

LIV FØNNEBØ

## THE PARABLES: THE TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP TOOLS OF THE MASTER

Jesus often used stories or parables in his teaching. Stories of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Lost Coin, the One Lost Sheep, and the Scattered Seed are among the classics Jesus told. Stories like these constitute central components of His teaching and leadership—traits by which His teaching was recognized and appreciated in His own time and through history up to our time. Dillon (2005) refers to 41 parables in the Synoptic Gospels alone (p. 89), and suggests that Jesus employed parables for 27% of his teaching time (p. 181). Horne (1998) proposes a number of 28 short comparisons of the “a city on a hill cannot be hidden” type, and 25 longer stories. Stein (1994) suggests that 35% of Jesus’ teaching in the Synoptic Gospels is in parables (p. 33).

Horne (1998) says that “one of the most outstanding features of Jesus as a teacher is that he told stories. We call them parables” (p. 73). Stein (1994) asserts that “the most famous form used by Jesus in his teaching is the parable” (p. 33). The recognition of these stories as parables is well supported in the theological literature, and they have withstood the scholarly critics’ tests (Carroll & Habermas, 1996). Idioms derived from Jesus’ parables have survived two millennia and are still used in our daily conversations. Our use of “casting pearls before swine” (Matt. 7:6), “building on sand” (Matt. 7:26), and “going the extra mile” indicate the impact of Jesus’ figurative form of speaking on our modern languages. Cox (2006) ties Jesus’ frequent use of parables to his Jewish roots: “Nothing about him is more Jewish or more rabbinical” (p. 154).

The Hebrew word *mashal* is the word that in Greek translates as “parable.” The concept of *mashal* contains several forms of figurative speech such as proverbs, satire, puns, riddles, story-parables, similitude, and metaphors (Stein, 1994). From His Jewish background, Jesus

Liv Fønnebo, Ph.D., is a teacher at Ekrehagen School in Tromsø, Norway. She specializes in staff development and coaching of teachers.

brought the Hebrew understanding of parable with Him to His teaching. There is evidence that He used the comprehensive concept of *mashal* to serve core purposes in His teaching.

Even if Jesus' parables have their roots in the Jewish tradition, Dillon (2005) makes a point to show how they also differ from this tradition:

Jesus' parables are unique to him. They are not fables, they are not allegories, they are not fantasies, they are neither aloof, nor complicated, nor allusive, nor expansive. To the contrary; their nearness to life, their simplicity and clarity, the masterly brevity with which they are told, the seriousness of their appeal to the conscience, their loving understanding of the outcasts of religion—all this is without analogy. (p. 88)

### **How Jesus Used Parables**

Cox (2006) explains the many twists and surprises in the parables of Jesus to be a main and intended tool in shaking and waking up His listeners to a new reality. Jesus called this new reality “the reign of God” or “the kingdom of God,” and He urgently invited His listeners to take part in this reality. To be able to acquire such new and radical viewpoints, a grand mental and emotional cataclysm had to take place (pp. 158–159).

The parable's potential can be imagined as layers. The following three sections attempt to explain the didactical forces of stories and parables with a layer model. The explanation is not in any way exhaustive regarding the properties of the parable and story as a teaching method, nor must it be seen as an attempt to limit the parable or story. It simply captures some inherent properties of the parable, which is typical of the Jewish tradition from where it comes: the facilitation for multi-leveled interpretation. Victoria Maizes, M.D., a Jew by genealogy and religion, confirmed with me the multi-level depth of Jewish literature, especially the parables (personal communication, April 2009).

