

⁴² LeRoy Aden, "Faith and the Developmental Cycle." *Christian Perspectives on Human Development*. Ed. Leroy Aden, et. al. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 33.

responsible for the religious education of the community at every stage in faith. As we have seen in the theories of Erikson and Fowler, the congregation is comprised of children, adolescents, and adults at various stages of psychological and faith development. Each of these individual interpreters encounters the scripture in a distinct way. A parable “whispers a message to the inward ear” and “suggests a hidden picture to the mind’s eye.”⁴³ This quiet, yet startling encounter changes the individual on a personal level. The traditional lecture is only one means of teaching, yet it is used every Sunday morning in churches around the world. While educational classes seek to address this issue, they rarely provide the lasting tools to allow the congregants control of their own learning. We must alter our approach to parabolic education to allow the parables the space to whisper and suggest rather than dictate and correct.

The objective of the pastor is to prepare her congregation to encounter the parables in a transformational way. In order to achieve such transformation, I propose a parabolic education with four primary characteristics. First, assume an intelligent audience. Second, set the congregation up for success by explicitly teaching the skills needed for a critical engagement of the parables. Third, be true to the biblical text in the delivery of the sermon by allowing the paradox of the parables to stand. Fourth, allow the congregation to actively engage the parables. If, as Fowler suggests, all humans have faith, then the parables were not meant to instill faith, but to ignite it, pushing the listener from one stage of faith to the next. Parables are meant to challenge our complacent faith, not confirm it.

Our first step in altering our teaching of parables is to amend our understanding of the congregation. When we overanalyze the parables and simplify the Gospel for a

⁴³ Henry Van Dyke qtd. Voris, 4.

sermon we assume a certain incapability of our audience. Instead, pastors take it upon themselves to gather, digest, and regurgitate the parabolic truth on their behalf. In his book *Overhearing the Gospel*, Craddock asks, “But is it not the wiser policy to address the best and highest in listeners and hope for what can be? No acceptable alternative comes to mind.”⁴⁴ If we want our audience to be successful interpreters of scripture, we must address them as an intelligent audience capable of religious insight. Teach to the top of the class, not the presumed bottom, allowing the congregation the opportunity to actively engage. When we simplify the parables we force the congregation to take a passive rather than active role in interpretation.

A congregation is a community of learners. In her collection of essays, *Releasing the Imagination*, Maxine Greene addresses the role of the imagination in bringing the learner and the leader together in the educational process. “In my view,” Greene writes, “the classroom situation most provocative of thoughtfulness and critical consciousness is the one in which teachers and learners find themselves conducting a kind of collaborative search, each from her or his lived situation.”⁴⁵ When congregants are acknowledged as capable and allowed to take on an active role in religious education, their individual faith development informs their reading of Scripture. The pastor must change her expectation of the congregation and adapt her role as leader and educator. According to Greene, “teaching and learning are matters of breaking through barriers—of expectation, of boredom, of predefinition.”⁴⁶ Actively engaging the congregation and expecting imaginative engagement fights our predefinitions of Scripture and God. When we

⁴⁴ Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2002), 16.

⁴⁵ Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

amend our understanding of the congregation and expect them to be active co-creators of Scriptural meaning, we lay the foundation for transformational change within the community.

This leads us to the second change; we must prepare our intelligent audience of interpreters for success by explicitly teaching the skills needed for an exegetical and critical engagement of the parabolic texts. Like a good exegete, the congregation should approach the parables and therefore the sermon with more questions than answers. According to Craddock, “Those who hear me have been sitting before the pulpit for two thousand years. Even for the casual listeners there is a fairly high degree of predictability in the sermon.”⁴⁷ When we over teach a formulaic interpretation of scripture, preachers begin to resemble the boy who cried wolf. They teach the parables until the congregation becomes numb to the shock of the stories. I must agree with Beardslee, “The language of the New Testament has become so familiar it has lost its edge.”⁴⁸ Our congregations have “heard and heard until they cannot hear.”⁴⁹ We must find a way to allow the individuals of the congregation to reencounter the parables anew through imaginative engagement. When we teach the parables, we are up against custom, repletion, and assumptions; “We are up against illusion . . . Victims of illusion do not realize they are victims.”⁵⁰ The congregation must fight against victimization by actively pursuing Truth in the parables. In light of Iser’s *narrative gap* theory, we must acknowledge the importance of the congregation in the teaching and interpretation of the parables. Before change can take place, the congregation needs room to think critically and exegetically.

