

HOLY

Conversations

Jesus' Parables



NORTH UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
INCLUSIVE. INSPIRED. INVOLVED.

Holy Conversations

Participant's Guide

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Session One

Parables of Foolish Desire

Key Question: What are you looking for?

Read Matthew 13:44-46

⁴⁴'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Read the parables using these substitutes for the "Kingdom of heaven":

- God's Reign
- Realm of God
- God's Imperial Rule
- God's Royal Bureaucracy

How do these alternative translations make the parables sound different from what we are used to hearing?

How does our culture manufacture desires and shape how we express our desires?

How do we seek to fulfill our desires in unhealthy or self-defeating ways?

Think of a time when you had a strong desire for something.

- How did that desire affect what you did, how you felt, and how you saw the future?
- Did you get it? If so, did it live up to your expectations? If not, how did that loss affect you?

Right now:

- What is your ultimate desire?
- Based on your attitude and your habits, what are you seeking for your life?
- How would you rank your desires and aspirations and wishes?

In the first parable, the “kingdom of heaven” is not defined, yet the character who finds the treasure has a strong desire for it.

- Have you ever had a strong but undefined desire for something “more” in your life?
- How might the parable help us deal with that kind of desire?

In the second parable, the “kingdom of heaven” is compared with a merchant seeking material wealth. How do our desires that are not “religious” or “spiritual” express a deeper desire for the “divine?”

Meditation Exercise:

Lectio Divina, or “divine reading,” developed in the

Medieval monasteries as a part of the Daily Office. It begins with reading aloud (lectio) that leads to pondering its meaning (meditatio) which, in turn, gives way to prayers (oratio) so that the individual spends the rest of the day in the presence of God (contemplatio).

Step 1: Select one parable—either v. 44 or v. 45-46

Step 2: Read the passage aloud. Say the word or phrase that catches your attention. Do not analyze it or try to interpret it. Silently repeat and envision it for five minutes.

Step 3: Read the passage aloud a second time. Ask yourself, “What does this passage reveal about God?” Ponder the question for five minutes.

Step 4: Read the passage aloud a third time. Ask yourself, “Based on the passage, what does God want me to do or to be?” Ponder the question for five minutes.

Step 5: With an awareness of God’s presence through the scripture passage, begin to pray.

Session Two
The Parable of the Losers' Lunch
Key Question: How do you see the future?

Read Luke 14:16-24

¹⁶Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." ¹⁸But they all began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." ¹⁹Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." ²⁰Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." ²¹So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." ²²And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." ²³Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Read the literary context of the parable in Luke 14:7-15. How is Jesus turning their understanding of honor and prestige upside down?

What does this parable reveal about God's vision for

the future?

- What is comforting about that vision?
- What is disturbing or challenging about that vision?

Is there a tension in the parable between inclusion (v. 23) and exclusion (v. 24)? How inclusive will God's future be?

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future? Why?

How does the parable compare with the various visions for society held by:

- politicians, political parties and pundits today?
- Corporations today?
- Different ethnic or demographic groups?

When has our church reflected the vision of this parable?

What barriers does our church face in living into the vision of the parable?

Meditation Exercise:

Read Luke 14:21-23. Close your eyes and imagine being at the banquet. Who are you sitting beside? What do you see? Smell? Hear? What is the conversation like?

Next, imagine the banquet table expanding around the world and today's poor and impaired are seated at the table. Who do you see at the table? Where is Jesus and what is he doing at the table?

Session Three

The Parable of the Embarrassing Dad

Key Question: What is God like?

Read Luke 15:11-32

¹¹Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” ²²But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out

a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate. ²⁵Now his elder son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.” ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” ³¹Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

Which character do you sympathize with the most?

Do you think the father’s actions were foolish? Shameful?

How does the father’s actions challenge or redefine an understanding of the nature of God?

What does the father want the older brother to do?
Are there any requirements of the younger brother?

Many people prefer to refer to God as “Father.” What titles or words do you usually use to refer to God?

How does the father in the parable compare with your view of God?

How do American Christians talk about God?

In what ways have those portrayals of God been harmful?

How does the parable challenge those notions about God?

Meditation Exercise:

Place yourself in the parable. Pick a character and substitute your name for that character when you read it. Try this with each of the main characters. Then try it by imagining that you are another, unmentioned character (such as the mother, the servant, or one of the dinner guests).

Session Four
Parables about Invasive Plants and Viruses
Key Question:
How does God work in the world?

Read Luke 13:18-21

¹⁸He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'

²⁰And again he said, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

How often do we think of or experience God in ordinary and insignificant things?

If the imagery of mustard seed is a parody of the Old Testament imagery of kingdoms being like the great cedars of Lebanon, what does this tell us about God's will and ways of working in history? Read these examples of the mighty cedars of Lebanon: Ezekiel 31:1-14; 17:1-16; Daniel 4:10-12.

If mustard was supposed to grow on the edges of gardens, where might we see and experience God's activity and presence in our society today?

What does the image of birds nesting in the branches tell us about the Kingdom of God?

Many scholars point out that yeast or leaven was a metaphor commonly used for impurity or moral corruption (for example, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy” in Luke 12:1). Why do you think Jesus used an image that implies impurity for God’s reign? What might that tell about how God works in the world?

If yeast is “hidden” in dough, how might God’s work in our lives be “hidden?”

What does the image of kneading dough suggest about the way God works in our lives?

Mustard seed and yeast take time to grow and spread. What might this tell us about the way God works?

Meditation Exercise

Each day this week look for signs of God’s activity in your everyday life. Be attentive to the subtle ways and the irreverent ways God may be speaking to you through your encounters with others and the circumstances you find yourself in. Each night, pause and reflect on the day. Ask God to help you see the day from God’s perspective. Give God thanks for the day.

Session Five
The Parable of Debt Relief
Key Question: What should we do?

Read Matthew 18:23-34

²³For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him 10,000 talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him 100 denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.

What did the first servant request? Did the king respond directly to his request (either granting or denying it), or did he do something else?

What did the other servant request? How did the first servant's response differ from the way the king had responded to him?

How does the king respond to the information? Is his response inconsistent with his earlier response (v. 27)?

How is the king attempting to change the dynamics and relationships in his bureaucracy when he cancels the first servant's debt?

In the end, did the king and his bureaucracy change?

Is his response inconsistent with his earlier response (v. 27)?

What values do we learn from the parable?

What changes do you need to make to live out those values?

Meditation Exercise

What is one change God is calling you to make so that you can be more fully obedient to God's will? Is it a habit, a cherished belief, or your attitude? Each day this week, ask for God to help you make that change.

Session Six
The Parable of the Whistle Blower
Key Question: What do we do when we
have no good options?

Read Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also

came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” ²⁶But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So he took the talent from him, and gave it to the one with the 10 talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Traditionally, it has been assumed that the master represents God, but there is nothing in the parable to suggest this. If the third servant (one talent) is the protagonist, then how does that shape the way we understand the parable?

- How does it change our understanding of his actions (v. 18)?
- How does it change our understanding of his description of the master (v. 24)?

Would you have done what the third servant did?

Have you ever been in a situation at work or in an organization that was doing things you disagreed with

but you did not have the power to change it?

How do you decide when to keep working for change (at work, in an organization, in a relationship, etc.) and when to leave?

What makes for moral courage and integrity?

Meditation Exercise:

This week, pray for persons who are caught in tough situations in which they will suffer for doing the right thing. Pray that God will give them inner strength and support from others to do the right thing. If you know them, give them a word of encouragement.