### **The Surface Layer**

The “surface” layer of Jesus' parables keeps the listener motivated to keep listening because of the unfolding of the story line itself. The listener does not need to have any pre-knowledge to follow the course of the story. It must be added that one powerful virtue of the story is that it continues to teach a long time after it is told. A vice-president for marketing and a friend, Richard Duerksen, who calls himself a story-catcher and a storyteller, has used stories for decades as a motivating and transforming tool for employees in corporate enterprises. During a

visit to Tromsø, Norway, he explained the longevity of a story this way:

I have had people come up to me who heard me tell a story 25 years ago. They have not seen or heard me for all this time, but they remembered a particular story I told then, and have kept it all these years. Today I met a man who heard me telling a story at a Youth Camp Meeting in Budapest in 1984. He had forgotten all about me until he met me again today, but he remembered the story I told in 1984! (R. Duerksen, personal communication, October 2008)

Since stories are preserved in the human memory, they can initiate flashes of insight a long time after they are told. When a situation occurs that is an analogue to a story once heard, the two incidents mutually inform each other. Schank and Abelson (1995) state in an article about knowledge and memory that “once stories are in our memory, we rely upon them for all that we say and understand” (p. 4). They argue that even new and creative responses and explanations that emerge are merely re-writes of existing stories in the human memory, adapted to fit new circumstances.

Thus, the task of an understander who has a memory filled with stories is to determine which of those stories is most relevant for the situation at hand. The old story is then used as a means for interpreting the new story. (Schank & Abelson, 1995, p. 4)

This could be the case for the parables Jesus told to His disciples. There is evidence that stories were understood some time after He told and showed them. In the book of Acts, there is an incident when the disciple Simon Peter finally grasps what Jesus implied when He said “train everyone you meet, far and near” (see Matt. 28:19, *The Message*). This happened to Peter in a vision that expanded the words of Jesus, which for Peter became filled with new meaning. He started preaching to and baptizing Gentiles—acts that drew frowns and reprimands by his associates in Jerusalem. But Peter confronted them:

“So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them [i.e., the pagans] as to us when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?” Hearing it all laid out like that, they [his old associates who criticized him for ‘rubbing shoulders’ with the riff raff] quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. “It really happened! God has broken through to the nations, opened them up to Life!” (Acts 11:15–18; cf. 1 Pet 3:18)

## The Middle Layer

The quality of the middle layer is that it speaks to the mental and emotional condition of the listener. It makes new sense and creates meaning for the listener who is already primed. Schank and Abelson (1995) explain:

We look for stories that can verify beliefs we already have. When a story can be absorbed into our memory as a ‘natural fit’ with stories we already know, we feel we have understood the story. A key point is that there is not one way to understand a story. When we hear a story we look for beliefs that are being commented upon. Any story can harbor many possible beliefs. We detect them by looking through the beliefs we already have. Our understanding of a new story becomes, at that point, a function of the old story. (p. 23)

Researcher and professor of cognitive psychology Jean Piaget explained the changes in human understanding as adaptations consisting of two sub-processes: assimilation and accommodation (as cited in Biehler & Snowman, 1993). Like Schank and Abelson (1995), Piaget emphasizes that our new story in many ways is a function of the old story. He calls this process “assimilation”: the old story serves as an adaptive scheme. But when the new story disturbs the old story to the point where the old story cracks, a new scheme is constructed. Piaget calls this process “accommodation.” Accommodation is the process that takes place when earlier experiences are re-shaped to unite with new experiences. These adaptive processes can also be detected within the middle-layer phase of Jesus’ parables, where listeners found ample opportunities for new understanding and perspectives. Within the borders of the middle layer, the parables of Jesus are in dialogue with, inform, and refine the platform of accumulated knowledge and understanding.

## The Earthquake Layer

The innermost layer of the parables can be described as the earthquake layer. This is the situation in which a story causes dramatic changes to take place: a total replacement in the way a person thinks and evaluates—conversion. Watch the dramatic change in the response to the address of the apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost. This speech caused the listeners to ask the life-turning question: “So now what do we do?” And Peter responded with “Change your life!” (see Acts 2:37–38). The innermost layer has the potential to shake up the listener—his convictions, views, traditions, and values. It shatters the human bedrock to a point where new convictions and values have to form,

upon which a new perspective on life is constructed. A mental process referred to as “high road transfer” (from cognitive learning theory) denotes the profound understanding of something, to the degree that the understanding becomes a newly formulated abstraction, or a new “rule” in a person’s life (Biehler & Snowman, 1993).

