



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
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Sermon: "Uncomfortable"  
Mark Ramsey

Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 8:9-10

Down through the history of the church,  
this little passage from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke –  
-sandwiched in the middle of a parable -  
--has been one of the most outrageous texts in the Gospels.

This text would rank high if we held a contest for the passage that causes  
the most DISCOMFORT in the whole New Testament.  
We seem to have caught Jesus...in a very UN-Christ-like attitude.

What happened is this:

Jesus has been going around healing and teaching  
and attracting a great deal of attention—  
--because when the word goes out that he's about to preach a sermon  
the text says that a "great crowd" gathered  
"from town after town."

When he opens his mouth to preach,  
the big crowd grows quiet with anticipation.

**...What do you think they expected to hear?**

Jesus does NOT begin his sermon with some great spiritual truth.  
He begins in an almost folksy fashion.

*"Once upon a time, there was this farmer...*

*...and he went out to sow seed in his fields."*

And then he was off and running with a sermon that was filled with parable,  
after parable,  
after parable.

Presumably, when the sermon was over and the crowd had gone home  
the disciples and the others around Jesus pulled him aside,  
and they said to him—

--*"Why do you do that?*

*Why do you talk to them in parables—seed and soils, baking bread,  
beating around the mustard bush?*

--*"If you have something to tell them,  
why didn't you just say it directly??"*

To which Jesus responded:

**"The reason I preach in parables is so they will hear me  
and NOT understand what I am talking about;  
so they will see me and not perceive what I'm getting at."**

Well...OK...thank you Jesus—we'll get back to you...

That is NOT what we expect Jesus to say.

WE expect Jesus to say something like:

*"The reason I preach in parables is to make it interesting.  
You know, a sermon can be deadly dull  
if it doesn't have some stories in it—  
--so I spice it up with a little parable oregano..."*

OR, *"The reason I preach in parables is to make it clear and concrete.*

*I'm talking about the Reign of God.*

*NOBODY understands what that is—*

*--so I bring it down to farms and breads  
and things they understand..."*

**NO.**

**"The reason I preach in parables is so they will hear me...  
...and NOT understand what I am talking about."**

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Well, if that bothers us—we can be comforted, I think,  
by the fact that it evidently bothered the writer of Matthew as well.

Mark's Gospel was written first of the four,  
and his account of this exchange between Jesus and the disciples  
is even more strident than Luke.

Mark has Jesus saying not only that he doesn't want folks  
to understand, but in not understanding...

***"...they may not turn again and be forgiven."***

Luke left that last sentence out, but it still stings.

But, when Matthew hit this story—he balked.

**Matthew couldn't stand the idea of a Jesus  
who would intentionally deceive his audience.**

So, you know what Matthew did?

He changed the story—just a little bit—but significantly.

In Matthew, Jesus does NOT say the reason I preach in parables  
is in order that they NOT understand me.

In Matthew, Jesus says—

***“the reason I preach in parables  
is because they don’t understand me.”***

Now, that’s much better, isn’t it?

In Matthew, the parables are NOT the CAUSE for the misunderstanding,  
they are a compassionate response to it.

**But NOT so in Mark...or in our text this morning:**

*“The reason I preach in parables is because  
I don’t want them to understand.”*

Look, if I get to choose this morning—I choose Matthew—

--because I don’t like the idea of a Jesus who deceives people,  
a Jesus who intentionally pumps fog into a life  
trying to follow the path of faith.

HOWEVER...before we jump into the lap of a kinder, gentler Matthew,  
We need to know that Luke’s Gospel is trying to teach us  
something TRUE about Jesus and the gospel.

**...Luke wants us to know that it is possible**

**to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ TOO EARLY—**

**--to move toward Jesus with too much haste,**

**--to reach out and grab the gospel too quickly.**

It was true in the first century church and it persists today:

*people can move toward Jesus QUICKLY*

*often do so for the WRONG reasons.*

They’re attracted to the glitter and NOT the substance.

