

TRUTH BY SURPRISE: SUBVERTING EXPECTATIONS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD THROUGH
HOMILETICAL HUMOR

by

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*Dedicated to Gigi, without whom I would still use the wrong verb tense,
and to Lydia and Susanna, who inspire the best stories.*

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ABSTRACT

RORY ALLEN NAEVE

TRUTH BY SURPRISE: SUBVERTING EXPECTATIONS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD THROUGH
HOMILETICAL HUMOR

Under the direction of BRETT YOUNGER, PH.D.

The congregants of First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, Tennessee are like people in many churches around the United States. They are long-time church-goers who have attended Sunday school lessons and heard sermons on biblical texts enough to breed a familiarity that can prevent further insight. The preacher must find a way to bypass familiarity, allowing hearers to experience the text anew. This study measures how six sermons employing humor subvert expectations to give a renewed experience of Jesus' descriptions of the Kingdom of God in the parables in Matthew's Gospel.

Twelve participants were interviewed in three sessions over six weeks to measure how effective humor is in communicating the complex and counter-cultural Kingdom of God that Jesus expresses in the parables. The group was interviewed together in three semi-structured sessions to allow participants to give their insights and experiences with limited researcher prompting.

Participant responses indicate that humor indeed aided in experiencing familiar parables with a new perspective, a sense of personal interaction, and a desire to act upon the principles of the Kingdom as presented in the sermons. Humor can provide a fresh experience for preachers and congregations alike.

Further study should be conducted in utilizing humor to preach texts of other biblical genres, such as the Hebrew prophets, proverbs, psalms, and epistles. Humor is a broad category, and some research into the congregation's varied responses to specific types of humor (wit, anecdote, or satire) could be illuminating.

CHAPTER 1

KNOCK, KNOCK: KINGDOM AND COMEDY

Background

From childhood, I have avidly watched standup comics. I memorized standup routines on television. When I finally reached the age to do so, I would sit in comedy clubs watching comedians work. The immediate reaction of comedy is laughter and that is what comedians are after. I noticed, however, that even though I laughed at a routine, I would still think about the subject matter weeks later. Humor elicited laughter, but it also communicated a deeper, more lasting message and one that may even challenge an antagonistic audience.

Younger generations tend to not read newspapers or watch traditional newscasts, but they will watch a satirist wisecrack about the sorry state of current affairs. Many Americans will not watch a political debate, but they will watch impressionists lampoon the powerful on *Saturday Night Live*. A sharp turn of phrase can make a crowd laugh but it may also reveal the ridiculousness of a silly societal norm. Humor's initial response is laughter, but the lasting impact unsettles the comfortable worldview of the audience, supplanting it with another. Humor can bypass defenses and convey a deeper message. But what better worldview could the comic offer than Jesus' own vision of how the world ought to be? The preacher might employ humor as the vehicle of the Gospel message.

Description of the Ministerial Context

The First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge, Tennessee is a unique church.¹ The church has been a leading moderate to progressive voice in East Tennessee for decades and has consistently practiced missional ministry. The community of Oak Ridge was formed expressly for the Manhattan Project during World War II, bringing scientists and engineers from all over the world. With federal nuclear facilities (Y12) and a National Laboratory (ORNL), Oak Ridge is a highly educated community. The First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge (FBCOR) matches her context in this regard. Most of the members of FBC Oak Ridge have been members for decades. This length of experience with church (and biblical content) coupled with significant education levels creates a strong sense of familiarity with matters of scripture.

I began serving as the Senior Pastor in July 2016. My tenure has been well-received. People are hopeful about the church and optimistic about the future. The church is experiencing modest growth and renewed energy, making the church ripe for a renewed sense of vision and purpose.

Resistance to the Preached Kingdom

The habit of the Sunday sermon may contribute to what Fred Craddock refers to as “the dead air of familiarity” for the members of FBC Oak Ridge.² They have been around the biblical block a time or two. The members of FBC Oak Ridge, like many

¹ Chapter 3 examines the First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge in finer detail.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 25.

church members, do not expect the sermon to significantly alter how they live because they assume that they already know how Christ wants them to live. Many expect the sermon to provide a small correction, elucidation, or redirection, but nothing life-changing. These are staid church members, many with advanced degrees, and history on both sides of the education system.

Pastors want to communicate the truth of Jesus Christ and parishioners want to hear what Christ has to say about their lives. The problem is not that parishioners do not want to grasp the Kingdom; the problem is that most hearers presume that they *already* grasp the truth. Familiar texts read in familiar settings of worship foster a sense of “same old, same old.” Familiarity breeds complacency. What good is preaching if no one experiences the truth?

Kingdom through Comedy

Because the hearers come with predispositions, the preacher must unsettle the familiarity of the congregation so that they might experience truth. In Jesus’ preaching, he had nothing less in mind than giving his hearers the experience of a new vision of God, life, and the world.³ The contemporary preacher is tasked with communicating that same Kingdom in a manner that can be felt and internalized by the hearers of the sermon.

For the parables of Jesus to be heard on their own terms, as opposed to the comfortable interpretations we tend to make, the preacher must surprise the hearers,

³ Raymond Bailey, *Jesus the Preacher* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 63-5.

unsettling them from the habitual and awakening them to new possibilities. To subvert the expectations of the congregation, this project measures how effective sermonic humor can be in delivering Jesus' descriptions of the Kingdom of God in a series of six sermons on parables in the Gospel of Matthew. For the congregation at FBC Oak Ridge, these sermons encourage personal responses to the Kingdom through individual behaviors, which ideally would create a community embodying Jesus' principles of forgiveness, generosity, and radical equality as described in the parables. Additionally, other preachers might employ humor as an effective tool for communicating the Kingdom to their congregations in a way that allows Jesus' message to be truly heard.

Research Methods

Structure

Beginning on August 6, 2017, I preached a series of six sermons on the Kingdom Parables of Matthew.⁴ The order of the sermons from August 6 through September 10, 2017 were as follows:

- August 6 – *The Parable of the Sower* – Matt. 13:3-8
- August 13 – *The Parable of the Wheat among the Weeds* – Matt. 13:24-30
- August 20 – *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant* – Matt. 18:23-35
- August 27 – *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard* – Matt. 20:1-16
- September 3 – *The Parable of the Two Sons* – Matt. 21:28-32
- September 10 – *The Parable of the Talents* – Matt. 25:14-30

Each sermon utilizes humor as a vehicle for recreating the original rhetorical impact of Jesus' telling of the parables so that hearers can experience the Kingdom of God anew.

⁴ Audio recordings of all six sermons are available on the church's website: <http://www.fbcoakridge.org/sermon-series/brave-new-world/>

Participants

The group is comprised of twelve members who were selected from volunteers within the congregation of FBC Oak Ridge. The entire congregation above the age of 18 years was invited to participate in the study by means of a newsletter article published twice in July 2017, verbal announcements in the Sunday morning worship services in July, and announcements at the Wednesday night Bible studies throughout July. Members were selected from the list of volunteers at the researcher's discretion with an intention of including diversity in age, gender, educational background, and ethnicity commensurate with the demographics of the church.

Rationale

Through the three semi-structured group interviews, I explored the hearers' concepts of the Kingdom as preached in the sermons. The interview format was necessary to allow for the deep processing and free expression to communicate their understanding of concepts of the Kingdom and their responses to it. The prompting questions allowed the group to discuss what the parables described, what they learned, and how Jesus' description of the Kingdom fits into their lives.⁵ Some participants benefited from the aid of a group to adequately explore the ramifications of the Kingdom both in the sermon and in their lives.⁶ The written notes were used by some

⁵ See Appendix B.

⁶ Interview by author, 10 September 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 30-2.

participants who may express their thoughts better in writing or who did not get a chance to thoroughly express their thoughts in the group session time.

Given that the data desired is deep understanding and exploration of the subjective impact of humor in the transmission of the Kingdom, a qualitative study provides the adequate framework to gain the data. Tim Sensing's work points to a semi-structured group interview as the best research method since it provides data thick enough to analyze and in a manner that participants will be able to offer their thoughts and feelings with minimal interference from the researcher.⁷

Measurement

I interviewed the participants as a group on the evenings of August 13, August 27, and September 10. Each group interview examined the hearers' understanding of the Kingdom in relation to the two sermons immediately prior to the interview. This approach allowed me to gather data on both a relatively recent sermon (less than 10 hours prior) and a more distant sermon (1 week). I facilitated a semi-structured group interview exploring the participants' concepts of the Kingdom of God and their reactions to the vision that Jesus proposes.⁸ I asked open-ended questions to prompt discussion and promote participation from all members of the group. I ended the interview when the participants had opportunity to offer their input. I intended these interviews to last

⁷ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

⁸ See Appendixes A and B.

no more than 90 minutes to prevent fatigue, but to allow enough time for participants to offer their discoveries. Each session ended up lasting around 2 hours. I also provided notepads to allow participants to write their responses and report them to me. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the data will be retained for two years, at which time it will be destroyed to protect participants' privacy.

I employed a professional outside of the church to transcribe the audio recordings of the interviews. Transcriptions of the three interviews and any participant notes were coded for major themes such as: Humor, Surprise, Novelty, Kingdom, Distraction, Action, Kingdom Principle, and Confusion. Subthemes for specific humor types and specific Kingdom principles were utilized as necessary. Codes were collected in a table and trends identified by the researcher. The details and conclusions of the research and data are in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

Limitations and Delimitations

I solicited volunteers over the age of 18 with no other requisites for age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic level from the congregation. Twelve participants were selected from the pool of volunteers to best represent the demographics of the congregation.

This study considers scholarship on the Kingdom of Heaven parables in Matthew to guard against the preacher's personal biases in interpretation and to ensure that the

principles imparted in the sermon are that of the text. These sources also help to illumine the humorous devices found within the parables.⁹

I conducted three semi-structured group interviews with the goal of prompting participants to offer their impressions about the Kingdom and the sermons without leading them toward favorable outcomes. Even so, some members reflected their feelings about the preacher in their responses, rather than simply reflecting on the sermons. Such responses were not used to agree the conclusions of this research.

Terms and Assumptions

Terms

Humor – Humor is a complex term, but for the purposes of this study, “humor” refers to stories or phrases meant to delight the hearer.¹⁰ By its nature, humor can be subjective. What one person finds funny, another might not. Moreover, there are various kinds of humor (wit, satire, hyperbole). The humor used most in the sermons of this study are amusing anecdotes. This research will not seek to differentiate or evaluate responses to different kinds of humor. Humor is meant to be the vehicle, not the purpose of the sermons. The purpose is communicating the Kingdom.

Kingdom – Jesus refers to the world as God intends it to be as the “Kingdom of God” or the “Kingdom of Heaven” in Matthew. Most scholars agree that these two

⁹ Chapter 2 details much of this research. Three parables are exegeted as a proof of concept in this chapter.

¹⁰ Chapter 2 includes a brief discussion of the theological functions of humor.

terms are interchangeable. For the sake of brevity, Kingdom will be used to describe Jesus' vision of how the world ought to work and how we are expected to live in it.¹¹

Kingdom Principle – Each of the six parables considered in this study contain truths about the Kingdom that Jesus is intending. For the purposes of this study, “Kingdom principle” refers to a particular aspect of the larger Kingdom of God that we might employ in our lives.¹²

Assumptions

I assumed that most people in the congregation enjoy some amount of humor during the sermon.¹³ The congregation has responded well to previous uses of humor in sermons and I assumed that I could employ humor effectively and appropriately. Lastly, I assumed that most congregants want to better follow the teachings and behaviors of Jesus Christ.

Purpose and Significance

By studying the responses to these six sermons, I wanted to understand the potential for homiletical humor to translate the impact of the parables of Jesus Christ to

¹¹ See Chapter 2 for greater detail.

¹² For example, the Kingdom principle that I communicate in the sermon on the Parable of the Sower is “inefficiency.” In the parable, the Sower is wasteful, casting seed even where it will not grow. It is an inefficient use of seed, but such is the Kingdom. Further discussion on these principles is included in Chapter 4.

¹³ FBC Oak Ridge observes a rare tradition of celebrating “Holy Humor Sunday” the week after Easter Sunday. Jokes, humorous music, and anecdotes are part of the worship hour. Humor already has a place in their worship consciousness.

FBC Oak Ridge. My sincere hope was that the Kingdom of God would be clearer and more accessible to people. I wanted to help people dream about what the Kingdom might look like in our midst. Largely, these sermons achieved what I hoped, though not universally.¹⁴

This research adds a practicality to the scholarship on the subject humor in preaching. Many assume humor's homiletic application is limited to keeping listeners' attention. This research proves that humor can be employed to communicate the purpose of the sermon. Humor is not just window dressing, but plays a vital role in the experience of the text.

Other pastors who serve in congregations with people familiar with the Bible can benefit from this research. Humor can make a stale text soar with new life while also making the concepts real in the lives of the people. This research is not making the case that humor is the panacea to contemporary preaching. Rather, humor is a powerful tool in the preacher's hands that can serve with great effect. Like any other tool, humor can dull with overuse. Nevertheless, the research does suggest that humor aided the people of Oak Ridge in encountering the Kingdom through these parables.

