

6.12.22 – Pentecost 1
“What Do the Parables Teach?”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NIV) ~ Pam

The Valley of Dry Bones

¹ The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’”

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹ Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophecy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’”

L: These are early Symbolic Words from God. C: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 18:10-14 (HCSB) ~ Pam

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

¹⁰ “See that you don’t look down on one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of My Father in heaven. [¹¹ For the Son of Man has come to save the lost.] ¹² What do you think? If a man has 100 sheep, and one of them goes astray, won’t he leave the 99 on the hillside and go and search for the stray? ¹³ And if he finds it, I assure you: He rejoices over that sheep more than over the 99 that did not go astray. ¹⁴ In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

L: These are Reassuring Words from God! C: Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me:

Dear God, speak to us through your prophecies and stories in Scripture. As we heard the rushing wind and tongues of fire in Pentecost last Sunday, speak to us today through the rattling bones of Ezekiel and the lost little sheep. Let us be your disciples this summer as we explore the parables as a tool to hear your direction. Open minds and hearts to see and hear through Bible imagery your motivation, voice, and direction. Help us be attentive to the message and promises you want each of us to hear, as you speak through this messenger. **“Amen.”**

Silence. Shhh. Can you hear? Did you hear the rushing wind descend last Sunday? Did you see the tongues of fire in your imagination as we read about Pentecost? Or the languages spoken through the Spirit and fire? Today, can you hear dry bones rattling? Or the spirit of God breathing life into those bones? Or the bleating on one lost sheep? The common thread is the Holy Spirit and yes, we are now in the season after Pentecost until Advent. Another common thread is the sense of hearing and listening. Not always an easy task in our noisy world.

This opens a summer series on the Parables. **Some** would say that the stories in the Bible and even the Bible itself are antiquated dry old bones with no life for today’s world. But as you heard from Ezekiel’s vision, the Sovereign Lord himself breathes relevant spirit for today into the words of Scripture. **If. We. Read. Them.** And Listen for Him in the words.

The word Parable comes from the Greek, *parabolé*, used mostly in the New Testament to identify meaning through a variety of literary forms. Like the geometric form of “parabola” or bell curve, the Gospels describe them as stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end, with images, aphorisms, and proverbs (or sayings) to make some point. Some parables in the Bible are used for comparative interpretation [“The kingdom

of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed (Matthew 13:31) which we will study later] and others are told to illustrate an example for living [like the Good Samaritan of Luke 10:25-37]. Often there is a moral of the story at the end, relating to some aspect of living in Christian community. According to Mark 4:10-12, Jesus used the parables to keep outsiders from fully understanding his teachings or accusing him of sedition; his stories were only for the belief, spiritual growth, and commitment of his chosen disciples who could repent of their sins and be forgiven. They would open doors for other believers.

We must also remember the oral nature of these parables; no one wrote them down until the first century for the early forming church. Even by then, the culture had changed from Jesus' day, and the symbols and images did not always make sense to them or to us today more than 2,000 years later. In our Matthew story of the lost sheep, it was about preservation of the Christian disciple, but in Luke, the same parable is about conversion of sinners outside the church. The context and writer's perspective determined the meaning, just as we interpret Scripture through our own lenses as priesthood of believers.

Interpretations were not really challenged until the end of the 19th Century when new literary tools of critique became available, and more fragments were found (Dead Sea Scrolls in late 1940's). No matter the debate, parables helped readers understand the existential and theological implications of the kingdom and the believer's role in it. Some scholars insist that the parables were disguised political or economic editorials of that time. Others believe the parables were moral prescriptions for a failing society. One source said there are over 70 parables in the New

Testament! We will only have time for twelve, but I encourage you to explore your Bible to find the ones you like.

There is room in our study for various interpretations if we are practicing our listening skills with heart, mind, body, and soul. Parables are a way to engage the whole body and not simply the intellect. As we go from week to week, after the sermon of that week, I'd like you to go back and re-read the parable all week long. First day, read with the mind (get the facts and remember the story). Second, read it aloud. Third day, create an imaginative play out of it – set the scene, smell the smells of the surrounding environment, hear the voices, eat the food in your mind, and walk the paths. The fourth day, select the character you relate to the most in the story and become him or her, as you read the story again. The fifth day, ask questions of the heart: how did the main character feel? Was he afraid, grateful, sorrowful, kind? The last day before church, ask this: what is God saying to me through this parable? Is this about the work of the church or is it a personal message? Please write down your insights! They are the quiet voice of God for you alone.

In Ezekiel, the dry bones prophecy is the beginning of hope for a resurrection, yes, even in the Old Testament! The dry rattling bones are a metaphor for a downcast spirit of the exiles who were doubting God's promise for restoration. They were despondent and personally could not bring themselves or their faith back to life—only God's spirit (*Ruach*) as he breathed on the parched parts could bring life. Only a divine intervention could save them or us.

Like the Pentecost, only a divine event through God's power could bring the bones back to life. Where are your dry bones that need God's

breath of life? There are parched places in this church, in this community and in our world, yet God's intervention can bring new life.

Yes, God's unlimited and unconditional love can bring new life, even to the lost one out of the 100. Are you a lost disciple? The lost sheep in our second passage can refer to a literal sheep, but also means lost children (literal children who know nothing yet of the world or Jesus) or lost adults (especially those trained up in the church but have lost their way). It is a story of a tender shepherd who leaves his flock to find the one lost sheep. Sheep were named based on their individuality (black foot or clipped ear), and they bonded with the shepherd who fed and sheltered them while protecting them from predators at night. This is how God knows us too. Yes, we are part of the larger body of believers, yet he knows every hair on our heads and every action or inaction. If we depart from his presence, he will bring us back, and he will rejoice, not scold us.

This Matthew passage warns us not to be competitive or judging of the lost sheep. To enter the kingdom of God, we must be like children or sheep—vulnerable, trusting, obedient, and humble. The story helps us to see we are individuals like the one lost, yet we are all equal, and deserve the Father's love and attention. Do we live in community with that equality or are there cliques and favorites? Do we think we can earn our salvation by staying with the 99? If we use the Luke interpretation of this parable, it is a call to action to find the lost one, the lost sinner who does not know Christ. Who do you know who might be lost or has strayed from Jesus? Prayer and a personal invitation are all that is necessary. God's breath and spirit will do the reconciliation. Are we listening for God's direction and open to new work or searching for the lost? Amen.//

Will you pray with me? God, you are the breath of life. Through you and because of you, we share Christ's story. We thank you for imaginative ways to do that in your parables. We ask for your help listening for your direction through the word of Scripture and our quiet prayer times. May we go from here with a desire to learn new meaning from Jesus' familiar parables. Fill us Lord with your spirit, to be vital, enthusiastic, and generous bones that reflect your love and power, attracting others to your presence. **Amen.**