

I can remember road trips as a kid with my brother and my sister but she was too little to participate in car activities. When all the tricks had been pulled out of the hat, every state named on license plates, every punch bug given at the sight of a VW bug, my parents, especially my dad, would reach for the cassette with stories of Br'er Rabbit. Do any of you remember Br'er Rabbit? Br'er Rabbit, short for Brother Rabbit, is a clever and cunning character from African American folklore, known for outsmarting his adversaries, particularly Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear. These stories, often referred to as the Uncle Remus tales, were popularized by Atlantan, Joel Chandler Harris, in the late 19th century. Br'er Rabbit's adventures often involved him finding himself in tricky situations, but he always managed to escape through wit and trickery. I can see why my parents put these Uncle Remus tales in on long trips to my grandparents' house in FL. It's because as soon as the story began, we were hooked. I mean hook, line, and sinker. I didn't know until I was much older that the Uncle Remus stories had such a complicated history and many critics accused Harris of appropriating slave stories and profiting from them. "These stories were told to Harris by slaves when he worked on a Georgia plantation in the 1860s. In turn, these stories have their roots in West African lore, specifically Anansi, the spider, and Adanko, the hare. These stories represent the universal desire of oppressed people everywhere: that the weak can outwit the strong with ingenuity and cunning" ([link](#)). While doing some more reading on this, I came upon this comment, "Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum of opinion, I think it is safe to say that Harris preserved a critically important part of Southern storytelling that may have been lost in the fog of oppression and bigotry that clouded the South in the years following the Civil War. What I find remarkable about the Harris manifestation of these African stories is their origin

from an unlikely bond between a shy and affable printer's apprentice and an elderly slave who shared the stories of his people in a time when the question of slavery was being settled by the Civil War." This writer continues, "Every time I read an Uncle Remus story, I am always in awe of the care Harris took to preserve the dialect of the enslaved people who told him their ancestral stories. These stories not only influenced such characters as Bugs Bunny but also writers like Mark Twain, who authored *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* among others, and Rudyard Kipling, author of *The Jungle Book*. And today, the Wren's Nest is dedicated to Harris' true vision- a south in which the races have reconciled. Today, African American storytellers reinterpret the Uncle Remus stories for visitors to the museum, and the Wren's Nest, Harris' former home, is increasingly becoming a center of learning and exchange for the city's literary community. The Wren's Nest's executive director, Melissa Swindell, told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 'Our goal is to make the Wren's Nest a center for the preservation of African American folk tales and slave narratives, as well as promoting storytelling on a larger scale. Everybody has a story'" ([link](#)). Stories are obviously part of culture. I only knew these stories from a child's limited understanding. Good storytellers have a tremendous gift because they reel us in. We remember good stories. It is especially difficult today to hold our attentions when storytellers are competing with short attention spans and screens. There have been and continue to be some excellent storytellers in this world. Jesus, God with skin on, was one of the very best. As a matter of fact, Jesus did most of his teaching in the form of stories called parables. Did you know that Jesus taught over 40 parables? Today we're going to take a look about what the Gospel writer Matthew says about the

purpose of Jesus' parables. Before we listen for God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Matthew doesn't tell us that Jesus sat on the boat preaching doctrine or giving a dissertation on what it looks like to follow him or going on and on about himself and how great he is...no. Jesus told stories that we call parables. All. The. Time. Some only a sentence or two long. Many of them, dare I say, are confusing and leave us with more questions than answers. Some are even controversial in how they are interpreted and by whom- like the Br'er Rabbit stories. "Jesus does not come preaching separation but is characterized by scandalous inclusions. Notoriously, he dines with prostitutes, imperial collaborationists, and their ilk. He counters that his critics are boundary-obsessed, that their separations do harm. While still others seek purity by devoutly observing religious duties, rituals, and bands, he enjoys rough company and breaks small laws with an odd nonchalance" (*The Parables*, Paul Simpson Duke).

Jesus' parables appear only in the synoptic Gospels; therefore, Matthew, Mark and Luke are our first known interpreters of Jesus' parables. Each has their own spin. For example, Matthew tends to increase the violence of some of the parables. Some overlap while others stand on their own. Mark claims that Jesus never said anything in public that wasn't a parable. Parables are strange little stories from everyday life that often capture what God is like. Listen: "A dragnet is thrown into the sea (Matt. 13:47). When the net is hauled in, it bristles with all sorts of creatures, a few good fish but lots of trash as well. The servants ask, "Master, do you want us to sort the good fish from the bad? 'No, let's worry

about the culling on another day. What a huge haul!’ God is like that. There, now. Are there other questions” (Will Willimon, *Why Jesus?*)? Don’t beat yourself up if you can’t figure out that story; the disciples, who were first to hear it, didn’t get it either. “Jesus comes across as the Zen-like teacher whose greatest desire is not to pass out the right answers but rather to tease and to provoke even more questions” (Willimon). Much like a poem, the longer one ponders a parable, the wider and deeper its reach. I’m still waiting on the parable of the dishonest manager to make sense (Luke 16:1-12). Both poetry and parables evoke numerous interpretations; it is our job to sort through them. “Perhaps what Jesus was trying to do in his parables was more than make a point. Perhaps mere intellectual understanding was not the point” (Willimon).