While this research focused on preaching Matthean parables in Oak Ridge, humor can vivify theological concepts in a variety of texts to a variety of people,

¹⁴ Chapter 5 makes conclusions about the results of the study and discusses in greater detail the significance for the wider community.

especially to those who already have fixed ideas about scripture and faith. Humor can surprise us with the truth.

CHAPTER 2

TELL ME IF YOU HEARD THIS ONE ALREADY: STUDYING KINGDOM, PARABLES, AND COMEDY

The preacher's task is not easy, as they must routinely find a way to disturb "the dead air of familiarity" that surrounds the event of the sermon.¹⁵ Members of the congregation do not come ready to receive information free of any history, bias, or preconceived notions. On the contrary, people come with varied life experiences, political preferences, and in most cases a background in biblical and theological matters. That is not to say that people are experts in these fields or possess a formal education in such subjects, but those who populate the pews on Sunday mornings have likely heard sermons, Bible studies, or Sunday school lessons that inform their worldview. This informal education can work *against* the preacher. The congregation may assume that they already know what the Scriptures have to say.

The biblical texts challenge the way the world works.¹⁶ The counter-cultural aspects of the Kingdom of God will often be met with suspicion, ambivalence, or even dismissal by the hearers. In his own time, Jesus elicited strong reactions from those who

¹⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 25.

¹⁶ Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 9.

listened to his preaching and teaching.¹⁷ Nevertheless, preachers must preach the texts and bear faithful witness to the truth found therein. Preachers in this context of familiarity face the problem of how to gain an honest hearing while bearing a counter-cultural word that would sooner be ignored than heard, let alone accepted.¹⁸

One comfort for the preacher is that Jesus also had to contend with resistance during his preaching ministry. We might find help if we consider his work not as the prescribed words of angels descended from heaven, but as the labor of a preacher who drafts, practices, and hones his craft. Jesus was trying to communicate a complex, abstract idea, the Kingdom of Heaven, to people who had preconceived ideas about what God desired of them. Jesus' preaching was not intended to confirm presuppositions, but to challenge them with a new manner of being.¹⁹

Jesus used the parables to create the conditions for an encounter with the Kingdom of God.²⁰ This project employs humor to serve the same function and allow the hearers to experience the alternative reality of the Kingdom that challenges our present age. But, before considering the rhetoric of Jesus' preaching, or how we might simulate it, let us begin by considering the content Jesus was preaching.

¹⁷ Consider Luke 4:16-30, when the reaction is to attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff.

¹⁸ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 41.

¹⁹ Raymond Bailey, *Jesus the Preacher* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 51-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-5.

The Kingdom of Heaven

The focus of Jesus' teaching and preaching was βασιλεια του θεου, the Kingdom of God.²¹ Interpreters have been at an impasse about how to understand the concept over such a great temporal and cultural distance from the texts. G. E. Ladd succinctly reviews the variety of interpretations on the Kingdom – from C. H. Dodd's "realized eschatology" that insists the Kingdom is present with Jesus to Albert Schweitzer's insistence that the Kingdom is wholly future and supernatural to Augustine's conflation of the Kingdom with the Church.²² Immanuel Kant opined that the Kingdom was a morally ordered society while Rudolph Otto conveyed the impression that Jesus' Kingdom was in dualistic opposition to an antagonistic kingdom of an "enemy."²³ How can there be so many differing opinions about the Kingdom?

At the center of this panoply of interpretations are Jesus' teachings and sermons. Matthew's gospel is full of references to the Kingdom of Heaven (an interchangeable euphemism for "Kingdom of God"), but Jesus never precisely defines it.²⁴ Eugene Boring suggests that Jesus does not need to define the Kingdom of Heaven since kingdom

²¹ Ron Farmer, "The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Matthew" in *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation* ed. Wendell Willis (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1987), 126.

²² George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 15.

²³ Bruce Chilton, "Introduction" in *The Kingdom of God* ed. Bruce Chilton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 5-9.

²⁴ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, and Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 134.

language at the time of Christ was common and understood as a shorthand way of evoking the story of the world.²⁵ Kingdom language has roots in the theological understanding of God as the creator and sovereign over all. God's proper place is the ruler of all things and all people. The Law, then, is an example of God's rule and those who live under the Law are within God's domain. God acts throughout Israel's history to reassert the divine rule, such as in the Exodus, exile, and the return. In time, the idea of an ultimate, eternal consummation of God's rule produces eschatological hope. The false kingdoms of this world would no longer hold sway and God would reign forever. The Kingdom of God is a way of talking about this entire story.

Norman Perrin gives scholars a better framework to speak about the Kingdom. Perrin argues that the Kingdom is not a *concept* or an *idea*, but rather a dynamic symbol.²⁶ When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom as a present reality, it is because God is breaking in and humans are permitted to live under God's reign. The future aspect anticipates the consummation and fullness of God's reign over all of creation. Rather than a specific physical dominion located in space and time, the Kingdom is a symbol of God's reign being made real. Anywhere God's rule is in action is the Kingdom.

Lay persons in congregations also come with a variety of preconceptions about the Kingdom. Invoking the term in the pulpit calls up preconceived notions of the

²⁵ Eugene Boring, "Matthew" in Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Matthew - Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 291-4.

²⁶ Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 33.

Kingdom in congregations, which can supplant the preacher's work. The preacher may be trying to cast the vision of some new way of being, but the hearers are still settled into an understanding that prevents growth or refreshed expressions of the Kingdom.

Boring offers three helpful examples of how traditional understandings of the Kingdom mute the fullness of the symbol.²⁷ First, the Kingdom of Heaven cannot be conflated with the church. The church can be a part of the Kingdom, live under God's reign, and further the influence of the Kingdom, but it cannot *be* the Kingdom any more than Israel could.

Second, the Kingdom cannot be confused with social progress or social programs as was the assertion of some liberal theologians.²⁸ The Kingdom, under this perspective, is simply a moral/ethical rule to be realized in the world.²⁹ The Kingdom certainly has social implications and could lead to programs that enhance the circumstances of people, but the Kingdom cannot be reduced to a Social Gospel.

Third, the Kingdom is not simply a matter of the "heart."³⁰ The Kingdom is the reign of God breaking into the world in history, and carries with it serious implications for the interactions of human beings and their power structures. Individualizing the Kingdom to a matter of personal piety grossly misrepresents the scope of the Kingdom.

²⁷ Boring, 293.

²⁸ Chilton, 6.

²⁹ Farmer, 124.

³⁰ Boring, 293.

Matthew's gospel emphasizes a dimension of the Kingdom that needs to be stated before moving on, specifically the opposition to the Kingdom. Matthew in particular refers to an enemy,³¹ understood to be ὁ διάβολος – the devil, tempter, Satan.³² The enemy works against the Kingdom of Heaven and even exerts control over the kingdoms of this world.³³ This opposition influences many of the worlds of the parables considered in this project.

In summary, the Kingdom of Heaven is a symbol for God's reign over the world. God's reign has been the intention since the creation, yet consistently resisted by human beings under the subtle influence of an enemy. Jesus inaugurates this Kingdom, points to God's reign among us, invites us to participate in it, and promises a time when God's reign will be complete. Conversely, the enemy is working against the Kingdom and attempts to resist it through control over the way that things currently operate. Jesus' teaching and preaching about the Kingdom attempts to cast a vision of a world contrary to the current way of the world. In other words, there is resistance.

The Kingdom of Heaven in Parables

To communicate the Kingdom of Heaven past the resistances of hearers, Jesus employs the story form of the parable. Parables are a unique genre within a greater

³¹ Matt 13:25. All Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

³² Matt 4:1-11.

³³ Boring, 290.

tradition of a Hebrew form known as *mashal*.³⁴ *Mashal* has roots in the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible exemplified in proverbs and aphorisms. *Meshalim* have a purpose, although often the purpose is hidden and must be uncovered with wisdom. The Hebrew root of *mashal* means “to be like.”³⁵ The Hebrew definition dovetails nicely with the Greek word *parabole* which literally means “to set beside” or “to throw beside.”³⁶ In both definitions, the idea is to hold two ideas next to one another and encourage the hearer to find similarity. Consider the opening to many of Jesus’ parables in Matthew: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . .” or “the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to. . .” The main idea is parallelism. These two things have something in common. Scott summarizes: “A parable is a *mashal* that employs a short narrative fiction to reference symbol.”³⁷

In Jesus’ parables in Matthew, the symbol that the parables reference is the Kingdom of Heaven.³⁸ A common interpretive presumption assumes that parables are allegories, a way of speaking in coded language about another subject. Amy-Jill Levine warns against easy solutions:

Down through the centuries, starting with the Gospel writers themselves, the parables have been allegorized, moralized, christologized, and otherwise tamed

³⁴ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 8-19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

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.³⁹

While parables are simple in form, structure, and language, they are far from simple in interpretation. The point of parables, in Levine’s understanding, is not to tell a story to illustrate a point, but rather to throw things together to provoke, disturb, or remind the hearer. The form itself demands the hearer to play an active role in the story. The listener must answer the question of how the two things are related.

Thomas Long’s advice to preachers about the parables is to avoid using the same approach to interpret all parables. Not all parables function in the same way. According to Long, some parables are a *code*, others a *vessel*, and still others are *works of art*.⁴⁰ A code would be a simple allegory, where each part means something else. The parable story tells a coded message about the Kingdom. Jesus interprets his own parable in this manner in Matthew 13:36-43. Each part of the parable is given a referent and when you make the substitution, the meaning is clear.

By vessel, Long means that the parable is a concrete way of speaking about an abstract concept – a truth about the Kingdom.⁴¹ A vessel parable provides a picture that explains something that is difficult to understand. Matthew sums up his record of Jesus’ Parable of the Unforgiving Servant with a logion that steers the reader to a vessel

³⁹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 4.

⁴⁰ Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 95.

⁴¹ Levine especially warns against this kind of interpretation, 4.

approach.⁴² Jesus tells this parable to embody the abstract concept of giving the forgiveness that we receive from God. The parable puts the concept in a human situation.

Finally, a work of art does not seek to teach, but to give an experience of the Kingdom. These parables invite the hearer into the world of the parable to invite comparison to the status quo. Long frees the parables from the shackles of a single approach and allows the parables to function on their own terms. Consider the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. The story resists simple allegory, although some have interpreted it that way.⁴³ The parable has a multitude of meanings to explore, aspects to see, and characters to consider. The story is an experience rather than a simple substitution or object lesson.⁴⁴

Contrast the effectiveness of the three parables in this chapter with a bald statement of principle instead. “We are meant to be together,” the preacher might say. The member of the congregation would nod, maybe even give an “amen,” and the next morning never pause when writing a check for his daughter’s private school tuition. In another church the preacher says, “God forgives you, so you can forgive others.” A lady in the choir wishes that hard-hearted Mrs. Duke were here to hear that sermon; everybody knows how *she* holds a grudge.

⁴² Matt 18:23-35.

⁴³ Scott, 282-3.

⁴⁴ The sermon I preached on this parable considers the perspectives of two characters to give multiple angles within this work of art.

The expectation of many good Christian people in churches on a given Sunday morning is to hear the preacher deliver a sermon with some truth about a passage of Scripture. If they know the Scripture passage, they will expect to know the point of the sermon. They will expect that the sermon will challenge them, but only in the ways that they expect to be challenged: trust God, be more regular in attending, giving, praying, studying, and volunteering. Be more generous, welcome others, or do not judge. They expect to hear good things and they are glad because there are certainly people who need to hear them. They might say, "If only more people would come to church to hear these things, then they might be better." They expect that someone needs to hear this sermon; hopefully that person will be at church next Sunday.

The parables as a genre lend themselves to breaking expectations. Preachers also need to break expectations to communicate the Kingdom of God to the people. And yet, in too many instances, the parables have become predictable, expected. If a congregant hears the Parable of the Good Samaritan read, they might expect to hear that Jesus accepts those on the fringes of society, like Samaritans. The moral of the story is, "We must not judge someone." But the preacher is not simply transmitting information, but trying to encounter the world of the parable. So how does the preacher subvert the expectations of the members of a congregation to faithfully communicate the "world-shattering" parable?

Humor is built upon subverting expectations. A story takes an unexpected turn and delights the hearer. Humor can ease the crossing between our world and that of the parable. Humor introduces another reality without the perceived threat to cherished

values. Humor works best in the relatable. In a humorous story, people can relate to the subject and see themselves within it. Humor simulates the intended effects of the parable for an audience familiar with these texts. We will pick up these ideas later in the theological considerations, but first we need more robust interpretations of these three parables and the worlds they create.

The Parable of the Wheat among the Weeds

The first parable to consider is in Matthew 13, a chapter filled with parables about the Kingdom.⁴⁵ The parables of Jesus are microcosms that illustrate another reality in order to convey a truth about the Kingdom. The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat illustrates a perennially unsettling truth about the Kingdom; that it is not pure.

The parable consists of two major sections.⁴⁶ Verses 24-6 are the exposition, what one might call the “setup.” The farmer is introduced, the seed is affirmed to be of good quality, but an enemy comes into the field by night and sows weeds among the wheat. Time passes and the weeds and wheat have grown together. The problem is perfectly clear; there are useless, nutrient-draining weeds among the good wheat.

⁴⁵ Scott argues that this parable is not original to Jesus in *Parable* p. 68-70. While Scott makes a reasonable argument, it is not strong enough to justify excluding the parable from the Jesus corpus.

⁴⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20 Hermeneia Series* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 252.