⁴⁷ Craddock, 16.

⁴⁸ W. A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 9.

⁴⁹ Craddock, 29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

When the individuals of a congregation take on the responsibility for interpreting the Scripture, they will require basic exegetical skills. There is not a set method for engaging Scripture, but Birch and Rasmussen propose a process through which a congregation can learn to exegetically engage the text in their book *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, which I will adapt. The first step of any good exegesis is a close reading of the text. The congregation should be familiar with the physical history of the text, its origins, and its challenges. While members of the congregation are likely unable to read the Greek text, Birch and Rasmussen suggest having several different translations of the Bible present for comparison.⁵¹ By consulting the text directly, congregants will come face-to-face with any serious problems in translation and may consult commentaries for guidance. The congregation should be asked to master the resources of their own faith tradition, rather than relying heavily on the exegesis of others.⁵²

Once the language of the text has been read and examined, the congregation proceeds to an intentional investigation into the meaning of the Scripture. Birch and Rasmussen break this down into four types of discovery: literary style and organization, form or genre, historical context, and theological. These quests for discovery identify and dispel any illusions and whittle away years of pretense. In their quest for discovery, congregations will question the text, for only in questioning will they be able to find answers. By questioning the historical context, they will address both the “concrete historical experience itself as witnessed to directly by the text” and “the historical context to which this witness was intended to speak.”⁵³ The Bible must be contemplated in

⁵¹ Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 167.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 166-167.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 169.

context before it can speak to contemporary communities. Finally, with a new understanding of the historical and literary context, questions of theological meaning will be addressed.

In a study of the parables, the leader of the study should here address the literary style and organization as discussed in chapters two and three. Likewise, our discussion of form and genre would become relevant to the discovery of meaning within the parables. For example, the genre of the parable requires an understanding of metaphor. The congregation must be appropriately prepared to encounter the ambiguity of the parabolic metaphor. While this may come easily for those individuals in the fourth, fifth, and sixth stages of faith, for many in the congregation, a departure from a concrete reading will require guidance, but such a reading is possible in a congregation that is held to such expectations. Metaphor theory and symbolic interpretation must be explicitly taught in religious education settings, such as Sunday school and bible study, to children, adolescents, and adults before a pastor can assume comprehension.

Once the quests for discovery have been concluded and the questions asked, the congregations should turn to exegetical tools. Birch and Rasmussen stress the importance of exegetical tools in the local church. The tools include excellent commentaries, Bible dictionaries, Bible atlases, concordances, handbooks of biblical theology, and introductions to biblical literature.⁵⁴ It is important that congregations should “carefully examine the passage under consideration and determine what the significant questions are which must be addressed” before using these tools to answer their questions.⁵⁵ Congregations should be familiar with the tools of exegesis and their proper use in order

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

to reach an accurate understanding. The pastor and educational leaders will guide the congregation through this process.

After examining the Scripture critically, the exegete should consider the text and its themes within the context of the entire canon. Birch and Rasmussen note that, “The church considers both the Old and New Testaments as Scripture; therefore a boundary for exegesis cannot be drawn between them.”⁵⁶ The canon must be considered as a whole. A Bible concordance is the primary tool for such an endeavor, with key words listed alphabetically and with reference to every appearance in the biblical text. Every student of the Bible should make regular use of a concordance in his or her study,⁵⁷ and it is the role of the religious leaders to implement and encourage such use. To examine Scripture in an isolated structure is to limit the ability of the Scripture to speak in new ways. Beyond the use of a concordance, congregations should be encouraged to become increasingly familiar with the Scriptures of their religious tradition.