While many stories can start “once upon a time,” in Matthew, many of Jesus’ stories begin with “the kingdom of heaven is like...” and Jesus would many times end a parable with, “go and do likewise.” Particularly in Matthew’s Gospel, the context in which the eight parables in Chapter 13 are told matters greatly for interpretation. This cluster of parables here in Chapter 13 signals a great shift in the world of Jesus. In the two previous chapters, 11 and 12, we’re told of “a storm of tensions and conflicts with Jesus, and the beginnings of plots to kill him, so now in Chapter 13, Jesus speaks of oppositions, rejections, and failures, and turns the focus of his ministry from the masses to the disciples. Matthew sees parables as the perfect mode of speech for making such a pivot” (Duke), hence the two statements within this chapter on the purpose of parables. Many of us, upon hearing one of Jesus’ stories or parables, like to do at least one of two things, if not both. We like to 1: try and reduce a parable to a single meaning- a moral, if

you will and/or 2: find ourselves in the parable- thus, usually picking to be in the good or hero role. Scholar A.J. Levine reminds us that “reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential. This surplus of meaning is how poetry and storytelling work, and it is all to the good” (*Short Stories by Jesus*). Jesus, as in today’s scripture, asks the disciples and others to listen as well as to think. When we identify as the good role within the parable, if we stay there long enough, we will be challenged or convicted by the Holy Spirit to “look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge. Our reaction to them should be one of resistance rather than acceptance. For our own comfort, we may want to foreclose the meaning rather than allow the parable to open into multiple interpretations. We are probably more comfortable proclaiming a creed than prompting a conversation or pursuing a call” (Levine). Furthermore, if we somehow think one of Jesus’ parables are no longer applicable for us, are we saying the Holy Spirit isn’t at work today?!

When you have a storyteller, it requires listeners, hence the reason Jesus would often say, “Listen” or “if anyone has ears, let them hear.” “Listening is not only a challenge; it is also an art, and this art has become lost. Down through the centuries, starting with the Gospel writers themselves, the parables have been tamed into either platitudes such as “God loves us” or “Be nice” or, worse, assurances that all is right with the world as long as we believe in Jesus. Too often we settle for easy interpretations: we should be nice like the Good Samaritan; we will be forgiven, as was the prodigal son; we should pray and not lose heart like

the importuning widow. If we stop with the easy lessons, good though they may be, we lose the way Jesus' first followers would have heard the parables, and we lose the genius of Jesus' storytelling and teaching" (Levine). Story by story, Jesus is moving us from the safe, secure world we thought we knew to another world where all is strange and things don't turn out as expected, and something's afoot. A world where God turns out to be other than you previously had assumed: a kingdom where everything seems upside down. Parables are like windows through which we see into the heart of God (Willimon).

"Good storytellers adapt their tales to the needs and interests of their audiences. The idea of Jesus having a set of three by five note cards or an iPad (for Jesus, better an "I-am-pad") on which were inscribed the Good Samaritan or the Pearl of Great Price and from which he read the same story, verbatim, under different circumstances is unlikely" (Levine). Jesus, expecting the kingdom of heaven to break in, indeed, seeing it already as present in his actions, demands a reaction: choose life, choose to live the way God wants us to live. "A good storyteller repeats material, and the parables, as good stories, are certainly worth repeating" (Levine). Listen: "One time a farmer went out to plant. As he did so, some of the seeds fell on the path, and the birds came along and gobbled them up. Others fell on rocky places where the soil was shallow. Because they weren't planted deep they came up right away, but not having a deep root they withered when the hot sun hit them. Still others fell among the weeds, which grew up and choked them out. But others fell on good dirt and matured, some multiplying a hundred times, some sixty, and some thirty. Now please let that soak in" (Cotton Patch Gospel, Clarence Jordan, 13:3-9, [link](#)). In other words, if you have ears, let them hear.

So what does Jesus as Storyteller mean for us? It means we might need to unlearn our addiction to certainty and embrace the mystery. We might need to stop demanding answers and start listening for the story. It means that when we are tempted to believe faith is about knowing everything, Jesus reminds us it's often about wondering, and wandering, and following the thread of a parable into the very heart of God. It also means the stories of our own lives matter. If Jesus teaches in parables, then maybe our lives are one, too. Maybe your struggle, your heartbreak, your joy, your laughter—they are all part of the telling. Maybe the gospel is being written not only in Scripture but in scars and songs and stories told around tables or on brick walls. Maybe God is still telling stories through people like you and me. So may we become listeners again. May we find Jesus in the stories of farmers and families, teachers and widows, bakers and boats. Most important: the great Storyteller, Jesus, is “God with us, not God controlled, explained, and tamed by us. Jesus not only spoke in parables; Jesus is a parable” (Willimon). May we remember that God came not with a lecture, but with a story—and that love and redemption story is still being told. Thanks be to God! Amen.