The proximity of this parable to the Parable of the Sower, which Jesus explains immediately prior to this parable, invites comparison to the thorny ground.⁴⁷ This is another instance of a competing plant spoiling the intended crop. In the Parable of the Sower, the competing plant kills the seed. Matthew's composition invites the reader to draw from Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Sower to inform the reading of this parable, specifically to build an expectation. The thorny weed choked out the seedling, therefore it makes sense to remove such impediments to good growth. Weekend gardeners weed out competing plants to increase the health of the crop. The solution is supposed to be evident and the reader expects a neat conclusion. Perhaps "Therefore, always be watchful and weed out the bad crop regularly."

In the next movement of the parable, Jesus frustrates these expectations. The conversation begins with the servants asking about the origin of the weeds. The master informs his servants that an enemy has planted the weeds among the wheat. The servants ask the question that the reader has been expecting: "Then do you want us to go and gather them?"⁴⁸ That is precisely the expectation and what most farmers would do.

The parable turns away from expectations when the master instructs his servants to let the weeds and the wheat grow up together; at harvest time, the reapers should collect the weeds first, bind them together for fuel, and store the grain in the

⁴⁷ Matthew 13:1-9 is the parable proper while v. 18-23 detail Jesus' explanation of the parable to the disciples.

⁴⁸ Matt. 13:28.

barn. Jesus moves on to another two parables and a brief aside before Matthew records Jesus' explanation of the parable.⁴⁹ The fact that Matthew's Jesus separates the explanation from the parable itself suggests that the parable is meant to stand alone, creating its own conditions and obeying its own rules.

Luz points out several odd qualities of this parable.⁵⁰ The crux of parable concerns the quandary of the weeds.⁵¹ First, the mysterious "enemy" comes to the field by night and sows the weeds. What kind of person stores up seeds for weeds? No sensible farmer would. The weeds in this parable are believed to be a common weed known as darnel, which is nearly indistinguishable from wheat until maturity.⁵² In fact, Luz describes a belief in darnel "as a degeneration or as a bewitched form of wheat."⁵³ Finding darnel in a field of wheat would not be that surprising as it is a common weed and often mistaken for wheat. Yet the common practice for dealing with it would have been to pull the weeds to preserve the wheat; the master's solution is contrary to the practice of the day.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Matt. 13:36-43.

⁵⁰ Luz, 252-3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵² Boring, 308.

⁵³ Luz, 254.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

These quirks in the narrative make little sense from a strict narrative sense or in agricultural practice, but this is a parable. The parable creates its own world, plays by its own rules. The oddness in characters, the dreamlike quality of temporal movement, and the contrary response of the master bend the hearer toward the realization intended by the parable.

Boring contends that this parable illuminates Matthew's cosmology of two kingdoms.⁵⁵ The Son of Man is working toward the Kingdom of Heaven while the "enemy" is working a kingdom contrary to the purposes of God. The field is the battleground, the field of play for this strategic game of occupation. While logic might lead us to want to occupy more land than the enemy, Jesus' parable challenges such a play. The vision is that the good and the evil will grow up together and that only in the end will they be separated. Humans are forbidden from making judgments and trying to "weed out" evil in our midst; God alone will do that. Jesus' followers are not to try to eliminate evil from their midst and create a "pure" society or church. Purifying the field might incur more damage to the good than it would impede the growth of evil. One common Christian resolution to this parable is to push ahead to the ending and presume the Church's *telos* as the purified harvest.⁵⁶ The ultimate goal in this interpretive leap only occurs when the evil has been stripped away leaving only a field of good grain. But the point of the parable is not to comfort the faithful as much as it is

⁵⁵ Boring, 308.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 311-2.

to cause the faithful to endure and accept the imperfection of this world. Evil deeds and those who exploit and promote evil purposes continue to exist even as God is working toward the Kingdom. These two realities do not sit well together in the mind.⁵⁷ The Kingdom is here and now, intermingled with good and evil, even while its fullness is still to come at the judgment when the good and the evil will finally be separated. This message would have been scandalous in Matthew's community, but it is no less subversive to modern interpreters.⁵⁸

On the surface, nothing is that comedic about the parable except perhaps a quirky farmer who has his own unique way of farming. Joseph Webb argues that one of the most basic traits of humor is the concept of *incongruity*.⁵⁹ Juxtapose two things that do not belong together. In the parable, the weeds obviously do not belong with the wheat. Placing incongruous people together drives the comedic engine of numerous stories, from TV shows like the *Beverly Hillbillies* to *New Girl*, and even in blockbuster children's movies like *Trolls* or *Moana*. Incongruity is funny. What's more, the moral of these stories is how those seemingly incompatible characters actually need each other.

A sermon on this parable that seeks to use this kind of incongruous humor might relate a story about not fitting in at a dinner party to introduce the concept of things that do not belong together. Yet, the point of utilizing humor is not merely to illustrate

⁵⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33a, Matthew 1-13* (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 382.

⁵⁸ Boring, 312.

⁵⁹ Joseph M. Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 77.

or provide a delightful aside, but to simulate the original intention of the parable. To that end, the sermon could include a recognition and illumination of the ups and downs of life. Rarely are we solely joyful or just grieved. More often than not, life comes all at once. We are weeping at a funeral when a child loudly announces his need to use the restroom. Laughter breaks out in the funeral home. Life is laughing with tears in our eyes. One day in the fullness of time, the evil of this world will pass, but until then we take the good with the bad, knowing that God will have the last laugh.⁶⁰

The sermon the I preached on this parable started by illustrating our impulse to try to weed out our lives. I told a story about a church where I grew up that had a café on the second floor of the full gym with the Christian radio station playing in the background. Cars with Jesus fish on the back are lined up around the building, waiting to pick up their kids from the church's daycare. It was a fully controlled environment. On the surface, that sounds like a good thing: a safe place.

But the parable encourages imperfection, a mixing of the good seed out among the weeds. We are meant to be out in the world, not safe in our walled garden. The sermon ended by telling the story of a church that meets monthly on the patio of a local restaurant. The gathered people drink tea or beer, eat food, and sing hymns right there with the wait staff and the bar regulars. The waitress that I talked to at the restaurant claims it is *her* church. The Kingdom growing out in mixed company. Who would have thought it possible?

⁶⁰ For an excellent sermon based on the world of this parable, consider Barbara Lundblad's "Bad Farming" in *Transforming the Stone* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 64-69.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus compares the Kingdom to a king settling accounts. In the first scene, a servant is called before the king to settle his debt of 10,000 talents, a comical amount of money. A talent was worth fifteen years of wages for a day-laborer.⁶¹ A laborer would need 150,000 years to work it off by himself. Josephus reports that the yearly taxes collected in Judea, Idumea, and Samaria combined only added up to 600 talents.⁶² Ben Witherington, III claims that 10,000 talents would have been more money than was in circulation at the time.⁶³ The impossible sum of money demands that the servant has absolutely no chance of ever settling this debt. The modern equivalent would be over 3 billion, which is nothing short of ridiculous. The king forgives the man's entire debt in a turn of events that would have floored an audience, and with good reason.⁶⁴ The entire first scene, from the comical size of the debt to the servant's groveling to the king's surprise forgiveness, is a humorous delight. Nothing is as it should be, but in a good way. All's well that ends well.

The grotesqueries of the second scene are much darker by comparison. The forgiven servant falls upon one of his fellow servants who owes him money – a much

⁶¹ Boring, 382.

⁶² Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33b, Matthew 14-28* (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 538.

⁶³ Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 353-4.

⁶⁴ Luz, 472.

more realistic sum of 100 denarii. The servant seizes his debtor by the throat and demands his money. In a moment of perfect symmetry, the debtor falls to the ground and pleads with him, invoking the exact words his accuser used before the king: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you."⁶⁵ The servant refuses the plea and throws the debtor into prison until he can pay.

The parable hinges on the play between similarity and difference. The two debtors' actions and pleas are nearly identical.⁶⁶ Matthew's language repeats words throughout the parable giving it a cohesive and paralleled structure that compels a reader to compare the two episodes.⁶⁷ The proximity in time and space only increases the demand to compare the two cases. We are given the impression that the servant leaves the king's chambers and immediately bumps into this debtor just outside the door. Even before arriving at the king's conclusion, the reader has already connected the inequity in forgiveness between the two episodes.

The king, horrified by the servant's behavior, speaks for the audience in the final scene. The king reminds the servant that he was forgiven and so he should have forgiven his fellow servant. The king hands over the unforgiving servant to be tortured until his entire debt is paid. Matthew concludes with Jesus' logion encouraging forgiveness among his disciples, but this addendum is superfluous to the parable's

⁶⁵ Hagner, 33*b*, 539.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Luz, 468-9.

standalone power.⁶⁸ The humor of the first scene highlights the horror of the second, forcing us as hearers to grapple with our own debts.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant includes elements of incongruity (how can the forgiven servant not forgive his fellow?), but the unique humorous device in this parable is hyperbole. Webb files hyperbole as a sub-type under incongruity, but it has a distinctive style.⁶⁹ What delights the hearers and draws them into the story is the absurd amount of debt. The hearer cannot help but laugh at one man owing enough money to pay 10,000 workers for fifteen years. The sermon might similarly exaggerate someone's spectacular failure at something – sports, dating, or a first job. Additionally, hyperbole can be used as a signal of humor. One key for humor, or any other jaunt into an alternate reality, is to clearly signal the departure – a shift in tone, a pre-emptive chuckle, or a statement of something so ridiculously absurd that it becomes clear that the rules of reality have changed.⁷⁰ If we can fail so spectacularly, perhaps we can cut someone else some slack for jaywalking on a dirt road.

The challenge in preaching this parable to an audience that has heard it several times before is the distance that they keep from the parable. Many hearers will see the parable from the outside watching the unforgiving servant and jeering at him from afar. They will consider those people in their lives who are hypocritical and never ask

⁶⁸ Boring, 381.

⁶⁹ Webb, 92.

⁷⁰ Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 67.

themselves if they share any similarities with the unforgiving servant. This parable is meant to address just that sort of person.

The parable starts off with a lighthearted tone, obvious exaggeration, and unexpected good fortune to draw in the audience. The sermon I preached on this parable began similarly, by highlighting how ridiculous a sum the man owed. Then, the sermon talked about hypocrisy with some humorous examples. The crucial point of the sermon came when I admitted to some of my own humorous hypocrisies. The details will be examined in chapter 4, but it was the admission of personal hypocrisy that encouraged people to find themselves within the parable and to be challenged by it.⁷¹ The humorous elements make a way for people to move inside the parable. From inside the parable, the forgiving world of the Kingdom is clear.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

The final parable for consideration in Matthew 20:1-16 has a structure that progresses nicely and maintains a bare bones cast of characters. The repetition of hiring creates movement without becoming rote and the payment of the workers clips along to keep the story moving. From a structural standpoint, this is a masterful parable.

A landowner goes out early in the morning to hire laborers. They agree upon the usual daily wage, a denarius per person, and begin to work in the vineyard. Right from the outset, this is an ordinary story inviting the reader to have a firm grasp of the world

⁷¹ Interview by author, 13 August 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 5-6.

of the parable before challenging the hearer.⁷² The owner goes out again after three hours of work and hires more laborers. He does not agree to pay a particular price, only “whatever is right.”⁷³ The owner repeats this pattern at noon and three hours later in the afternoon.

Jesus sets up a clear expectation. Every three hours, the owner hires a new set of workers from the marketplace to come and join those already working in the vineyard. The final trip to the market breaks the three-hour rhythm and the owner hires the last set of workers in the final hour of the day, at about 5 o’clock. This too is rather silly since the workers will have to travel to get to the vineyard before they can even start working.⁷⁴ But he hires them after a brief interrogation about why they are still waiting in the marketplace.

The scene jumps to the day’s end. The owner orders the manager to pay the workers beginning with the last hired, defying not only the workers’ expectations, but also the reader’s.⁷⁵ Even more surprising is that the owner pays those last hired (who worked only one hour) a full day’s wage, and the agreed upon price for those hired first. We are not told about any of the other workers’ reactions when they receive the same amount, but when the first-hired approach the manager they expect more, and so does

⁷² Boring, 392.

⁷³ Luz, 525.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 531.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 532.

the reader.⁷⁶ Yet, they each receive a denarius, same as everyone else. They protest about working longer and during the scorching heat of the day only to be paid the same amount as those hired last who worked less than an hour. The owner reminds them that they had an agreement, and that what he chooses to pay the other workers is none of their concern. Their envy will not move him.

The parable exemplifies the grace of the owner. In the words of Joachim Jeremias, the parable contrasts “the world of merit, and the world of grace; the law is contrasted with the Gospel.”⁷⁷ The problem is not that the first-hired workers are treated unfairly; they are paid the amount agreed upon. Their complaint is that they are made *equals* with those who came after them.⁷⁸ In this way, their complaint sounds like that of the older son in Luke’s Parable of the Prodigal Son.⁷⁹ The issue is not inequity, but *equality* with those who are deemed unworthy.

Boring argues that one should avoid allegorizing this parable to keep the hearer firmly in the perspective of those first hired.⁸⁰ Indeed, that is the intended audience of this passage. Jesus offers no commentary on the reactions of anyone else to their pay,

⁷⁶ Boring, 393.

⁷⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, 3rd edition. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 139.

⁷⁸ Boring, 394.