The final stage of exegesis is to allow the text the opportunity to speak to the individuals in the congregation and to the congregation as a whole. We must “go beyond mere description to reflect on how the words of the biblical text become the Word of God which addresses God’s people anew in our time.”⁵⁸ With the fresh perspective of an exegetical examination, congregations must step back and ask what can be gained from the text. When we interact directly with the Scriptures, “the Bible’s application to ethical issues is not mechanistic; it is dialogic.”⁵⁹ One cannot merely read from the Scriptures and draw an answer. A dialogue must be had through exegesis. The careful analysis of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the Bible allows the witness of the Scriptures to be heard. The parables that have suffered from prejudgments are allowed to speak with a new voice of their own.

The third step in transforming the way in which we teach parables is to alter the way in which the text is presented to the congregation. For authentic engagement a preacher must be true to the text from the pulpit and in small group studies. There is a paradox to the particularity of the language that cannot be easily replicated through a modern appropriation. The vehicle of the metaphor should not be confused with the tenor; any story of a father with two sons cannot be substituted. The intelligent congregation deserves an honest interaction with the parables of Jesus. Craddock argues that the Gospel should be encountered as overhearing rather than hearing. Craddock asks, “Have you not gone to the scriptures demanding that they speak directly to you, yielding information or comfort or a lecture or a sermon for a fast-approaching occasion and, in reflection later, had to admit to assault and rape of the text?”⁶⁰ Religious education should avoid such an assault by making an honest presentation of the parable. A sermon should not make the parables less shocking; a sermon should prepare the congregation to be altered by the metaphor itself.

The fourth change I propose is possibly the most challenging. To effectively teach the parables we must allow the congregation to learn from the metaphor without our overbearing interpretations limiting their exposure to change. Once we have preached the parable, we must step aside and allow the congregation to feel the discomfort of the paradox. Parables and paradox should be faithfully held in tension. Like *Israel* with God,⁶¹ we must wrestle with our faith; “But so often the church has had

⁶⁰ Craddock, 96.

⁶¹ Genesis 32.23-34

little room for inquiring and struggling, making those so engaged feel guilty for so little faith.”⁶² Learning takes place in a messy, engaged, questioning environment. We must create an atmosphere of more questions than answers. A strong congregation is one that formulates and asks questions, not passively accepts the words from the pulpit. It takes a lifetime to encounter God, and even then God remains a mystery. We must stop approaching the parables and religious education as if it can be understood in a single homily; “A husband and wife take hours and days and years to know each other, and yet some would know God before the parking meter expires. Lifetime questions take a lifetime.”⁶³ The church should be a community of those who seek God together, not a stagnant gathering where sloth members regurgitate stale teachings.

There is an inherent inactivity in reading the parables that must be confronted. Only active engagement with the parable can produce lasting change. Yet, according to Craddock, “Some church people seem simply and passively to want to be told what to think, what to believe, and what to do.”⁶⁴ We cannot teach a passive congregation. The reader as meaning maker is an integral part of scriptural interpretation; “If to call the Bible scripture means that the text has not just a past but a future, and that future is toward the reader/listener, then communication is a necessary dimension of biblical study.”⁶⁵ Those who engage the parables and struggle with their faith exemplify the active engagement of an intelligent congregation. In *The Power of Parable*, John Dominic Crossan writes, “The power of Jesus’ parables challenged and enabled his

⁶² Craddock, 25.

⁶³ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 63.

followers to co-create with God a world of justice and love, peace and nonviolence.”⁶⁶
 Jesus created a community of partners in discovery and understanding—active learners.

The ability to learn may best be exemplified through an examination of the faith of a child. A child often understands a story until we explain it. This begs the question: should we limit our exegetical analysis of the parables, rather than attempt to overanalyze them on the child’s behalf? When we intercede, the child is no longer in direct contact with the parable. We should teach religion like we teach science to children; begin with simplicity, not lies.⁶⁷ The mind of a child is powerful; “Young children possess the ability to cut across the customary categories; to appreciate usually undiscerned links among realms, to respond effectively in a parallel manner to events which are usually categorized differently, and to capture these originally.”⁶⁸ We limit his or her natural ability to see the unseen and to know the unknown when we intercede for the child. The faith of a child has not been tarnished by decades of misconception, nor is he or she limited by the logic of disbelief. We cannot be afraid of the interpretive abilities of a child and we cannot be afraid of what God will do with them. Likewise, we must teach the congregation to approach the parables with the wide-eyed faith of a child, openly engaging the metaphor and questioning their own faith. When the paradox of the parables is allowed to speak for itself, mountains may move.

