



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Hearing Parables
in the Patch
(*Parables*, pp. 80-87)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Hands of the Father
(*Parables*, pp. 71-75)

📖 A Gesture of
Reconciliation
(*Parables*, pp. 66-70)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Hearing Parables in the Cotton Patch

Clarence Jordan (1912-1969) was an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' parables. Not only his academic study, but also his small-town background and experiences in establishing the interracial Koinonia Farm in the 1940s shaped his ability to hear the parables in "the Cotton Patch."

Prayer

Loving Father, Creator and Sustainer of all, as a hen gathers her young, you gather us to yourself.

For we live in response to your story—a story that reminds us that you made us, and we chose to fall away from you into sin. Yet you did not leave us in our sin. In your mercy and grace, you gave to us Jesus the Christ in whom we have redemption. To you, Holy and Triune God, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority now and forever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Reflection

Clarence Jordan has been called a twentieth-century prophet for his views on race, economics, and war. The community he founded, Koinonia Farm, continues to be a beacon of racial reconciliation and rural economic development near Americus, GA. And the international Christian housing project, Habitat for Humanity, blossomed from a plan for "partnership housing" that he and Millard Fuller developed at Koinonia Farm in 1965.

In his popular Cotton Patch translations of New Testament books, Jordan relocated the story of Jesus and the early Church to the contemporary rural South. Thus, Romans became *The Letter to Christians in Washington* and Philippians was *The Letter to the Alabaster African Church*. Despite "Jordan's homespun style in the Cotton Patch translations," writes Joel Snider, "his translations were based on an extensive knowledge of the original language of the New Testament, *koine* Greek."

Jesus' parables, or "the Comparisons" in the Cotton Patch version, held a special interest for Jordan. He believed their "characters and action disguise the truth, which must then be deduced by the hearer," Snider notes. "The story changes the scene and the setting in order to throw the audience a bit off guard until the point can be made. Jesus often used parables when the situation was delicate or dangerous—when he could not speak directly to the issue at hand. If a frontal assault against emotional or spiritual defenses was likely to fail, Jesus used a parable to bait people into listening. In other words, parables were the perfect rhetorical tool for challenging the resistance of the status quo."

Jordan called those parables that slip past our defenses and deliver an unpopular prophetic message, "Trojan horse parables." Nathan's story against King David is an example. "As Nathan tells his story about the man who stole his neighbor's sheep (2 Samuel 12:1-4), King David never sees the trap laid for him in the story until he is caught in it: 'Old King David, he's looking and looking,' taught



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Jordan, 'but don't [sic] hear anything. He's listening and listening, but doesn't see anything.'"

Not only did Jesus tell *narrative parables* (simple comparisons and stories), his life was filled with *dramatic parables*, Jordan said. These events "where the message was intentionally deeper than the ostensible action...[included] the signs in John's Gospel, the temptation of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the Lord's Supper."

Is this distinction also our key to understanding Jordan's prophetic life? The narrative parables ("the Comparisons") he loved to translate and teach so shaped his imagination that Koinonia Farm became a dramatic parable—a Trojan parable in his beloved rural South. "If you only followed the parables," the writer Kafka once said, "you yourselves might become parables."

Study Questions

1. What does Jordan mean by a "Trojan parable"? In what way is the Parable of the Prodigal Son such a parable? Have other parables of Jesus been Trojan parables for you?
2. Clarence Jordan distinguishes between *narrative* and *dramatic* parables. What are some examples of dramatic parables for Jordan, and why does he call them "parables"?
3. Discuss the parallels Jordan draws between the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-38). What insights does he gain from this approach to the parable?
4. How do Rembrandt and Guercino—Protestant and Catholic artists, respectively, in the seventeenth century—depict the father's hands in order to emphasize his gracious welcome of the returning prodigal son?

Departing Hymn: "Tell Me the Old, Old Story" (verses 1, 2, 4a, and 3b)

Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,
for I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.

*Tell me the old, old story; tell me the old, old story.
Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*

Tell me the old, old story that I may take it in—
that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon;
the early dew of morning has passed away at noon.

Refrain

Tell me the same old story when you have cause to fear
that this world's empty glory is costing me too dear.
Tell me the story always, if you would ready be,
in any time of trouble, a comforter to me.

Refrain

A. Katherine Hankey (1866)
Tune: EVANGEL

Hearing Parables in the Cotton Patch

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider why Clarence Jordan, who has been called a modern prophet, was so attracted to Jesus' parables, and especially those stories that Jordan called "Trojan parables."
2. To review Jordan's concept of "dramatic parables" and consider how his own lifework became a parable in the rural South.
3. To explore the familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son with new eyes—guided by Jordan, Rembrandt, and Guercino.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Tell Me the Old, Old Story" locate the familiar tune EVANGEL in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

Paul Duke has written, "As we witness these constant crazy moves [in Jesus' parables] from the common to the extravagant, from the small to the outrageous, the risky, the beautifully grand, in time it dawns on us that this insistently repeating shift is more than a pattern in parables; it is a way that human lives might come to be lived. Kafka said, 'If you only followed the parables you yourselves might become parables.' God's best parable was Jesus himself, who told the largest tales and lived the largest life, and kept saying over his shoulder, 'Follow me'" (from *The Parables: A Preaching Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005) p. 14).