⁷⁹ Hagner, *33b*, 571.

⁸⁰ Boring, 392.

although we might presume they are rather pleased, having gotten the best of both worlds. When taken from the perspective of the first-hired, the parable rankles. Amy-Jill Levine argues strongly against allegorizing the owner as God and instead keeping the parable rooted in the real economics of labor and salaries: “What if we saw [this parable] as about what God would have us do not to earn salvation, but to love our neighbor?”⁸¹ As Hare puts it: “This parable is offensive to us; it challenges our sense of justice.”⁸² The parable causes the reader to own up to feelings of envy toward those who have not earned the grace of God, but receive it all the same. Our insistence upon justice is foiled. The Kingdom is not about justice as much as it is about invitation.⁸³ Even before the summary logion “So the last will be first, and the first will be last,” the parable has already exemplified a world in which this is the rule.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard perfectly illustrates a key principle of humor – the reversal of expectation. In some ways, all three parables subvert or reverse expectation, but the point of this parable is reversing what is “deserved.” The parable intends to reshape the world and so the preacher can use folly to invert perspective. In the world of humor, one is allowed to temporarily violate norms, allowing the hearers to momentarily see if the upside-down world actually makes more sense than the right-side-up one.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Levine, 220.

⁸² Hare, 230.

⁸³ Scott, 298.

⁸⁴ Berger, 73-8.

A preacher might point out any number of recent newsworthy items that have flipped expectations of what is possible – the triumph of the underdog, the hard-case with a heart of gold, or the inmate who became an opera singer. If these things are possible, if the last can truly be first, then where do we fit in? Perhaps we need to make room at the front of the line.

When I preached on this parable, I used humor to first exemplify how unfair the world of the parable is from the perspective of those first hired, where worth is linked to work. I related a story about having to work harder in Greek class than the other section who had open-book tests. I worked harder, therefore I deserved more. The sermon turns to consider worth based on personhood rather than strictly the work a person does. This shift occurs through another story about baptizing young Christians and welcoming them to a Baptist church where they have the same power that their parents or grandparents do. They do not have to serve a term on the Finance Committee before getting their vote. What a delight it is for the young and inexperienced to be made equal with those that have come before them.

The Theological Function of Parables

The great reversal that ends the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is a prime example of an aspect of the parables that makes them so powerful in terms of communication; parables play against expectations. The workers last hired are paid first and given a full day's wage; the man whose debt is more than a nation is forgiven; the weeds are left in the ground with the wheat. Each parable sets up an expectation before taking a turn and leaving the hearer a little disoriented. Scott calls this the “world-

shattering” effect of parables.⁸⁵ This disorientation is a natural effect of the “throwing beside” of two concepts: the story and the Kingdom. Practically speaking, the parable creates a world of its own. As the narrative progresses, the hearer continues living in that world, following the path of expectation. When that expectation is frustrated and the narrative concludes, the disorientation allows the hearer to reconsider the world from which they originated.

For instance, in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the expectation that the first-hired will be paid more is frustrated and the landowner makes the case that his generosity is not their concern. The parable unsettles the normal way of the world and causes the hearer to consider a world not based on strict adherence to fairness, but rather a world based on generosity and grace. What would happen if day laborers were hired simply because owners knew they needed the money? Could I congratulate a coworker who catches a break rather than jockey for more money for myself? The world of the parable allows us to see a different reality, the Kingdom.

The Theological Function of Humor

In *Redeeming Laughter*, Peter Berger details how a judicious use of humor can produce a similar “world-shattering” effect. Berger borrows language from Alfred Schultz to describe how certain activities can create little realities, with their own rules and functions, that exist temporarily alongside our shared “paramount reality,” which we might be tempted to call “the real world.”⁸⁶ These are marks of transcendence. We

⁸⁵ Scott, 67.

⁸⁶ Berger, 7.

break from this reality to touch at another before coming back to the paramount reality, perhaps changed by our experience. Music creates an alternate world in which we are permitted to raise our voices, join another's voice, and create a racket. Those activities are generally not accepted in polite company, but music allows a different set of rules. The same is true of playful games, art, sex, religion, and humor.

The comedian can tell a story about verbally arguing with a bear. Normally, such behavior would lead to mental resistance, but the world created by a humorous story behaves by its own rules. After the punchline, the world of the joke collapses and all live again in the paramount reality, albeit with a joyful disposition – a souvenir from the journey.

Parables and humor share DNA. Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers argue that folly “melts the solidity of the world.”⁸⁷ The comedic calls into question that which everyone believed was already a settled matter. Likewise, the parable means to create an alternate reality, a world different than the one we normally inhabit that challenges the way things are.⁸⁸ Strange things may happen, but we permit it because it is a story. A man refuses to weed his garden, or forgives millions of dollars in debt, or hires a few people just to take a walk in a vineyard. These defy norms, but in the world of the parable, it is tolerated. What makes the parables of Jesus unique is that the worlds they

⁸⁷ Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 67.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

create are actually the reality of the Kingdom. Jesus invites us, through the parable narrative, to inhabit the world of the Kingdom of Heaven before returning to the paramount reality. Jesus' intention is that the hearer bring the souvenirs with them and in so doing, the Kingdom might come to earth as it is in heaven.

The cold reality is that even the parables can lose their power to create a new world for an audience. Another sermon on the Parable of the Sower may only be *another sermon* on the matter. In other words, they have already been there, done that. Berger argues that there is inertia to our world, a tendency to remain the same: "The paramount reality of everyday life always defends itself against the ever-present danger of being swept away by those other realities lurking behind its facades."⁸⁹ Any group, any congregation, will attempt to avoid disruption. Presuming the knowledge of the parable prevents the hearer from journeying in too far and risking a change.

Humor can simulate that same motion of invitation to a new reality, experience of subversion, and return with souvenirs. Humor certainly can achieve little other than diversion, but the same can be said of storytelling or music. Yet if properly employed they can communicate the reality of the Kingdom. The parables discussed in this chapter lend themselves to humor since they include native elements to the humorous. Each parable was selected as a sort of archetype of how humor can simulate the "motion" of the parable.

Conclusion

⁸⁹ Berger, 12.

Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God, a reality of God's way that we could live into if we can just see it. He taught through parables, parallel worlds that give the hearer an experience of what is possible in the Kingdom. Parables bypassed the defenses of the routines of the everyday by defying expectation and delighting with oddity. Preachers can utilize a number of devices to facilitate the same movement, but humor can be a natural fit. A humorous story appears low stakes and enjoyable, encouraging attention in the hearers, but at some point something unexpected will happen. The unexpected departure is what causes delight, but it can also inspire revelation.

Humor and parables have much in common, like the juxtaposition of odd pairs, subverting expectation, and breaking the norms of reality. In such ways, the preacher might actually utilize the tools of humor to offer the hearers an experience in the world of the Kingdom of God. For modern churchgoers, humor can provide a new way into a familiar text.

CHAPTER 3

WHY THE PREACHER CROSSED THE ROAD: KINGDOM AND COMEDY IN OAK RIDGE

Preachers endeavor to deliver sermons that provide the space for an encounter with the deep riches of the scriptures. Using humor, the preacher can provide a new avenue into a familiar text. Preachers need such devices since the majority of people sitting under sermons on Sunday mornings have already heard sermons on these texts. The First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge, TN is comprised almost entirely of long-attending church members who have heard sermons and lessons on the parables. This chapter describes the congregation and argues why a sermon series using humor is necessary.

Context

History of Oak Ridge

Many people have never heard of Oak Ridge, and that is intentional to some degree. Oak Ridge was formed during World War II for the purpose of the Manhattan Project. Oak Ridge was selected by the federal government as a site to develop atomic weapons. Due to the sensitive nature of the work, the city was closed to the public, and consequently Oak Ridge had to be self-sufficient. Scientists, engineers, machinists, and support workers came to the mountains of East Tennessee where they would work and live with little to no contact with the outside world. These new Oak Ridgers, who came from all over the United States, brought their cultural expectations from home into this new setting. They wanted good schools for their children, recreation for their families,

restaurants, shopping, and public transportation within the city since they could not leave easily. They made a community apart from the outside world, a Secret City.⁹⁰

At her peak, Oak Ridge had a total population of around 75,000 during the Manhattan Project.⁹¹ After the War, the city opened to the public and people were allowed to move in and out. Nearly half of the wartime personnel did move with government contracts in flux, but many others stayed. The Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) became a magnet for high caliber scientists from around the world. The city continued to attract people from diverse cultures and welcomed them into the community. Oak Ridge has maintained a virtually unchanged population of around 28,000 for the past 60 years.⁹² Oak Ridge was formed by people who were selected by the government because they were the best and the brightest.

Current Context of Oak Ridge

In some ways, Oak Ridge has remained the same. Today, the population has grown modestly to 29,310 as of the 2015 Census.⁹³ Oak Ridge remains a science town.

⁹⁰ Oak Ridge is known as “The Secret City.” The yearly summer festival held in celebration of the town is called The Secret City Festival.

⁹¹ Charles W. Johnson and Charles O. Jackson, *City Behind a Fence: Oak Ridge, Tennessee 1942-1946* (Knoxville: University of Knoxville Press, 1990), 25.

⁹² Archived US Census data is kept in different locations based on survey years. They can be accessed at the following links to the websites which have been shortened for space. 1950: <https://tinyurl.com/ydawgnvq>, p. 59; 1960-80: <https://tinyurl.com/yaaw58z4>, p. 24; 1990: <https://tinyurl.com/yavrvyro>, p. 23; 2000: <https://tinyurl.com/yc5xkhwy>, p. 53.

⁹³ The US Census Bureau website does not allow static hyperlinks, but statistics can be found by searching “Oak Ridge, TN” at <https://factfinder.census.gov/>.

The largest employers are the Department of Energy (DOE) and ORNL. Several other contract scientific businesses supplement their work.⁹⁴ The families who live in Oak Ridge place a high value on education and are willing to sacrifice financially for it. The Oak Ridge School System consistently pays education professionals more than surrounding county and city systems so that they can hire the best teachers available.⁹⁵ As such, Oak Ridge tends to rank near the top performing schools in the state.⁹⁶ The city boasts a highly-educated population with 92% graduating from high school, 70% with at least some college education, and almost 20% having graduate or advanced degrees.⁹⁷

Oak Ridgers maintain their sense of community independence. They are revitalizing their own shopping district to compete with the commercial sprawl of nearby Knoxville. The community supports a community ballet, two orchestras (one paid and one volunteer), a separate community band, and a chorus that provide fine arts expression within Oak Ridge. The community embodies a spirit of self-sufficiency.

Oak Ridge is an aging community with a median age of 42 and one-fifth of the population over the age of 62.⁹⁸ The original generations who moved to Oak Ridge or who were born here are now retiring. Nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and in-

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ <http://www.ornl.edu/central-office/human-resources/salary-schedules/>.

⁹⁶ <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/report-card>.

⁹⁷ <https://factfinder.census.gov/>

⁹⁸ Ibid.

home caregivers are in high demand. Still, with age comes experience and pride in the accomplishments of life.

All of these characteristics come to bear upon the preaching event. Oak Ridgers are by and large educated experts in their respective fields, who were often recruited from other places because of their abilities and knowledge. They have spent their lives solving problems, from national security to scientific expansion to civil and community engineering. People in the community are by and large self-motivated, successful intellectuals. Nuclear physicists and experienced educators will not easily be lectured. Like the educated elite on Mars Hill, new ideas are welcomed and considered as interesting diversions.⁹⁹ Novelty does not necessarily lead to engagement or adoption of the concept. People might listen to the sermon or consider its ideas, but not engage with the world of the Kingdom.

First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge

The First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge (FBCOR) mirrors the city in many ways. The church was formed during the construction of the city of Oak Ridge. The founding members were government employees working on the Manhattan Project. The church has followed the life cycle of the town. What was once bursting at the seams with people has matured and cooled. At its peak in 1946, the church boasted 925 in average attendance. After the War, the attendance dropped and then hovered around 500 until

⁹⁹ Acts 17:19-21.

1965. That number has declined since then. Today, the church has an average attendance of 125.¹⁰⁰

The congregation maintains a large percentage of highly-educated members. Many of our people have been employed by DOE, ORNL, or Oak Ridge City Schools.¹⁰¹ Most of the membership is upper-middle class. The congregation is mostly Caucasian-American with 5% being Asian-American. The congregation is aging with about 70% of the congregation over the age of 50, many of whom have been members of the church for over 20 years. In the past twelve months, the church has experienced some moderate growth with young families joining. Most of these new members have prior church experience. The vast majority of our people have grown up in churches of like faith.

The committee structure is robust and active. They believe in lay leadership of the church. Deacons and Sunday school classes perform pastoral care, the Trustees handle the facilities, and lay leaders tend to speak to one another before including a staff member in a new initiative.

Throughout her history, the church has been on the leading edge of change and social engagement in Oak Ridge. When the Civil Rights movement was heating up in the early 1960s, FBCOR was one of the first white congregations in Oak Ridge to allow non-white members and championed the cause of integration at local and denominational

¹⁰⁰ Johelen Stephenson, *The Fellowship of Kindred Spirits: Fifty Years with First Baptist Church Oak Ridge, Tennessee*, ed. Johelen Stephenson (Oak Ridge: 1993), 187-8.