### **When Jesus Used Parables**

Theologians and authors have noted that Jesus employed parables in situations when He wanted His listeners to open their minds to some new and abstract content or when He wanted to help them to arrive at personal moral values (Burbules, 2004; Carroll & Habermas, 1996; Cox, 2006). Burbules (2004) asserts that Jesus used parables, paradoxes, proverbs, allegories, and other figurative forms when He saw that new insight in the moral domain was needed among His hearers: “Deep moral insights are gained only indirectly, through reflection on complex and puzzling cases that do not yield simple truths or directives” (p. 13). When listeners posed questions, Jesus often replied in the form of a parable. For example, Jesus’ answer to a question from a religious scholar on how to define “neighbor” is the parable of the merciful Samaritan.

When His disciples initially do not understand and ask Him to explain, many times His explanation comes in the form of a second parable. Dillon (2005) emphasizes that “Jesus habitually spoke parables as the very content of his teaching” (p. 89). Jesus told stories in everyday situations when He wanted to clarify something, give a response to questions or criticism, or when He was interrupted by incidents.

It also seems likely that Jesus needed the safety of the language of stories to stretch His time period of work before being abducted by the religious leaders (Stein, 1994). Telling stories might have been the surreptitious method by which Jesus could convey His message while avoiding being arrested prematurely.

### **Why Jesus Used Parables**

It is interesting that the gospel writers Mark, Matthew, and Luke state several reasons Jesus made use of parables. Mark put it this way:

He taught by using stories, many stories. . . .

He told them; “you’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom—you know how it works. But for those who can’t see it yet, everything comes in stories, creating readiness, nudging them toward receptive insight. These are people—

whose eyes are open but don't see a thing,  
 whose ears are open but don't understand a word,  
 who avoid making an about-face and getting forgiven.”

He continued, “Do you see how this story works? All my stories work this way.”

With many stories like these he presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots. (Mark 4:2, 11–12, 33–34)

From these passages in Mark and Matthew the following reasons for Jesus' use of parables can be summarized:

1. To prepare and motivate his followers for what would be coming next—often more challenging lessons (Mark 4:9, 11–12).
2. To match the differences in aptitudes and abilities among his audience; to allow for postponed learning or even no learning at all with those who were not yet ready—mentally, morally, or emotionally—to receive its message (Mark 4:11–12, 33–34).
3. To accomplish specific learning goals with those who were ready for His teaching; for example, insight into how the kingdom of God works (Matthew 13:11–13).
4. To be discreet when opposition was increasing, but still able to attend to the needs of followers (Matt 13:11–58; Mark 12:1–11).
5. To protect his teaching from being discredited and misused by his opponents (Mark 4:11).

Allowing for postponed learning is one of the unique aspects of Jesus' approach which has elicited some debate among readers of the New Testament. What did He mean when He said the following?

To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven. (Mark 4:10–12)

Those words of Jesus are not immediately self-explanatory. Different interpretations are possible. They illustrate some distinctive didactical properties of Jesus' parables: they are tools for multiple tasks, cemented with an inherent flexibility which makes them compatible at any level of receptivity and differing needs of the listeners, even to block unreceptive persons from getting insight they could possibly abuse. Stein (1994) supports the idea of matching the aptitudes and abilities of the audience by using the parable as a tool to both reveal and conceal content. He also adds that the use of parables made it more difficult for perceived opponents to attack Jesus' teaching (pp. 38–41).

Stein (1994) points to the illustrative and motivational side of the parables as one of the reasons Jesus used them (p. 38). But Dillon (2005) warns that the traditional way of viewing Jesus' parables mainly as illustrations of a particular point actually misses the point of a parable. Instead, he urges readers to pay special attention to those characteristics that really distinguish Jesus' parables from all others:

Jesus' parables are a form of teaching, but not instruction; they embody a message but do not illustrate a proposition; they deliver content but do not transmit knowledge; they require understanding but not intellect, they call for response in action and attitude, not in mentation and analysis. (pp. 92–93)

Dillon's comments highlight instructional properties, like "a form of teaching," "embody a message," "require understanding," and "call for response in action and attitude" associated with an all-inclusive and balanced use of the brain (Zull, 2002). And a balanced use of the brain is conducive to effective learning (Nilson, 2010; Zull, 2002).