When they reach out with haste to grab the gospel,  
they get the surface, but NOT the depth.

Luke does NOT want us splashing around in the shallow end of the pool,  
thinking we are driving down to the depths...

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**There was a wonderful preacher of a previous generation**

**by the name of George Buttrick.**

He was, for many years, pastor of New York’s Madison Avenue Church.

One week he had been off on a speaking engagement  
and was flying back to New York City.  
On the plane, he had a pad out,  
making some notes for next Sunday's sermon.  
The curiosity of the man seated next to him finally got the best of him,  
and he said to Buttrick:  
*"I hate to bother you—but what in the world are you working on?"*

"Oh, I'm a minister," Buttrick explained,  
and I'm working on my sermon for Sunday."

***"Oh, religion,"*** said the man,  
***"I don't like to get all caught up in the in's and out's  
and complexities of religion.  
I like to keep it simple.  
'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'  
The Golden Rule—that's my religion."***

"I see," said Buttrick, "and what do you do?"  
*"I'm an astronomer. I teach at the university."*

**"Oh yes,"** said Buttrick, **"Astronomy—I don't like to get all caught up  
in the in's and out's and complexities of astronomy.  
Twinkle, twinkle little star—that's my astronomy..."**

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Jesus seems to be saying:  
"The reason I preach in parables is to push to deeper places..."

In that light, one New Testament scholar came up with a terrific definition  
of a parable:  
*"A parable is a metaphor drawn from everyday life,  
the meaning of which is sufficiently in doubt  
to tease the mind into active thought."*

***"The meaning of which is sufficiently in doubt..."***  
You think you know, but you don't know.  
What good is it to say the Bible says this, and the Bible says that—  
--case closed!  
The Gospels are not a law library,  
nor a dictionary,  
nor a book of recipes.

What we THINK we know, but aren't quite sure if we know—  
--PUSHES us to deeper, more active contemplation.

That's a good thing--because, in America today,  
the main heresy is NOT atheism—it's superficiality.

**So Jesus teaches in parables....and we get pushed deeper...**

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When I was in high school, our whole senior high church youth group—  
--about 200 of us in all—  
--would go to church camp in August at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

The climax of the week-long camp was Saturday night communion,  
where the speaker for the camp would issue some sort of invitation.  
(Being a church much like this one, of course,  
we would NEVER call it at "altar call.")

The leader would often say something along the lines of:  
*"Behold, Jesus stands at the door of your heart and knocks.  
Oh, that you would open up and let him in tonight.  
Tomorrow may be too late.  
It'll be too late then—it's got to be TONIGHT!"*

My friends and I would go along—mostly so we could all get emotional  
under the guise of the Spirit--  
--and end up hugging all the pretty girls in the group.

But even without that somewhat tilted motive—  
--you can capitulate to a message like that—  
*--"open up and let Jesus in RIGHT NOW"--*  
--but you can't really embrace it...

...It takes time to believe the gospel,  
and God is very, very, very, very PATIENT.

**Have you noticed the extent to which, in the Gospels—  
--NOBODY understands Jesus?**

The crowds don't.  
The religious leaders don't.  
The disciples sure don't.  
Not even Jesus' family understands him.

NOBODY understands Jesus—until you get all the way to the end,  
and then one Roman soldier looks up at the cross and says:  
*"Oh, that's the Son of God.  
That's the way God is in the world."*

The Easter accounts mostly have messengers showing Jesus' followers where Jesus ISN'T,

and then saying

***“Go tell everyone that Jesus will see them in Galilee.”***

**Go tell the disciples that he’ll see them in Galilee?**

Those are the REAL disciples and the REAL Galilee—

--but it’s also referring to...US.

Jesus will see you in Galilee—but where’s Galilee?

Luke, chapter 4: ***“Jesus came into Galilee preaching***

***the Kingdom of God is at hand.”***

In other words—go back and read it again.

You didn’t understand it the first time.

Go back and read it again.

It takes time.

And God is very, very PATIENT...

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I remember, painfully, an older man in a congregation I once served.