¹⁰¹ True to their independent spirit, the City of Oak Ridge maintains their own public school system apart from Anderson and Roane counties.

levels.¹⁰² In 1971, FBCOR became the first Baptist church in the state of Tennessee to ordain a female to be a deacon, Betty Galloway.¹⁰³ For decades, the church has funded and operated a food pantry and clothes closet, the Agape Center, that gives out about \$500 in groceries each week. The church financially sponsors local social service organizations that secure housing, provide furniture, and assist with utilities. FBCOR takes pride in their history and their mission efforts. The members of the church are accustomed to being educated, experienced, thoughtful, self-reliant and on the forefront of what is to come. Leaders in the church have served for decades and they take church matters seriously.

I was called to the church as Senior Pastor in July 2016 with high expectations and a generous welcome. Throughout the interview process and since my coming to Oak Ridge, I have heard cautionary tales of prior ministers who ran afoul of certain members and groups. A particularly egregious offense to this congregation is “micro-managing.” A minister who wants to control the work of committees or attempts to “run the church” will have a contentious tenure at FBCOR. That said, I have been encouraged to attend and participate in most meetings in the church. A couple of committees have changed their meeting times to better suit my schedule. The not so subtle message is that they want to lead the church, but they genuinely do want to hear from their minister, especially from the pulpit. More than other congregations I have

¹⁰² Ibid., 67-9. It is disappointing, however, that despite this push in the 60s, the church currently has no African-American members.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 90.

served, FBCOR has a membership that places a high value on preaching. Several people take notes, follow up on ideas from sermons, or even challenge what I say with a counter-example. Sermons are not just a perfunctory part of worship.

The membership's collective church experience means that they have listened to a great many sermons, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and revivals. Many of them retain these teachings. They remember the history and stories of the Bible. To borrow a phrase from a former minister of the church, "they have been around the biblical block before." When the Scriptures are read on Sunday morning, many in the congregation will recognize the passage and will already be making connections to past teachings. The passage is familiar, which makes it easy to tune out because the assumption is that the sermon will offer the same conclusions that previous teachings have. That is often true, but the preacher is not out to reiterate, but to transform. Especially when the preacher offers the challenging words of Jesus Christ, the goal is to recapture Jesus' "power to unravel the cocoon of worldview and ideology."¹⁰⁴ The challenge for the preacher is to gain a fresh hearing with the members who have heard these stories before, so that they can encounter the world-changing vision of the Kingdom of God and be transformed by the Spirit of God.

A refreshed vision of the Kingdom of God is needed in this place and at this time. New people are joining and the staid members are busy keeping the past ministries going. The congregation is changing and they need a shared vision of what the church is

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 98.

working toward. Both the established members and the new ones might presume they already know what the vision of the church is, based on prior church experience. But the Kingdom of God challenges the comfortable ways that we have.¹⁰⁵ How do preachers bypass the presumptions of experienced church members so that the revolutionary vision of the Kingdom of God can be encountered afresh?

Expectations Subverted

The answer may be at work already within the rhythm of the congregation. The church observes a tradition known as Holy Humor Sunday. Observances vary depending on the congregation, but FBCOR practices Holy Humor Sunday the week after Easter, linking it directly to the glory of the resurrection. Holy Humor Sunday begins with the choir processing in with affected laughter. The instrumentalists play popular secular tunes, the choir sings a piece outside of the normal repertoire, and humor is expected in the various elements of worship. This tradition was started by one of my predecessors who exclaimed that Easter is the greatest joke ever played upon Satan and the powers of this world. What was certain defeat and death turns to victory and eternal life. The congregation accepts the theology of talking about the holiest season of the Christian year as a joke. Humor, then, might provide the appropriate vehicle for the counter-cultural vision of the Kingdom of God because this church already has humor built into their liturgical practice.

¹⁰⁵ Consider for example the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13. The text challenges notions of efficiency and economy by the way the sower indiscriminately scatters seed. Especially in a scientific town, waste is not exactly welcome.

Research Methodology

The intention of this research is to determine how effective homiletical humor can be in communicating the vision of the Kingdom of God. This is not as simple as tracking whether or not people are paying attention during the sermons or tallying how many people approve of the sermon. Surface level responses do not measure if the message was truly heard since respondents may be drawing on previous teachings or sermons outside of the study.

A better test of the hypothesis is to measure participants' interaction with the principles of the Kingdom presented in the sermons. Participants must be free to articulate their understanding with minimal researcher interference and in their own words. For these reasons, the study will employ a qualitative research methodology to preserve participant meanings and to gain data rich enough to draw conclusions about how effective the sermons are in vivifying the Kingdom.¹⁰⁶ Since the sermon series is only six weeks and I am measuring the reactions of a small group to the phenomenon, a case study design suits the purposes of the study.¹⁰⁷

Structure of the Project

Three group interview sessions measure participant responses to six consecutive sermons.¹⁰⁸ The research was announced and people were invited to become

¹⁰⁶ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th edition (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2014), 184-6.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁸ The project was submitted to Mercer University's IRB and was approved on June 7, 2017. See Appendix E.

participants during July 2017. Verbal announcements were made on Sunday mornings during worship and at Wednesday night Bible studies. Written advertisements were printed in the bulletins for Sunday mornings, Wednesday nights, and in both editions of the July newsletter.¹⁰⁹ These announcements provided twenty-five volunteers from which I selected a group of twelve.

Twelve participants were selected from a larger pool of volunteers in the congregation. Volunteers were selected to maintain a balance in the numbers of male and female participation (six of each) as well as create a cross-section of various ages within the congregation. Participants range in age from the mid-20s to over 80. Most participants are Caucasian-American. The only Asian-American who volunteered was selected to accurately reflect the ethnic makeup of the congregation. Participants were informed about the minimal risks of the study and that the purpose of the study was to measure the effectiveness of the sermons over a six-week period.¹¹⁰ Humor was not mentioned in the introduction as a focus of the study to guard against initial bias.

Sermons

All six sermons are based on parables concerning the Kingdom of God in Matthew. The six sermons of this study are as follows:

¹⁰⁹ See Appendix C.

¹¹⁰ See Appendix D.

- August 6 – *The Parable of the Sower* – Matt. 13:3-9
- August 13 – *The Parable of the Wheat among the Weeds* – Matt. 13:24-30
- August 20 – *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant* – Matt. 18:23-35
- August 27 – *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard* – Matt. 20:1-16
- September 3 – *The Parable of the Two Sons* – Matt. 21:28-32
- September 10 – *The Parable of the Talents* – Matt. 25:14-30

Many of these parables are familiar to church attendees. Most of the respondents had heard a sermon or lesson on most of the parables before, meaning that they had a prior understanding of what the parable means as soon as the Scripture was read. Biblical literacy is not a negative, but it does require the preacher to adjust the sermon to maintain the transformative power that Jesus intended for these parables.

As argued in the last chapter, parables are meant to draw the hearer into the strange world of the story and to consider its meaning. Inside of Jesus' parables were truths about the Kingdom. The six sermons of this study seek to mimic that same motion of attraction and invitation into the world of the Kingdom of God through humor.

Each sermon utilizes humor to facilitate the Kingdom principle reaching the hearer. Humor arises from tangible, relatable circumstances which help the hearer identify with the situation the preacher poses. I used humor to explore the tension within the parable so that the Kingdom principle can impact and even transform the hearer. Humor is not the point of these sermons; the Kingdom is the point. Humor is the vehicle. Humor provides the draw that the parables were intended to have.

That is not to say that using humor is without danger. Some might find humor to be unsuitable for worship. Given the church's tradition of Holy Humor Sunday and

reactions to previous humorous stories in sermons, the use of humor seems within bounds. Utilizing humor in sermons runs a risk of becoming a gimmick or, even worse, a distraction. With this danger in mind, these sermons are not a standup routine. They are not wall to wall jokes. Some stories are humorous, but some are not humorous at all. As we will observe in the next chapter, some of the sermons were more successful maintaining that balance between tool and crutch than others.

Group Interviews

All available participants were encouraged to attend and contribute during three group interview sessions on August 13, August 27, and September 10. Sessions were conducted in one of the church's Sunday school rooms on Sunday evenings when no one else was in the church building so the participants' privacy was maintained. Each session included a meal to help compensate for their time and to ease the awkwardness of a recorded interview session. Interviews followed the procedures outlined in the Group Interview Guidelines and stayed primarily to the prescribed questions with minimal prompting and interference on the part of the researcher.¹¹¹ Sessions were divided into two sections: one for each of the previous sermons.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a third party outside of the church. The participants were given notepads during the sessions in case they were more comfortable writing their thoughts than speaking in front of a group. One participant gave me handwritten notes that she had written prior to the interview sessions. The primary objective of the research methodology was to ascertain the

¹¹¹ See Appendices A and B.

participants' meanings with minimal researcher guidance or interference. Providing various methods of expression encourages these outcomes.

During the interview sessions, I took notes in my field journal to supplement the participants' direct responses. I made note of moments when people around the table were nodding in agreement with something a fellow participant was saying. I noted general impressions of what I heard people saying to aid location of phrases or topics in the recordings.

Data Collection

After the recorded sessions were transcribed, field notes were applied to the document to provide depth and context. The transcription was then coded for humor, novelty, surprise, distraction, Kingdom principles, past teachings, personal connection, confusion, and action. These themes (and sub-themes when necessary) were compiled onto a table to compare how each sermon was received by the participants. I identified the major themes endemic to all the sermons as well as those confined to a few, or even a single sermon.

As we will see in the next chapter, not all sermons were received in the same way. There was a strong correlation to overall reception of the sermon and the way that humor was used within the sermon. The expression of the Kingdom principle in each sermon was the primary objective and for the most part, the Kingdom principles came through clearly in the participants' responses.

CHAPTER 4

A GUY WALKS INTO A PULPIT: KINGDOM THROUGH COMEDY

Humor is not the point; the Kingdom is the point. In the sermons preached over the course of these six weeks, humor provided a means of conveying the strange and challenging truths of the Kingdom of God to the congregation.¹¹² The twelve participants in the study described their experiences of the sermons in three group interview sessions. The three sessions lasted two hours each. This produced an abundance of raw information. This chapter will organize the salient data by first broadly addressing how humor engaged the participants in the Kingdom messages across the scope of the sermon series. After briefly viewing the larger trends, I will examine specific participant's experiences which give a sense of how the mixture of Kingdom and comedy affected individuals.

Larger Trends

Generally, the participants recognized the preacher's attempts at humor and responded favorably to them. The reactions to specific instances of humor varied widely, which is to be expected since humor leans toward the subjective. We will explore these responses in the focused sections on each sermon below, but there was not a uniform response to the humor used in these sermons. The great majority of

¹¹² Audio recordings of the sermons can be found on the FBCOR website: <http://www.fbcoakridge.org/sermon-series/brave-new-world/>

responses indicated a favorable response to humor and some participants attributed their engagement with the subject matter to the use of humor. One such comment from the first session came from a participant in her mid-thirties who has grown up in FBCOR and has heard quite a few sermons. Janine offered,

Sometimes if a minister says something that I either don't relate to or I find offensive or stiff or, you know, "holier than thou" or whatever, it kind of closes me off a little bit. So, I think the humor helps, for me personally, to open up and listen better to what you're saying.¹¹³

Message Received

On the macroscopic level, the sermons were successful in communicating the Kingdom principles to the participants. In responding to all of the sermons, at least 70% of the participants were able to verbalize the Kingdom principle highlighted in the sermon.¹¹⁴ In the first sermon on the Parable of the Sower, the focus was on how inefficient the Kingdom of God is, exemplified by the Sower throwing seed even in obviously unfavorable places. During the first group session, one of our youngest participants, Pat, spoke up for the group who was struggling to come up with specific instances of humor. Pat said,

I would say that although none of us can remember the jokes, it helped us, or helped me, to remember that the farmer was inefficient. Regardless of what that joke was or what twelve jokes that was, I probably would have just forgotten if it wasn't for the jokes.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Janine, interview by author, 13 August 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 8.

¹¹⁴ See *Figure 1*.

¹¹⁵ Pat, 13 August, 8.

As Pat and Janine have noted, humor positively effects the reception of the Kingdom principles.

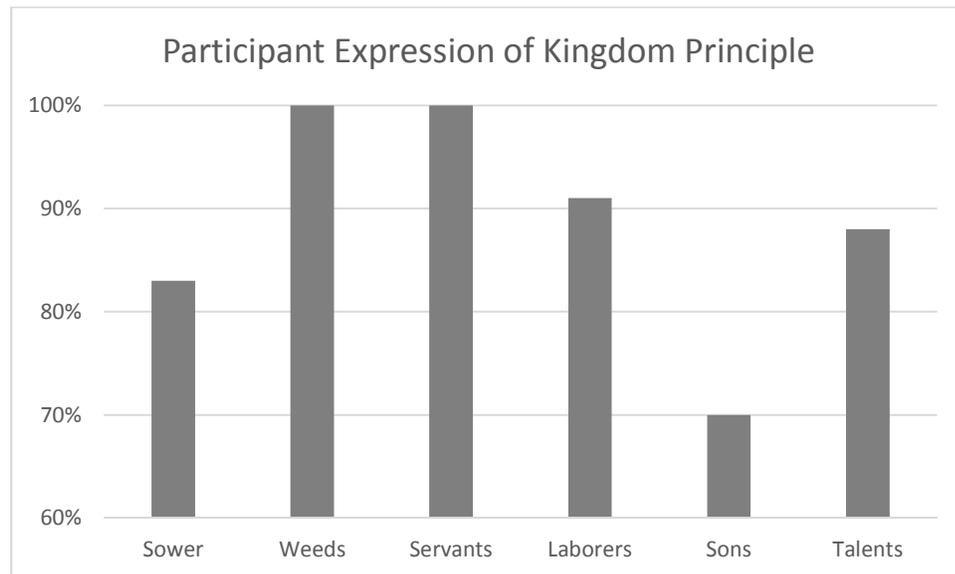


Figure 1.