### **Leaders as Storytellers**

Through the use of parables, Jesus challenged the minds of His audience. His parables compared abstract ideas to familiar facts and thus connected the unknown to the known. By drawing invisible lines between real-life experiences and mental pictures that He had designed, Jesus continually tried to stretch and deepen the thinking, and thus motivate a change in the behavior of His listeners.

The inherent properties of storytelling are as relevant for leaders today as they were to Jesus' audience in Palestine. Storytelling has properties that make it suitable as a teaching method at many levels of aptitude, preparation, and maturation. To the teacher who is concerned about inclusion of all students and wants to instruct so that every student learns at high levels, the storytelling method offers an undeniable tool. It should be used as often as possible and in as many subject or content areas as possible. Those topics or concepts the teacher knows are hard for students to grasp or are of great importance would especially benefit from being dressed in stories.

Some years ago, during a visit to South Africa, I came across a story that encompasses multiple angles with a high learning potential for children, teenagers, and adults. It has become part of my story "database" ever since. The story is about Nelson Mandela, told by our tour guide at Robben Island. Shortly after Nelson Mandela was brought as a prisoner to Robben Island, he was transferred to the limestone quarry.

The work in the quarry was physically and psychologically challenging. A common routine in the quarry was to have the prisoners one day carry the big pile of limestone from one corner of the quarry to the other, and the next day to carry it back—a tactic applied to humiliate and dispirit the political prisoners. Mandela immediately grasped the situation. He gathered his fellow prisoners in the quarry and spoke to them: “You think you are in a prison. This is not a prison. This is a university, and your education starts today.” The now well-known story tells how Nelson Mandela, inspired by the biblical account of Joseph in Pharaoh’s jail, spent much of his time on Robben Island not only educating his fellow prisoners, but also the white prison guards of the apartheid regime.

This story uncovers Christian values and Christian leadership in a convincing way. I have used it in different settings with young and old to illuminate principles like loving your neighbor, charity, equality, forgiveness, never submitting to self-pity, and the fact that we have alternatives—even under the most challenging circumstances. I have used the story to introduce discussion groups about leadership for young pastors in Norway. Interestingly, the leadership role Nelson Mandela took at the limestone quarry overlaps with the Jesus Model I have described in more detail elsewhere (Fønnebø, 2011, p. 218-220). The Jesus Model is a relationship-based model with authentic authority at the core. Authentic authority is the authority given to a person who has, by his action, proven himself worthy of it.

The servant leader described by Robert Greenleaf (2002) and the transformational leader described by Wren (1995) are contemporary leadership ideas that match and support the Jesus Model. “He came to serve, not be served” (Matthew 20:26). He had a transformational strategy in mind when He promised Andrew and Peter that He would transform them into a new kind of fishermen (Matthew 4:19). Serving the needs of those who are led and motivating lasting changes by modeling transformational leadership are likely to form the relationship referred to as authentic authority in the Jesus Model. This is what Nelson Mandela demonstrated. He started by inducing hope and motivation among his fellow prisoners: “This is not a prison. This is a university.” He then showed the way: “Your education starts today.” With insightful wisdom, he served their unspoken needs (the need of education) and thus gave them a new focus for their thoughts. He followed up by teaching and leading his fellow prisoners, motivating their transformation into active peacemakers and conscious citizens of a future South Africa.



My experience is that stories like the Nelson Mandela story apply to many different settings. The strength of this story is that it is a true. Its main character, Nelson Mandela, still inspires us—at the age of 93—with his values and his ideas.