There is a childlike joy with which we must engage religious education. Erikson highlights the link between work and play, suggesting “we do not make play and work

⁶⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 252.

⁶⁷ Mike Graves, Interview (Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia), December 2011.

⁶⁸ Howard Gardner qtd. Patti Garrett Shade, *Curiosita Teaching: Integrating Creative Thinking Into Your 21st Century Classroom* (Saline MI: McNaughton and Gunn, 2011), 45.

mutually exclusive.”⁶⁹ Rather, there is a continual link between the seriousness with which we play as a child, and the degree of play that is incorporated in our work as an adult. Children and adults learn most effectively through interactive play; we learn best when we are actively engaged with the subject.⁷⁰ If we can encourage parabolic education through radical, unique engagements of the parables, then the congregation may encounter parabolic literature in a transformative fashion. We must redesign religious education and put the individual listener into direct contact with the parables. We must raise questions, but resist the urge to answer them *for* the congregation. The metaphor must continue to stand as metaphor. The parable is the vehicle of change and we need to get out of the way.

IV. Ears That Can Hear

My goal in challenging the traditional approach to teaching parabolic literature is aligned with Craddock’s goal in his book, *Overhearing the Gospel*:

To enable hearers to walk down the corridors of their own minds, seeing anew old images hanging there, images that have served more powerfully than all concepts and generalizations in shaping them into the feeling, thinking, acting beings they are; to pronounce the old vocabulary so that someone hears a new cadence in it—that is the task here.⁷¹

Homes are filled with personal libraries, not because we enjoy each book once and return it to the shelf for aesthetic appeal, but because each time we return to a specific book we have changed and we find before us a new story. There is longevity to learning, which requires us to return time and again to the old images hanging in the corridors of our

⁶⁹ Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Complete*, 51.

⁷⁰ In an attempt to exemplify the union of work and play, I engaged the Parable of the Prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32) through perspective-based artwork (Appendix B). The two images I produced represent the dramatically opposing view each son has of the father as he greets the prodigal son. I was able to link work and play in a kinesthetic approach to exegesis. Through artistic expression I acknowledged my own pretense and interpolation of the parables. I became aware of myself as both reader and artist. But in the midst of glue, paper, and scissors, I felt the whisper of the metaphor.

⁷¹ Craddock, 28.

mind. Although we first encounter the parables as a child, we must return to them with the willingness to hear a new cadence in the old vocabulary, inspiring the reorientation of our faith and a reengagement of the metaphor. The parabolic form is revealing of God and God takes a lifetime to encounter. Parables must be revisited time and again, not superficially acknowledged as a child in the beginning stages of faith and dismissed as juvenile in adulthood. Each time we return to the parables we encounter a new cadence in the old vocabulary for we have changed and must be shocked anew by the reality of the Kingdom of God.

I do not mean to suggest that congregations receive free reign of the Gospel to recreate Jesus and his parables in their own image to reflect their own worldview. Rather, I mean to propose that the congregation be actively engaged in the hearing and interpreting of scripture—especially the parables of Jesus. Kierkegaard writes, “One must approach from behind the person who is under an illusion.”⁷² The parables are intended to correct the illusions of the interpreter. These illusions are different at various stages of spiritual and psychological development. Kierkegaard takes a similarly parabolic approach to his writing:

The goal of all his [Kierkegaard’s] writing was to bring the reader to a true Christianity. This could not be done by stating what “true Christianity” really was and forcing the reader to move toward it, but rather by nudging the reader from behind, through “indirect” writing, toward a freely chosen Christian life.⁷³

One cannot preach the parables by saying what the Kingdom of God is like and forcing the congregation to nod along in agreement. The congregation must be given the

⁷² Søren Kierkegaard, “The Point of View for My Work as an Author,” *Religion and Literature*, Ed. Robert Detweiler and David Jasper (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 8.