As the sermon series and the sessions continued, there was a greater likelihood of synthesizing previous Kingdom principles into their responses. For instance, in the Parable of the Two Sons, the Kingdom principle that I intended was “inclusion.” The idea is that the Kingdom of God is broader than we tend to believe. Both sons are eventually included. It is not an either/or proposition. All but three of the participants verbalized “inclusion.” The three who did not, however, mentioned a Kingdom principle from previous sermons: “forgiveness” and “imperfection.” Both imperfection and forgiveness are aspects within the Parable of the Two Sons that harmonize with inclusion. A major section of the sermon was about how neither son got it all right (imperfection). While the two participants did not specifically mention inclusion, they were still expressing

Kingdom principles. All told, the data suggests a successful reception of the key Kingdom principles intended by the preacher.

Action Items

Identifying Kingdom principles is a good start, but are people motivated to action? Some of the questions posed during the group interview sessions measured how participants engaged with the Kingdom principles on a deeper level.¹¹⁶ Some members were able to verbalize that their willingness to engage with ideas in a refreshed way correlates to the use of humor. Tina spoke pointedly to the idea of humor overcoming defenses:

Some of the jokes, especially with children or people in your life, made me want to go home and think about who are the people that I care about in my life or that I see day to day or strangers and then go back to Scripture and see how can I use God's word. How can I change and invest in myself to be a better sower and to spread the word? Even though I won't necessarily be efficient in it because we can't be efficient with people, which is what you were discussing.¹¹⁷

As we shall see, participants shared their engagement with the principles in various ways. Some questioned, some connected the principle to their personal lives, and some were compelled to act upon what they understood Christ to be suggesting.

In response to the sermons, the average number of participants who expressed intent to action based on the Kingdom principle was 64%. The individual sermons varied widely on this figure, ranging from 30% on the fifth sermon to 100% on the last.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ For a list of the Group Interview Questions, see *Appendix B*.

¹¹⁷ Tina, 13 August, 10.

¹¹⁸ See *Figure 2*.

Intent to action shows the ultimate engagement with the Kingdom principle because it becomes something upon which they are willing to base their behavior. In response to the final sermon, all the participants present made an indication of a desire to act upon the Kingdom.

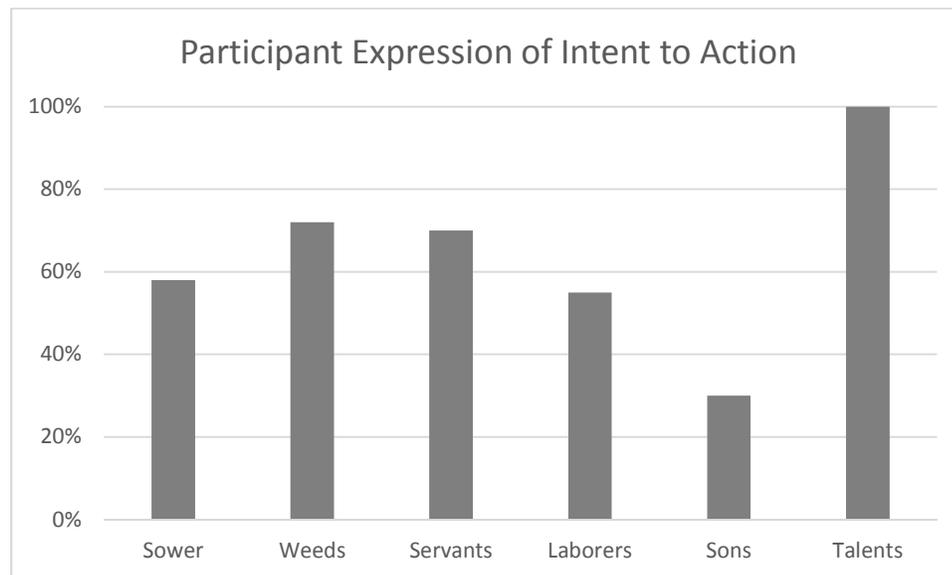


Figure 2.

Examples of Engagement

This section will consider each sermon in turn and examine one participant who shared their experiences during the group interview session. Each of the twelve participants offered their experiences when they were present, but often, one type of response to a question was shared among the group. By focusing on a single voice in each sermon's response, we will gain a greater understanding of the depth of participants' experiences while noting instances of broad agreement.

Dave's Revelation – Parable of the Sower

Dave is one of the newest members to FBCOR in the research group. Dave and his wife have a young child. He lives in the tension of a demanding career and being the kind of family man he aspires to be. One way that he spends time with his family is in a family garden. Dave's experience in his garden informed his hearing of the sermon on the Parable of the Sower.

The Kingdom principle that I highlighted in the sermon was inefficiency. The sower scatters seed everywhere, which is a waste for a business. The Kingdom, however, is not about business, but about people. Efficiency flies out the window when it comes to investing in people. Humor was used to exemplify how investing in people is inefficient, but that inefficiency is not a bad thing.

Dave's response to this sermon unfolded throughout the session. At first, Dave expressed how he grappled with the concept:

I was challenged by it, to be honest. I guess I concur with pretty much everything that's been said so far about traditionally being the parable . . . about how, you know, at best you've got good soil and you've got not good soil. And you break it down and we've got this nice foil, and we can proceed with that. But to then turn around and say well it's not about the efficiency. And, you know, I agree.¹¹⁹

Dave continued to talk about trying to maximize efficiency in his garden and in the rest of his life. He concluded by saying that the sermon "challenged the way I was looking and thinking about things and then how to apply that in my life."¹²⁰ Dave's comments came early in the session indicating that it had been working on him for the past week.

¹¹⁹ Dave, 13 August, 4.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 5.

Further into the session, Dave responded to a question about whether or not they gained anything as a result of the humor. Dave said:

I'm going to say, "No." And I know that sounds harsh, but that doesn't mean that I don't think it was worthwhile, but it ultimately didn't impact what was gleaned from the sermon. I know that just in conversation, and I imagine in sermons there can be a lot of tension, a lot of expectation, and laughter maybe more than any other response is something that helps to ease that discomfort. . . . So, I mean, I guess, I don't know as I gained anything directly from the humor, but I do feel that it clearly played an important part in the sermon and in our ability to hear and understand and retain it.¹²¹

While Dave could not identify any specific insight gained from a humorous example, he insisted that the use of humor was important in the work of the sermon. Other participants shared aspects of Dave's response. Amy, Janine, and Louie noted that humor in general helps them to "open up" to the sermon.¹²² Jerry and Pat agreed with Dave's idea, indicating that humor helps them remember information.¹²³

The group as a whole had a hard time initially coming up with specific instances in this sermon that they found humorous, giving rise to Pat's aforementioned comment about remembering the Kingdom principle because of the "jokes" which everyone had forgotten. A few members did eventually recall that I had offered examples of children being inefficient getting ready for school in the morning or at bedtime. But those humorous stories were not the ideas fresh on their minds about the sermon.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹²² Interview by author, 13 August, 8.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 11 and 8 respectively.

Dave's initial impression was that the humor had produced no insights. In his final response on the sermon, Dave admitted that his concept of the Kingdom had changed and that he was compelled to act upon it. Dave said:

I guess I'd actually like to return to the last question we departed from because I was thinking about it a little bit, and the answer is yes, and I'm a little surprised by it. You know, has the sermon changed my understanding of the Kingdom of God? . . . So yes, I've never really thought about it quite like. . . Thinking that somehow the Kingdom of Heaven (interlocks) and (overlaps) our current existence, but that we're all there. We're all in the Kingdom of Heaven, even the ones that aren't necessarily actively seeking after God. And that's interesting to me. And I guess, I'm not sure what we're going to do with that one, but, um... But have I been able to practice last week's, yeah. I have a bunch of interns, *had* a bunch of interns, this is their last week. The temptation is always to try to optimize efficiency, but you know, (I've been) making the time to sit down and talk with them, go back over what their last couple of weeks have been like. You know, and kind of get them into as good a place as possible, as they launch at the end of the summer and go back to school. So, I mean yeah, it's been sacrificing my efficiency to show love and kindness and grace and so forth.¹²⁴

Dave's experience illustrates how humor can open a hearer up to the sermon so that the Kingdom principle can be experienced in a deep way. Dave's response includes a way that he behaved in a manner outside of his usual pattern to make room for the young people in his workplace and to invest in them, even if it meant sacrificing efficiency. In that way, Dave brought the Kingdom with him to the laboratory.

Stephen's Distraction – Parable of the Wheat among the Weeds

Stephen is a retired scientist who is heavily involved in leadership within the church. He has held just about every position of leadership at one point or another and he continues to be one of the church's most dependable volunteers for mission work, benevolence, and fellowship activities. He has a great mind, a big heart, and a strong

¹²⁴ Dave, 13 August, 14-5.

work ethic. Stephen also has a penchant for humor evidenced by his readiness with a joke during long meetings. It was no surprise when Stephen volunteered for the study. He is a consummate churchman and no stranger to scholarship.

Stephen only attended the first session due to a surgery that kept him at home for the others. The night he attended our group session, he was a vocal and unabashed participant. One of Stephen's strongest characteristics is that he speaks up and gives his opinion. He is not harsh or rude about it, but neither does he see a need to sugarcoat the truth.

The group was still in middle of their discussion about the sermon on the Sower when Stephen offered his thoughts about the second sermon,

I noticed today, and this is off topic a little bit. You said a couple of things that were quite weak that some people I don't think caught, and so I think you have to be mindful of when you do say something that everybody in the audience goes, "Oh, I understand." Some of them were pretty quick.¹²⁵

He was making a technical critique about the delivery of humorous elements (although the "weak" comment reads more like quality than volume). The worry he expressed a few minutes later was that he did not want to exclude anybody.¹²⁶

After the midpoint break, the group began officially talking about the second sermon, on the Parable of the Wheat among the Weeds. From the outset, the reactions to this sermon were noticeably different from the first. Part of that was due to the

¹²⁵ Stephen, 13 August, 8.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 9.

sermon being fresher on the memory, since it was preached about 6 hours earlier the same day.

The sermon itself was quite different. The Kingdom principle in the parable is “imperfection.” The owner of the field does not pluck the weeds from the field, but rather orders that they grow up together. In the same field are good crops right next to invasive plants that will do nothing except cause trouble and rob nutrients from the productive crops. To simulate the same counterintuitive approach in the parable, I employed humor that went a bit against the grain.

The humor in this sermon was largely about Walt Disney World. The idea behind the choice is that Disney World is a pristine, controlled place. The company owns so much acreage in Central Florida, that they really have created a world where everything is just how they want it to be. I spent a good chunk upfront setting this idea up in preparation for the turn later toward something that looks more like the Kingdom, imperfect and intermingled. But many expressed a struggle with the humor right at the outset of the session.

Paula expressed some confusion about my comments on Disney after the first question, followed immediately by Stephen who said, “I got a little thrown too. I got too wrapped up in the minutiae about Disney. I thought where is he going? I mean, you could have cut half of that out and still said the same thing.”¹²⁷ A few participants pushed back on the length part, but about a third of the participants agreed that the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 15.

focus on Disney toward the beginning was confusing. Again, Stephen was not trying to be harsh or overly critical. He was answering the question honestly and without reservation. I agree with Stephen about the length of that section of the sermon.

Less than thirty seconds later, he jumped back into the discussion and changed the direction again by saying, “When you said there were no weeds in Disney World: bingo! The whole thing just snapped together. It made perfect sense.”¹²⁸ After this comment, the discussion shifted toward how the Disney commentary illustrated the point of the parable. After some initial confusion, the sermon did deliver the Kingdom principle and the data shows it. While many expressed confusion or even distraction, all the participants expressed the Kingdom principle imperfection and a majority of participants expressed a personal connection or cognitive engagement with the concepts; 72% were even compelled to action.¹²⁹

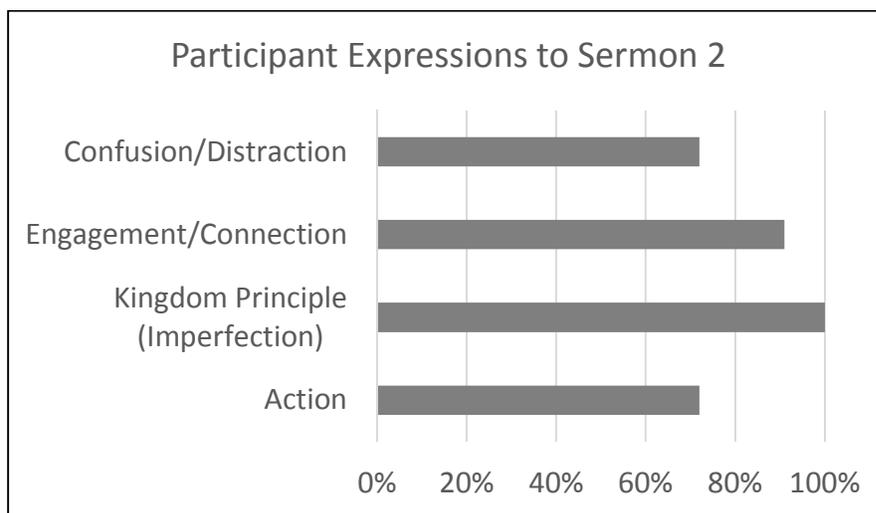


Figure 3.