Clarence Jordan was not only a gifted interpreter of Jesus' parables, but also a courageous follower of Christ. Jordan's lifework—translating the New Testament into colloquial Southern language and establishing Koinonia Farm—became a parable in the rural South.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 from a modern translation. Jordan's Cotton Patch translation of the Gospel of Luke is available in a new print edition from Smyth & Helwys Publishing (www.Helwys.com) or may be read online at rockhay.tripod.com/cottonpatch.

Reflection

You can use this session to introduce the lifework of a modern prophet, Clarence Jordan. Recall the biographical details in Joel Snider's *Hearing the Parables in the Patch*. For more information about Jordan's life, see the Koinonia Farm website (www.koinoniapartners.org). Enrich this study by listening to free audio excerpts of Jordan's talks. His eight-lecture series on Jesus' parables, *The Cotton Patch Parables: A Bible Study for Thinking Christians*, is available on compact disc.

Another approach in this session is to review Jordan's insights into the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The two supplemental articles provide other rich readings of this parable: in *Hands of the Father*, Bill Shiell reflects

on Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, while Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons analyze Guercino's *Return of the Prodigal Son* in *A Gesture of Reconciliation*.

Study Questions

1. "Deriving its name from the tactical weapon employed by the Greek army in Homer's *Iliad*, a Trojan horse parable is particularly effective in communicating an unpopular message," Joel Snider writes. "This type parable tells a story in such a way as to slip past the listeners' defenses in order to release the message on the unsuspecting."
In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we are surprised to see our rebellion on display in the younger son, and our ungrateful, judgmental attitudes revealed in the older son. What other parables lead us to acknowledge the darkness in ourselves? "Parables invite the hearer's interest with familiar settings and situations but finally veer off into the unfamiliar, shattering their homey realism and insisting on further reflection and inquiry," Ron Hanson writes. Thus, "we have the uneasy feeling that *we* are being interpreted even as we interpret them" (quoted in *Parables*, p. 61).
2. Just as *narrative parables* draw a comparison, so the *dramatic parables* are actions (such as "the signs in John's Gospel, the temptation of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the Lord's Supper") that mean more than appears on the surface. "The message was intentionally deeper than the ostensible action," writes Snider. There are dramatic parables in the Old Testament, like Ezekiel's portraying Judah's captivity by digging a hole through the wall of his house and carrying luggage in and out (Ezekiel 12:1-16). The signs, or miracles, in John's Gospel, like feeding the crowd by the sea or changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana, seem to be similar to Ezekiel's action, for they are filled with deeper symbolic meaning. Do members agree that the virgin birth and Jesus' temptation can be described this way?
3. Though the *identification* of the prodigal son and demoniac is not supported by the text, the *imaginative comparison* of the two has been a favorite of preachers (cf. Charles H. Spurgeon's famous sermon, "He Ran and 'He' Ran"). Jordan notes the demoniac and prodigal son live in "the far country" (a non-Jewish region) and tend hogs. This could cause a Jewish young man to "lose his mind," Jordan suggests, because he "had been taught that touching hog meat or 'smelling red-eyed gravy' was blasphemy. How much more did getting into the trough and eating 'slop' with the hogs present a religious crisis!" Jordan also notes that the herd of pigs across the sea from Galilee represented "bootleg" business and "religious hypocrisy at its highest form: making profit from the very items forbidden by religion."
4. "The return of the Prodigal Son to his father was a popular subject in seventeenth-century Christian art," Hornik and Parsons write. "The [Roman Catholic] Counter Reformation embraced it as an example of forgiveness and healing between family members; Protestants viewed it as a return to God the Father despite their break from the Roman Catholic Church." They find both of these meanings in Guercino's painting; Rembrandt's painting illustrates a Protestant interpretation.

In Rembrandt's painting, the light falls on the father's hands, which "are disproportionately larger than the other parts of the father's body," Shiell notes. The father offers welcoming, noncontrolling love. In contrast, "the older brother stands to the far right, dressed like a Pharisee (ironically) with his hands and arms folded. Another man sits with his arms pridefully folded. They are afraid to love as the father does."

Guercino emphasizes the father's and son's hands in a different way. They "are entwined in a classic gesture of reconciliation and...positioned at the center of the composition." Hornik and Parsons say, "The classicizing elements of the composition create a painting less of emotion and passion than of recognized rhetorical gesture of reconciliation."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.