⁷³ *Religion and Literature*. Ed. Robert Detweiler and David Jasper (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 8

opportunity to freely encounter the parables and choose to be transformed by the Truth therein.

Henry Van Dyke calls a parable, “a brief tale of real things and persons, carrying along with it (or beside it) a deeper meaning. It suggests a hidden picture to the mind’s eye. It whispers a message to the inward ear.”⁷⁴ The parable is a narrative about realistic things and persons, which carries a deeper Truth than its literal interpretation. A parable does not carry the same simplicity of Aesop’s fables or the fairy tales of the Brother’s Grimm; it is more than children’s literature. Like the presence of God, the parables whisper Truth by speaking directly to the reader.⁷⁵ Similarly, the stories of Kierkegaard lose poignancy when summarized or retold. Only when the reader is able to encounter the text directly, to be caught up in the original metaphor, forced to complete narrative gaps and explore metaphoric limits can the narrative have the intended effect on the reader. It is only through direct contact that the parable may whisper a message of Truth to the inward ear.

⁷⁴ Henry Van Dyke qtd. Voris, 4.

⁷⁵ “And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice” (1 Kings 19.11-12, RSV).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: PARABLES AND BEYOND

The dark night is God's attack on religion. If you genuinely desire union with the unspeakable love of God, then you must be prepared to have your "religious" world shattered. If you think devotional practices, theological insights, even charitable actions give you some sort of purchase on God, you are still playing games.¹

Biblical parables are cloaked in abstract metaphorical language that requires complex analysis and contemplation. Yet the church uses the parables as a basis for instructing its children. We feed them the answers by interpreting the metaphor for them, rather than with them. We plant a seed of interpretation that has a lasting effect on how that child, and eventually that adult, is able to interact with the literature. Why would an adult Christian waste her time reading parabolic children's stories? She has understood them since Bible School. But, if parables are metaphors, and metaphors are abstract thought, then concrete thinking children are unable to interpret parables to their fullest potential. We read the parables with the pretext of Truth, but we often encounter our memory of the text rather than the text itself.

Often we fail to acknowledge the complexity of the parables. We approach them as simplified, juvenile stories to teach simple truths. In reality, the parables are highly complex and complicated metaphoric narratives that, when read with intent, force upon the reader a *shift* in his or her worldview. You cannot truly engage the parables and walk

¹ Rowan Williams, "The Dark Night," *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Boston: Cowley, 1995), 82.

away unscathed. The form of the parable itself causes us to ask questions, forcing us to realize that perhaps we do not understand with complete comprehension those things we previously assumed to have understood. The act of questioning, active reading through cognitive engagement, forces us from our comfortable view of the world into a reoriented view.

Parables must be more than an aesthetic object.² The aesthetic is a mode of awareness in which you find yourself participating in something much larger than yourself, such as Life, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. For David Pacini, this aesthetic moment is one in which there is radical transformation, which he calls *μετάνοια*. No interpretation of Luke 15 is the Truth, but all of them contain truth. The parable cannot be captured in words or even in paintings. “Looking at the aesthetic cannot get you there,” said Pacini, “but if you perceive that the truth may be brought through you, you can be brought to a moment of *μετάνοια*.”³ The moment of new mindedness cannot be captured and examined; you simply have what was before and what came after. This transformational *μετάνοια* is what I hope to achieve when a congregation takes a more active role in interpreting the parables, rather than passively receiving a simplified interpretation from the pulpit. If we are cognitively present and an active part of the parabolic interpretation, then we are open for what Pacini has termed a moment of *μετάνοια* in which we will acknowledge, and occasionally accept, a reorientation in our understanding of the Kingdom of God. We cannot stop and behold the moment; we simply have the world we understood before and the cracks we are now able to see in our false construction of the Kingdom. Understanding is part of the Truth; “Truth, Beauty,

² David Pacini, “Luke 15 and the Prodigal in Art” (Lecture. Candler School of Theology. Atlanta, GA), November 3, 2011.

³ Ibid.

and Goodness include both the true and the untrue, the right and the wrong, the beautiful and the hideous; only in the tension can we perceive and receive the new perspective.”⁴

Through the paradox of the parables, the intelligent congregation is able to experience the transformational power of the parabolic metaphor.