¹²⁸ Stephen, 13 August, 16.

¹²⁹ See Figure 3. Note that only 11 of the participants heard the second sermon.

Stephen's heart for ministry and for people shined through in his comments during this session. Stephen is a man who cares about people and believes that the church is a place that needs to help others. For him, the message of this parable was clear. He shared:

It's not all shiny white. My impression of it was, you know, when the Master said to leave the weeds in there with the wheat, let them grow together. We'll figure it out later. We'll get rid of those weeds later on. And kind of what you were thinking about is like, let's isolate those weeds. Let's exterminate them right now. And we want to sterilize ourselves. Be in a shiny, white place that's sparkling clean, and the world's just not like that. The people that need help are dirty and hungry. You can't be in a shiny, white place and serve those folks.¹³⁰

The data shows that the sermon succeeded in engaging hearers in the Kingdom, but that is not to say that the sermon was without fault. What the results from this sermon suggest is that while humor can be an effective vehicle for communicating the Kingdom of God, the preacher runs the risk of distracting from the point. There is a balance to be struck between conveying the Kingdom and convoluting the message.

Kate's Relatability – the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Kate was one of the first people from FBCOR that I met. She has a successful career in the medical field and she understands the workings of the church. She has two grown children and a husband who shares her quick wit. She is easy to talk to, highly capable, and a natural leader. Kate was a reliable and insightful contributor in the group sessions, but her comments on the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant were especially illuminating.

¹³⁰ Stephen, 13 August, 18.

The Kingdom principle that the sermon promoted was, naturally, forgiveness. The passage begins with Jesus' preamble about forgiving our fellows "70 times 7" before launching into the parable proper. The parable hinges on the hypocrisy of the servant who cannot forgive a sum that cannot even be compared to the debt he himself was forgiven. Thus, we must forgive, just as we have been forgiven.

The sermon begins with explaining the ridiculous disparity between the two debts. Tina and Pat, our married couple on the committee, discussed their reaction to the opening:

Tina: For me, it was kind of a reminder that the parables and the way Jesus spoke to people really made sense at the time. In the same way that he would talk to us now if he were in this time, (like) where he gives the example of the sum of money that is completely ridiculous, and I never thought of Jesus as being kind of like comically. . . what's the word?

Pat: Hyperbolic.

Tina: Yeah, like hyperbolic. And so, I heard how much a talent was and a (denarius) put together and it was so absurd, and it made it feel a lot more real to me.¹³¹

Tina's impression was that the parable became more relatable when she understood the ridiculousness of the premise.

Throughout the sessions, Kate notes the phrases, stories, or comments that she related to personally. This was especially true during the discussion of the third sermon. In the first few minutes of the discussion, she reported on the notes she had taken:

Oh, I had written down when you talked about the everyday stuff like how people dressed, what their education is, where they live, and what their food in their grocery carts are. . . . For some reason, I wrote those down. So, things you do every day. I mean, just in everyday life where you don't think you're being

¹³¹ Interview by author, 27 August 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 1.

judgmental but then you have to stop and go, “Look, maybe I am, and I don’t even realize I’m being judgmental.”¹³²

For Kate, the revelation that she might need to work on her own life came because of small relatable moments in the sermon given in jest.

I used several little comments, like the ones Kate mentioned, throughout the sermon. These quick bits of humor were designed to be relatable with everyday situations and behaviors. In this sermon, more than in others, I made myself the heel in some of the quips, admitting my own faults (albeit minor ones). This was a conscious choice, and the participants caught onto the reasoning behind it:

Margaret: But I mean, I think it, it shows your humanity, and it shows you’re, that you have errors too in your life or things you need to work on. Just human nature.

Louie: And when you do that, for me, it makes me a little more willing to turn the mirror on me. You know, if he’s willing to expose himself that much, I need to look closer at this. I need not to assume I’m above or. . . so, it makes a big difference in the application.¹³³

And several people did “turn the mirror” on themselves during the session. Paula confessed to being a bit of a grudge-holder, a truth she despises about herself.¹³⁴

Margaret told a lengthy story about a misunderstanding she had with a woman earlier that same week. She called the woman to ask for her forgiveness.¹³⁵ Jerry opened up

¹³² Kate, 27 August, 4.

¹³³ Interview by author, 27 August, 7.

¹³⁴ Paula, 27 August, 3.

¹³⁵ Margaret, 27 August, 17.

about his own struggle to keep forgiving a member of his family.¹³⁶ It turns out that Kate was not the only participant to note the relatability of the sermon to life. All the participants present found the examples relatable, spoke about the Kingdom principle of forgiveness, and made a personal connection to their own lives.

This sermon was delivered the Sunday immediately following the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. I mentioned the matter in the pastoral prayer several minutes before the sermon, yet a few participants, including Kate, noted that the overall tone of the sermon felt a bit more serious and self-reflective.¹³⁷ Even so, Kate still found humor in the sermon in the everyday examples that encouraged her own self-reflection.¹³⁸ The sermon stands as a testament to the reality that out of all the things we might like to control about a sermon, some (like the national conversation) are simply beyond our ability to control.

Louie's Perspective – Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Louie is a musician who lends his considerable talents and skills to our music ministry. Louie volunteers in the Oak Ridge Philharmonia and the Oak Ridge Community Band. Louie was never a dominating voice in the group sessions, speaking infrequently. When he did say something, he was extraordinarily thoughtful, and commanded great respect. Coming from his background in church, Louie is knowledgeable in music as well as Scripture. He has heard plenty of sermons.

¹³⁶ Jerry, 27 August, 8.

¹³⁷ Interview by author, 27 August, 3.

¹³⁸ Kate, 27 August, 12.

The sermon on the Parable of the Laborers had to overcome the challenge of familiarity. Our congregation is largely comprised of seasoned church members who have likely heard this parable before. As such, it can be difficult to break through the familiarity and allow the fresh experience of God's Kingdom to work in the hearts and minds of the hearers. Louie is a seasoned churchman who has heard this parable preached before. In his general thoughts on the sermon, Louie talked about his past:

That's kind of how I've always looked at this parable in comparison, and I felt like it was a caution. I've had the fortune of being in a Christian family and involved in church all my life, so I'd better be careful not to think less of somebody who, you know, the last-minute thing.¹³⁹

Louie brought up the tension that is inherent in this parable for long-time churchgoers: they might begrudge those who come to faith later. Janine, also a lifelong church member and a musician, admitted that the parable was particularly troubling for her when she said, "I think it's a difficult (parable) to understand and. . . to deal with some of the implications of the parable."¹⁴⁰

In the light of this congregational reality, this parable provides a real challenge. The Kingdom principle from the parable is unfairness, or generosity on the flip side. God's Kingdom is not fair in the sense of giving more to those who have worked longer. Rather, the Kingdom is generous, giving to all no matter when they come. This Kingdom principle can be a hard message for a bunch of career Christians.

¹³⁹ Louie, 27 August, 21.

¹⁴⁰ Janine, 27 August, 20.

Louie was not offended by it, but moved by the Kingdom. His initial comment on the sermon reveals his experience:

It was profound to me to look from the lesser, the people who worked only the last hour, to look from that perspective because I've always looked at it, you know, from the perspective of people who felt cheated and know that I shouldn't feel cheated. But it's even more profound to look at it from the generosity perspective. (It's) incredible that this vineyard grower would pay me that much, would give me that much. It would be unfair in my favor, that much.¹⁴¹

Louie experienced the Kingdom principle through a change of perspective. He naturally identified with the person in the parable "who felt cheated," but experienced God's generous grace by living in another perspective for a moment. Dave and Pat shared in Louie's experience of looking from the new perspective.¹⁴²

The humor in this sermon was a mixture of methods. There were a few quick quips toward the beginning of the sermon, but toward the middle and end, there were two humorous stories. The first story was meant to encourage identification with feelings of unfairness in the parable. I related my frustrations with a tough Greek teacher, especially when I found out that another class had open-book tests all year. Louie agreed that he found this story funny, which is remarkable.¹⁴³ While Louie has a great sense of humor, in the three logged hours of these group sessions, Louie had not

¹⁴¹ Louie, 27 August, 20.

¹⁴² Interview by author, 27 August, 24.

¹⁴³ Louie, 27 August, 26.

yet verbally mentioned anything in particular that he found humorous. Louie's response to this story makes sense since he identifies with those who feel cheated in the parable.

The final humorous story in the sermon was about the reaction of some teenagers who were flummoxed by the generosity of a church member on their behalf. We heard echoes of that sentiment in Louie's comment about God being "that unfair in his favor." Tina mentioned how this story in particular compelled her to want to act more generously.¹⁴⁴ She explained how the tone of the sermon helped facilitate her call to action:

So, to compare it to last week's (sermon), we were saying was maybe more somber, and as a consequence you were more maybe self-reflective. Whereas in this, it was more, like, peppy or upbeat, and for me it kind of called me to action of, you know, like wanting to be the person who makes everyone feel like they matter.¹⁴⁵

After this sentence, the oft quiet Louie voices his assent. The experience of a new perspective promoted empathy and calling to make everyone matter.

Paula's Frustration – Parable of the Two Sons

Paula embodies grace and class. She and her husband are sociable and quick to make friends. Paula is a deacon in our church and the families under her charge are blessed to have someone who attends to them. She and her husband volunteer for various activities, despite recent health concerns. In my short time at FBCOR, Paula has never been afraid to ask me a question about the Bible or theology. This questioning

¹⁴⁴ Tina, 27 August, 32.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 27.

posture continued throughout the course of the study, but came to prominence in the fifth sermon on the Parable of the Two Sons.

The parable is lesser known, perhaps because of Luke's more prominent parable featuring the dynamics of two sons and their father. The Kingdom principle I intended to highlight in this parable was "inclusion." One son denies the father, then works anyway while the other agrees to work and never does. Neither one gets it all right, reinforcing the previous Kingdom principle of "imperfection." To wit, 60% of the participants mentioned "imperfection" during the discussion. Considering that only 70% identified the intended Kingdom principle, "inclusion," it is fair to say that there was confusion in response to the sermon.

Paula expressed her confusion about the parable right up front:

I don't remember ever having heard this before, and I've been in church all my life. And I really found it to be puzzling because it seems obvious at first, but then it's not obvious, and it, I didn't see the lesson in it. I could not, I did not see the lesson in it, as, when I read it this afternoon. And then after hearing your sermon about it, I assume that the answer to which one was right is neither and both, so. . .¹⁴⁶

Paula had expressed questions and frustrations with parables in previous sessions as well. In other sessions she asked if Jesus' original audience would have understood these parables without guidance and this question resurfaced here: "Is there enough information there to glean that without having help and understanding it? Am I the only one that, that sees it so narrowly that, that I don't see the lesson in it? Where they both

¹⁴⁶ Paula, interview by author, 10 September 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 2.

end in the right place?"¹⁴⁷ Margaret, the most senior member of the group, reassured Paula that this is quite difficult. Tina, the youngest member of the group, reminded everyone that even the disciples were often stumped.¹⁴⁸

The conversation continued until Dave talked for a while about his impressions of the sermon. He mentioned the context of the parable being in the Temple with the religious authorities. When Paula heard this detail, the parable changed for her. She waited for Dave to finish his thought and then spoke:

Now something you just said makes this make a lot more sense to me. I don't remember hearing that he was speaking to Sadducees and Pharisees. I thought he was teaching to the masses as he often taught, but it does make sense now I see. If he's talking to Pharisees and Sadducees, that makes perfect sense to me. But I was under the impression he was speaking to the general masses who were not that pious and were struggling with, with believing. But now that makes a whole lot more sense.¹⁴⁹

The contextual detail was included in the sermon, evidenced by Louie's comment:

It was helpful to have it pointed out that Scripture doesn't say that tax collectors and prostitutes go in *instead* of you but go in *ahead* of you. From my perspective of the Sadducees and Pharisees, you know, that would be shocking news to them. Not only that the tax collectors and prostitutes would be getting into Heaven, but they would be in before them because of the self-righteous factor.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Interview by author, 10 September, 2.

¹⁴⁹ Paula, 10 September, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Louie, 10 September, 5.

Still, Paula was not able to hear the key piece of information that she needed to unlock the parable. Moreover, the relatively low percentage of participants to identify the intended Kingdom principle points to a misfire on the preacher's part.