Both he and his wife had been really devoted to the church.

Soon after I arrived, I got a letter from the man, introducing himself to me.

A year before, on the Saturday before Easter, his wife got unexpectedly ill in the morning,  
got worse in the afternoon,  
and died that evening.

He said: “I went to church the next day.

I sat in the pew of my church on Easter Day.

It was full of Easter lilies, and a brass choir,

and a springtime congregation singing *Alleluia! Alleluia!*

And the Easter hymn stuck in my throat.

I couldn’t believe in the resurrection--not that day,

not after what had just happened to me.

I couldn’t believe in the resurrection--I closed the hymn book.

“But, as I listened to that congregation singing all around me,

I realized that I don’t have to believe in the resurrection today—

--they are believing in the resurrection FOR me,

until I can believe it again for myself.

***It takes time...and God is patient.”***

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But the MAIN reason Luke wants us to know

that it’s possible to move toward the gospel too early—

**--is because Luke knows that we often  
try to squeeze the Christian faith into the PRESENT TENSE.**

The crowd who came to hear Jesus beside the Sea of Galilee—  
--they wanted something they could take home with them;  
--they wanted peace of mind NOW;

Just like WE want prayers that are effective this afternoon;  
we want justice to roll down like the waters TODAY;  
we want a Christian faith that works, PRONTO!

But the church to which Luke's Gospel was written was being persecuted,  
and Luke wanted them to know that being a Christian  
means clinging to the promises of God,  
even when everything in the NOW seems to deny it.

It means holding on to the promises of God's FUTURE  
when the PRESENT tense seems empty of meaning.  
It's like that farmer.  
You sow seed and it falls on hard ground,  
shallow ground,  
thorny ground.  
You want to quit.

But you keep on spreading the seed because you believe  
that the harvest of God in the future will be a bumper crop.

As Robert Capon has said:

***"The parables are the language of God's future breaking into the present."***

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Every church does Confirmation of its young people a little differently.  
A friend of mine was telling me what happened in her church.

During the weeks of confirmation class, they learn all sorts of things,  
then, on Pentecost Sunday--they line the kids up in front of the church  
and let them show off some of what they learned.

Sometimes they memorize a creed,  
sometimes it's some church history.  
This class had memorized a passage of scripture—part of Romans 8.  
And the teacher let them display what they had learned.

"George" she said, starting with the first kid in line,  
**"what shall separate you from the love of God?"**  
And George said:

*"I am persuaded that neither death nor life  
nor angels nor rulers  
nor things present nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation  
can separate me from the love God in Jesus Christ."*

George beamed.  
His parents beamed.  
The congregation beamed.

The teacher moved to the next: **"Mary, what can separate you from the love of God?"**  
And she recited Romans 8...

**But as the teacher moved down the line, the congregation grew anxious...**

...because at the END of the line was Rachel—  
--a child with a warm smile and easy grace, who had Down's syndrome.  
There was NO WAY she could memorize Romans 8.  
But, the question moved closer until:  
***"Rachel, what can separate you from the love of God?"***

Rachel flashed that familiar smile, and then she said but ONE word: **"Nothing."**

Rachel was, that day, a PARABLE of the Reign of God.  
That even though you CANNOT see it all in the present tense,  
you TRUST the promises that nothing—NOTHING--  
--will separate us from the love of God.  
And the Reign of God will yield a bumper crop.

**And THAT is why Jesus teaches in parables...**

...and I wonder today where God is pushing YOU, pushing US DEEPER?  
Away from the known, the sure, the well-trod path—  
--where is the deeper call...TODAY?

What rush to judgment needs to be arrested in our hearts today?  
What well-worn old categories by which we operate with ease  
in looking out at the world needs to be retired?

In this hard, confusing world, where the journey of faith can seem so IMPOSING  
and IMPOSSIBLE many days—  
**--we need to gratefully receive the Word:  
that reaching a DEPTH with God takes time.  
And, God is very, very patient...**

Amen.