We cannot be preached into *μετάνοια*, even by the best sermon. Parables are themselves moments of confusion, which breed clarity through paradox.⁵ The congregation must be in direct contact with the paradox to experience the clarity of the parable and participate in a moment of *μετάνοια*. The parables contain transformational power; we can be transformed by the parables in spite of our way of seeing the world. According to Pacini, “You cannot think your way into new mindedness (*μετάνοια*); it happens to you. We can be reconstituted in spite of our way of seeing.”⁶ We do not bring *μετάνοια* upon ourselves, nor can a pastor preach *μετάνοια* upon her congregation. Only the paradox of the parables can bring a new understanding of the Kingdom of God. The parables force the listener into a new vision, a new perspective, and a new way of seeing life and the Kingdom of God. The church asks a congregation to encounter extremely powerful literature that has been preserved for two thousand years, yet we give them explicit instructions not to touch it. God is working to shock, reorient, and transform persons. Some develop through faith, while others encounter divine transformation. If the parables are preserved behind pastoral interpretations and church tradition, the congregation is unable to be lured into a new vision. The language of the parable is rendered mute.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Steven Kraftchick, “Parables of Jesus,” Lecture, (Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, GA), August 30, 2011.

⁶ Pacini, “Luke 15”

We must be willing to risk the parable, for if we do not, the power of the parabolic language may be smothered. We cannot sit and passively accept the assumed exegesis and literary engagement performed by others while we are force-fed yet another homily on the same old parable. When an exegesis is performed for a congregation, they benefit from the knowledge of the preacher, but a single perspective also limits them. Congregations must take an active part in the interpretive process. Congregations must learn to do their own basic exegesis.⁷ As outlined by Birch and Rasmussen in *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, congregations can take part in exegesis when they “engage in disciplined reflection on [their] own scriptural resources,”⁸ such as multiple translations of the English text, concordances, and commentaries. When engaged through an exegetical examination, Scriptures are allowed to speak with their own voice.⁹

The parables present a challenge, because they take what is known and make it unknown. In *The Silence of Jesus*, James Breech writes, "...learning how to apprehend what is strange and unfamiliar is the most difficult discipline of all."¹⁰ We naturally reject what is unfamiliar. We fear the unknown. The parables force us to reconcile the Kingdom we wish to know with the metaphoric realities we do not recognize. What we see as fair does not match what the parables present as God's justice. Like the presence of God, the parables whisper Truth by speaking directly to the reader.¹¹ It is only when the reader is able to encounter the text directly, to be caught up in the original metaphor,

⁷ Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 160.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 3.

¹¹ “And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice” (1 Kings 19.11-12, RSV).

to complete narrative gaps, and to explore metaphoric limits that the reader can experience *μετάνοια*. It is only through direct contact that the parable may whisper a message of Truth to the inward ear.

When we truly engage the parables, we are forced to question and likely change the way in which we interact with one another, having been lead to reimagine what it means to live in connection to God through *μετάνοια*. We must take a step back and give the congregation the opportunity to respond “no” to a parable, for without the opportunity to say “no,” their “yes” remains shallow.¹² If, however, we impose our pretense on the parables of Jesus rather than allow them to teach us anew with each encounter, we effectively render them dead metaphors. The dark night Rowan Williams writes about may well be the result of the parables.¹³ In many ways, when Jesus spoke in parables it was his attack on the “conventional” religion of the day. It was an attack on what people thought they believed. The parables shatter the religious world you think you know and replace it with the awful and wondrous reality of the Kingdom of God. Devotional practices, theological insights, and charitable actions fall short of God’s justice. When you stand face to face with the paradox that is the Kingdom, you experience the dark night.

The dark night is not something of the past. Parabolic literature speaks as powerfully today as it did two thousand years ago, if only we allow it to. Robert Funk writes on the necessity of parabolic literature in modern theology:

It appears that history has brought theological language full circle: having begun with the poetry of parable, metaphor, simile, and aphorism, it seems that theology is being thrust back upon the language of its infancy. The

¹² Mike Graves, Interview, Candler School of Theology (Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia), December 2011.