A good story can be viewed as a hook. It catches the attention and involves the learner. A story provides pegs on which to hang underlying principles. It occupies space in human memory and can be retrieved when triggered by someone or something at a later point in time. The stories Jesus used were unique in their simplicity, but were loaded with deeper dimensions. They captured divine and abstract truths while appearing to be quite ordinary. They may seem to be tailored to the occasion on the spur of the moment, but that is most likely not true. Jesus was exposed to many and various impressions during His 18 silent years. I hold the possibility open that Jesus accumulated stories for later use during those years, as part of His leader preparation.

In my work as a school principal, I have often used stories from the life of Jesus to address issues teachers face. One day I used the story of Jesus and the storm (Mark 4:35-41) as an introduction to a meeting with my teachers. It was an opportunity to reflect on what it means to “be in the boat with Jesus.” The disciples did not realize the meaning of having Jesus with them in the boat. As a result insecurity, fear, and horror spread among them. I reminded my staff that running a Christian school is in many respects like that boat trip on the Lake of Galilee. But the important thing is to always remember who we have with us “on board.”

At the time I told this story we had just hired a new special education teacher. She was not a committed Christian. What we did not know was that at that time she suffered from a terrible fear of the dark and of being alone. It was about a year after I told the Jesus and the storm story that she told me that this crippling fear that had tormented her for years was gone. Every time she had to work alone in the school building late at night, she just kept telling herself that “Jesus is in the boat.” The school building actually became the only place she could be alone after dark and feel peace surrounding her.

Another time I used the story of the rich young ruler coming to Jesus (Matt. 19:16-29) as a gateway to talk about formative assessment. The young man came to Jesus and wanted some advice on how to achieve eternal life. He had kept all the commandments since a young age. So he was relieved when Jesus followed His instruction to “obey the commandments” (verse 17) with examples from the Ten Commandments and the Love Commandment of Leviticus 19:18. Jesus, however, saw

deeper and pointed to an area in the young man's his life that he needed to improve—the attitude with which he managed his wealth and his properties, and the responsibility he had for those who were underprivileged in society. What Jesus does in this situation is formative assessment. He confirms what is already good, and He points out what needed to change in order to reach a higher goal. The story led to a productive discussion about the why, how, and when of formative assessment which is a crucial tool in the continuous learning process of students, teachers, and leaders.

An obvious implication of the storytelling method of Jesus is this: the good teacher and the good leader should always be hunting for stories. It takes time to find or design stories suitable to the various subjects taught in school and the many situations leaders may face. And it may take years to build up a story database. But Jesus' power as a leader and teacher reminds us that such a registry of stories, sorted by category, could be a treasure for every teacher or leader who wants to reach out to, teach, and involve all of his or her students or co-workers.

## References

- Biehler, R., & Snowman, J. (1993). *Psychology applied to teaching*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Burbules, N. (2004). Jesus as a teacher. In A. A. Hanan (Ed.), *Spirituality and ethics in education: Philosophical, theological, and radical perspectives* (pp. 7-20). Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press.
- Carroll, J. A., & Habermas, R. (1996). *Jesus didn't use worksheets: A 2000-year-old model for good teaching*. Spring, TX: Absey.
- Cox, H. (2006). *When Jesus came to Harvard: Making moral choices today*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dillon, J. T. (2005). *Jesus as a teacher: A multidisciplinary case study*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
- Fønnebø, L. (2011). *A grounded-theory study of the teaching methods of Jesus: An emergent instructional model* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.
- Greenleaf, R. (2002). *Servant leadership*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Horne, H. (1998). *Jesus the teacher: Examining his expertise in education*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel.
- Nilson, L. (2010). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schank, R., & Abelson, R. (1995). Knowledge and memory: The real story. In R. S. Wyer, Jr. (Ed.), *Advances in social cognition* (Vol. 8, pp. 1–85). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Stein, R. (1994). *The method and message of Jesus' teachings*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.
- Wren, T. (1995). *The leader's companion*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Zull, J. (2002). *The art of changing the brain: Enriching the practice of teaching by exploring the biology of learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.