¹³ Williams, 82.

reason may be that just as faith could not be presupposed then, it cannot be presupposed now. In such a context the redeeming word must lay its own foundation: by its power as word it must be able to bring that world into being in which faith is possible, indeed necessary. Only then is it possible for theology to extrapolate conceptually from faith's experience of the world as redeemed. If, in the intervening centuries, theology has grown less and less solicitous of its ownmost origin, it is now being forced to renew itself at its source -- or perish.¹⁴

We must learn to seek God in the original texts with new eyes and an open heart. We seek God in the poetry and the parable; we seek God in the narrative gaps and the grotesque realities of life. We seek God in the places where we do not wish to find God, but God is there. By encountering the parable through congregational exegesis we are able to see the context of the metaphoric tenor. The vibrant history of the text comes alive through engaging questions. By offering a literary analysis of the parable, we are able to encounter with full force the shock of the metaphor. While Flannery O'Connor uses the grotesque to shock her audience, Jesus uses the paradox of the parables to bring about *μετάνοια*. When we take the time to teach the congregation to utilize the resources of their own faith, we are able to encounter in the parables through active exegesis and application. The words of Jesus speak powerfully to those who hear and it is up to the leaders of the church to prepare the ears of the congregation. For even in the parables where we do not wish to find God, God is there.

¹⁴ Robert Funk qtd, Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 24.

APPENDIX A
ERIK ERIKSON'S *STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT*¹

First Stage: (HOPE) Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust—The first stage is one of hope and withdrawal, during which the infant child builds basic trust versus basic mistrust. The child must learn that his or her world is a safe place and learn to rely on the family. The child must also learn to rely on itself. This coincides with Freud's oral stage, during which the child experiences its world orally (ex: foot in the mouth, breast feeding).

Second Stage: (WILL) Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt—The second stage is one of will and compulsion, during which the child begins to question autonomy versus shame and doubt. The child develops its ability to mobilize and interact with the world. The child questions this autonomy against the negative aspect of shame, which he or she may feel from being observed by other members of the social web. A fear of doing something wrong or uncommon is the negative counterpart to the newfound autonomy. For Freud, this was dubbed the anal stage.

Third Stage: (PURPOSE) Initiative vs. Guilt—The third stage is one of purpose and inhibition, in which the preschool-aged child questions initiative versus guilt. This is the stage of play. Hetty Zock writes, "Imagination, first expressed in play, will remain important in all later attempts to give meaning to life in terms of issues like ideology, art, philosophy and religion. The capacity to imagine is the basis of all human creativity."² This stage is crucial in the development of the child's ability to integrate both work and play into adult life. The child's playfulness is a vital element in all the stages to come.

¹ Summarized from Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997).

² Hetty Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern: Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to the Psychology of Religion*, 2nd ed (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 42.

Fourth Stage: (COMPETENCE) Industry vs. Inferiority—The fourth stage is one of competence and inertia, during which the school-aged child contemplates industry versus inferiority. This is the stage that, in every society, the children are educated for their transition into adult life. The negative feelings associated with this quest for competence is the fear of inferiority. Children are drawn to imitate the work roles of instructing adults, as well as heroes of legend, history, and fiction. Children strive to avoid the isolation of inferiority in the eyes of society.

Fifth Stage: (FIDELITY) Identity vs. Identity Confusion—The fifth stage is one of fidelity and repudiation, during which the adolescent questions identity versus identity confusion. Each individual seeks to form an identity. For Erikson, identity formation was both a conscious and an unconscious process. He leaves room for a person to construct his or her personality intentionally. In this stage of fidelity, the adolescent “maintains a strong relation both to infantile trust and to mature faith.”³ The adolescent seeks to define his or her individuality, while still remaining acceptable to the society.

Sixth Stage: (LOVE) Intimacy vs. Isolation—The sixth stage is one of love and exclusivity, during which a young adult seeks intimacy while avoiding isolation. During this stage the capacity for and commitment to enduring love is acquired. Although individuals may have experienced prior intimacy, “the intimacy now at stake is the capacity to commit oneself to concrete affiliations which may call for significant sacrifices and compromises.”⁴ During this stage young adults seek to merge their own identity with that of a lover. This stage is accompanied by a fear of remaining separate and alone. Young adults become willing to lose themselves to find one another.

³ Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

Seventh Stage: (CARE) Generativity vs. Stagnation—The seventh stage is one of care and reactivity, during which the adult questions generativity versus stagnation. Generativity encompasses procreation, productivity and creativity. Each person has the need to fulfill his or her desire to care and be cared for. Generativity is itself a concern for the well being of the next generation. To avoid stagnation, adults often seek a new generative ethos that “may call for a more *universal care* concerned with a qualitative improvement in the lives of all children.”⁵ While many adults seek to produce their own offspring, generativity may be obtained through a universal awareness of the next generation.

Eighth Stage: (WISDOM) Integrity vs. Despair, Disgust—The eighth stage is one of wisdom and disdain, in which the now elderly individual questions integrity versus despair. Age allows each person a new perspective on the world, on his or her own family, and on life itself. In this final stage of life, the individual turns again toward to the hope of childhood that has developed into a mature hope, which “confirms hopefulness as the most childlike of all human qualities.”⁶ This final stage is met with feelings of despair and a loss of autonomy. For Erikson, the progression through the stages of life leaves an individual with faith grown from the hope of infancy, thus leaving the life cycle completed.

⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁶ Ibid., 62.

APPENDIX B
NEW PERSPECTIVES

In order to engage the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15.11-32) further, I expressed my reading of the parable through artistic depiction. I used decoupage to create the image of the father out of cut-up magazines. I depicted his image from two opposing perspectives—through the eyes of both sons. Although the parable is written from the perspective of a third person omniscient narrator, we must enter into the parable at the level of each individual character in order to understand their opposing perspectives. This visual approach makes a new perspective on the parable more available to the listener and observer.

In the first image I portrayed the perspective of the prodigal son. Only the clasped hands of this son are visible. I depicted his hands as clasped to represent the humility of the son as he approaches his father. Although this is not meant to show his repentance, it is intended to show the son's submission to his father as he asks to be taken back as a servant. The father is shown standing with open arms, reminiscent of the stature of the crucified Jesus. The image of the father is the only thing the son sees, which I have constructed by adding a burst of color filling the rest of the canvas. The final element of the piece is the Greek text, which is to be read as if through the eyes of the prodigal son who has returned to his welcoming father.

The second image portrays the elder son's perspective on a story that all but excludes him. I have depicted the older son with a staff to represent his continual work and loyalty to the father; when the prodigal son returns, the older son is working in the fields (15.25). Although the text does not tell us that the older son witnessed the return of

his younger brother, I have taken artistic license in order to portray a perspective rather than a series of events. In this image the father figure is shown more distant and turned away from the observer—the older son. By reading the story through the eyes of the eldest son, new feelings of abandonment and unfairness are evoked in the reader and observer.

When Jesus spoke the parables, he was presenting them to unorganized followers who had yet to begin the Christian movement. They were like the lost son, in need of returning to the father. Two thousand years later, the Church is a community of believers who have already come into communion with God. No longer lost, they may now read the parable from the perspective of the loyal son. Like the loyal son, we too must be willing to share in the acceptance of our lost brothers and sisters into the kingdom of God. When we engage the parable from a new perspective we are forced to fight against our narcissistic desire to be the main character; we can take our place in the background as the loyal child of God.

Artistic engagement of the text forced me to examine the details of the text and to acknowledge my own reactions to the parable. I became more conscious of the narrative gaps that I filled in order to understand the text. I also became aware of my own narcissistic desires to be the child whom the father loved the most. The challenge of this desire is that the father of the parable is just in his love of both sons. It is not the father who forces the older son from the celebration, but the jealousy of the older son that drives him from the celebration of his younger brother's return. It is our own childish jealousy that limits the love of God. The father remains the same in both images; he is merely depicted from two opposing views. How we encounter God's love is often our choice.

Do we run towards God and embrace our fellow brothers and sisters, or do we separate ourselves from the celebration and wait?

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