The participants noted two stories as humorous. The first was a simple recasting of the two sons in modern terms.¹⁵¹ The idea was to point out that neither one is entirely ideal. While the point was to illustrate the situation, it seemed to add little to the sermon and may have actually distracted Janine who said, "What I'm saying is, the parable and the funny story were kind of opposites for me. So, um, I guess in that way it makes me think about it? I don't know. Then I just kind of had to sit and fight in my head about it for a while."¹⁵²

The other noted piece of humor was a story about my relationship with my father. The story exemplified my initial mild rebellion against my father's fashion sense (in the length of my shorts and socks), to eventually adopting these behaviors as an adult. Several participants mentioned this story as an example of humor in the sermon, but Tina found something important in the humor:

I think the humor also on the other story of you with your father is sort of, when we read these parables or we think about being rebellious towards God, it's such a gut instinct of "This is the worst thing that we could possibly do. We can't be forgiven for rebellion." But then seeing it through a more personal lens of all, "You know, of course I did things that people have forgiven me for or people have done things that I've forgiven them for." And then when you think of the

¹⁵¹ The recasting was about using a turn signal ("blinker" in these parts) on a car. I posed the question about which one is worse: the one who never uses their signal and turns suddenly right in front of you or the one who drives for 2 miles with their blinker on and never turns?

¹⁵² Janine, 10 September, 10.

way that you feel then you can remember that, you know, God is a thousand times more loving than any of (us). The humor kind of helps us to remember that because it breaks down that gut feeling of being absolutely horrible.¹⁵³

Tina had a great insight, but it was not about the intended Kingdom principle of the sermon; it was about forgiveness. The humor that people remembered from the sermon illustrated imperfection and forgiveness rather than inclusion.

After the rest of the interview session, Paula got the final word before the break. It was clear that the conversation with her peers had helped her to find the truth in the parable. She shared a story from her life:

If I may, I'm in a Bible study with, with women my age, and we've all, most of us, have been Christians for all our lives or in church all their lives. And we have a new, younger woman who has joined us in the last couple of years, and she's a new Christian. And she, she's very open to asking things that she doesn't understand, and it is so refreshing to see Christ through her because she, she's not bashful to ask anything and is so open to anything, you know, that she can absorb. So maybe we should take a moment and see the church or the Kingdom through a new Christian's eyes and see what we can learn because (this young woman) has taught my group a lot with her eagerness and her enthusiasm and her openness to learn.¹⁵⁴

The grace of God is such that we are not required to be first. Indeed, all are welcome, no matter when we come.

Tina's Breakthrough – Parable of the Talents

Tina is one of the youngest members of the group, and is also one of the newest members of the church, joining in the past year. Tina has a background in church, a sharp wit, and works for a firm that produces materials to help churches teach about

¹⁵³ Tina, 10 September, 11.

¹⁵⁴ Paula, 10 September, 15.

stewardship. Tina's comments throughout the study were insightful. It was clear that she was engaged with the parables. The subject matter of the final parable intersected with her professional life, creating an opportunity for her to share some wonderful insights.

The final sermon on the Parable of the Talents is familiar to regular church attenders. The parable is paraded out for stewardship emphases with predictable regularity. Our group members have heard sermons on this passage before, which builds an expectation that this sermon will be similar.

Coincidentally, the Sunday that I preached this sermon, the Sunday school material was on stewardship. When we came into the meeting room, there were worksheets from Sunday school that morning with columns for "Time, Talents, and Resources." By the time the sermon came around on Sunday morning, people were already primed to think in terms of financial stewardship.

Tina offered a personal story of one of her experiences from a previous sermon on the parable:

I'll say, I kind of, when you started going into your "I'm not going to do this the typical way," I kind of elbowed (my husband), and I said, "the last time, the most recent time I heard this preached on, sort of, was just a few months ago was someone saying that this is Scriptural proof that if you are not a good steward of your money, you're going to hell." . . . So, it was like this is going to be very different. So, coming into it with that having been the most recent thing I had heard on it, I was excited to hear your take on it. So, I guess my overall view is I enjoyed hearing something that went beyond the treasure aspect.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Tina, 10 September, 16.

The sermon was decidedly not about money. Instead, the sermon was about the investment of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom principle for this sermon was “spreading.” The Kingdom of God is not meant to be hidden away in us or buried in the church, but working out in the market. In that way, the Kingdom of God will spread. The sermon was about how these parables have entrusted us with Jesus Christ’s vision of how the world ought to be. But that knowledge, the treasure entrusted to us, is meant to be used.

The data shows a strong comprehension of the Kingdom principle, not only in verbalizing the principle, but in the intention toward action.¹⁵⁶ The Kingdom is meant to be shared, to be used and even risked. The intent of the sermon was to compel hearers into action because of the Kingdom that has been entrusted to us. The data suggests that for the focus group, the sermon succeeded.

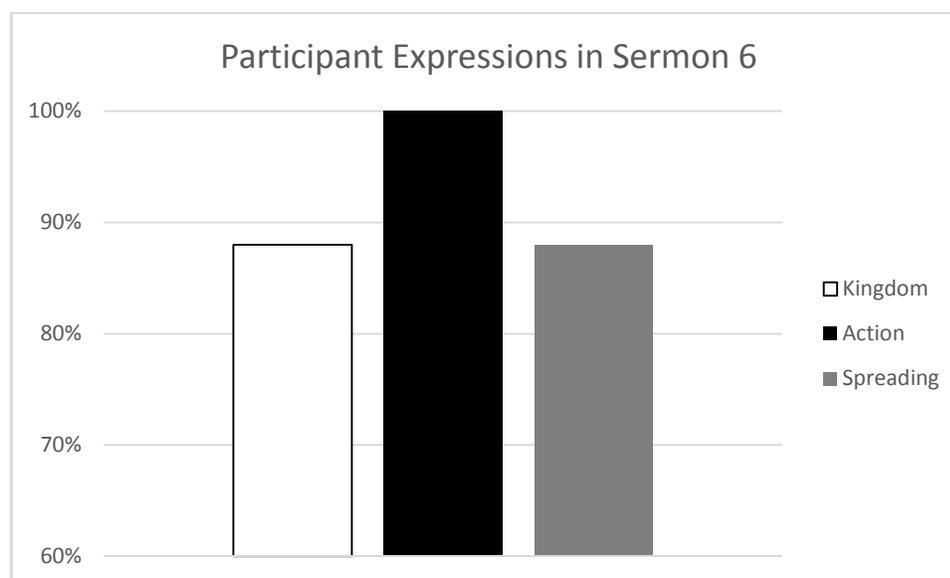


Figure 4.

¹⁵⁶ See Figure 4.

The humor in this sermon was to encourage action rather than passive assent. One humorous story featured a manager who leaves a to-do list for the employees to accomplish while he is gone. When the manager returns, he finds that they have framed the list, held list studies, and have actually accomplished nothing on the list. Janine explains her response to the story:

That really helped me. I could see where you were going almost immediately, but it still helped me put the parable into perspective and think about it. Well, this is such a pretty list. Let's frame it and put it up in our house and admire it. And, but, not actually do the things on the list. So, it was very helpful for me to put the parable into context and also somewhat amusing.¹⁵⁷

Janine referenced the story a number of times throughout the discussion. The story reframed the point of the parable as action-based. We are to do something with the Kingdom beyond just agreeing with it.

Janine and the rest of the group had heard the parable before. Out of all of the participants, Tina had the most reasonable case for tuning out on the sermon altogether. After all, she not only had heard the parable preached recently, but stewardship is her career. Yet, Tina found the sermon motivating because of the humor throughout the sermon:

I think for me as somebody who, like I said, I deal with biblical stewardship every day and so this is something that I'm looking over all the time in my work. But to see it, the humor kind of helps to get out of that fear tactic mindset that we can all see with this parable. . . . But when you're doing it as a juxtaposition to what people have typically heard, and as you said this was kind of aimed at people who had been long-time churchgoers or at least churchgoers long enough to have seen this a time or two. I think that it was an excellent motivator to see it as

¹⁵⁷ Janine, 10 September, 26.

more of an optimism standpoint, and the humor really helps with that because it helps us to break down those barriers and fears that we have and to be more open and self-reflective.¹⁵⁸

Humor opened her up to the message of the parable and allowed her to be inspired by it all over again. Some sermons and stories accomplished the job better than others. Through it all, the Kingdom of God became a little more real for some of the members of FBCOR.

On the final night of the study, after talking about the two specific sermons on the schedule, I asked how the whole series of sermons had affected them. No surprise, Tina had a good word:

But through the sermon series, it's more talking about what is, you know, making us think about the Kingdom of God here on Earth and the now, which we may think about, but I don't think we phrase it that way. . . . This is what we can do to live part of this now. I thought that was; that's what I appreciated most from it.¹⁵⁹

These sermons were designed to engage hearers with the strange world of the Kingdom. Some sermons were more successful in this goal than others. By using humor, Tina and the rest of the group were able to see that the Kingdom of God is not some lofty idea or a metaphysical destination, but that it is here, now. Humorous stories encouraged hearers to identify with the characters in the parables and to look with fresh eyes at their own lives. Humor helped the Kingdom come closer, and that is precisely what this preacher was hoping.

¹⁵⁸ Tina, 10 September, 28-9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

CHAPTER 5

TELL ME ANOTHER: THY KINGDOM COME

Jesus' parables are meant to provoke hearers toward a life in the Kingdom of God. The purpose of this research was to utilize humor to replicate the parables' same provocation for the members of FBCOR. The previous chapter detailed the experiences of the group throughout each of the sermons. The data suggests success in most of the sermons. This chapter summarizes the discussion about this study and begins to explore avenues for further exploration.

Conclusions of the Study

Throughout the group interviews, the participants made it clear that the humor in these sermons served a variety of positive functions. In a number of instances, participants commented on how humor helped keep their attention:

Janine: I would say in that particular sermon, your stories about your kids were definitely the most humorous. I found, for me personally, that when I'm listening to a sermon that having someone be more relatable and be more humorous helps me open up and listen to it more.

Louie: It clears the fog.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Interview by author, 13 August 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 8.

In another session, Jerry mentioned: “I think that humor has a good place in that we’re straining to understand your strands and then you give us a little bit of relief and then we can go back to work again.”¹⁶¹

Attention may seem like a low bar for success, but for most of the hearers, these parables were familiar, even routine. Several group members mentioned their previous experiences with these parables. Maintaining the attention of hearers who are well-versed in these parables is no small task, and a necessary one if the preacher is to engage them in a deeper manner.

More than attention, the humor in these sermons helped the group members accept the ideas presented in the sermon. Listeners may attend to the sermon, but the sermon must still persuade them to move from their standard world into that of Jesus’ Kingdom. Some participants explained how the humorous elements in the sermon aided in understanding or applying the subject matter. Even in the “Disney sermon” where humor was somewhat distracting, several members expressed how the humorous stories helped to communicate the deeper meaning in the sermon. Paula describes the moment when she realized the “perfection” of Disney was contrived:

In your defense with the length of time you took about the Disney, I think that. . . when the point was made, I can’t imagine a better illustration for this generation or Americans than Disney for a perfect place. . . . So that when you made your point, it was like, “Oh yeah, I see that.”¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Interview by author, 27 August 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 12.

¹⁶² 13 August, 23.

Kate's experience in the third sermon helps illustrate the possibility for acceptance. Kate found the everyday examples of judgment and hypocrisy funny, but also noted that they stirred some reflection about our tendency to judge others:

The humor in this one was more everyday things we do and now looking at it to see that it's humorous more so than just a funny story like you told the story about the kids asking what you do after you go to bed. That was kind of funny. And then you talked about being in the grocery store and judging people. So, your use of humor was more . . . part of the story and made you reflect on, "Yes, I do that, that is kind of funny." More so than just a funny story.¹⁶³

Pat's comment early in the first session suggested that the humor of the sermon (which he could not remember specifically) caused him to remember the main thrust of the parable.¹⁶⁴ Many of the group members came away with a new understanding of what God's Kingdom looks like in the world. The Kingdom is taking place out in the world. The Kingdom is not fair, but generous. The Kingdom includes us all. Often it was not what they expected when the sermon began. Humor encourages attention and can aid acceptance of the truth within the sermon, but humor can still do more.

Humor propelled some group members toward action. Consider Louie's response to the preacher's self-deprecating humor which inspired his own self-reflection.¹⁶⁵ Paula said:

I would hope that it would that it would make me . . . to live a little more openly to see a need and meet it without fanfare, without a committee, and not just in the church itself but in the neighborhood or in the grocery or wherever. Like we're seeing people rise to the occasion in the times of natural disasters, maybe

¹⁶³ 27 August, 12.

¹⁶⁴ 13 August, 8-9.

¹⁶⁵ 27 August, 7.

I need to rise to the occasion without a natural disaster. It shouldn't take a disaster to make me more cognizant of other people's needs and how I can satisfy them.¹⁶⁶

Inspired by the sermon on the Unforgiving Servant, Margaret asked for forgiveness from a friend.¹⁶⁷ The humor enticed listeners to attend to the sermon, aided in winning people over to Christ's vision of the world, and encouraged them toward action.

These three levels of engagement – attention, acceptance, and action – build upon one another. The conclusion of this research is that the humor employed in these sermons not only encouraged attention, but also reached the higher levels of acceptance and action. Not all participants were inspired toward action in all six sermons. Most notably in the fifth sermon on the Parable of the Two Sons, the responses that indicated an intent to act were quite low.¹⁶⁸ In the other five, however, the level of engagement was high, and all participants expressed favorable responses to humor as a sermonic device. Therefore, since humor in the sermons was a positive experience and because it elicited high engagement from participants in the majority of sermons, it is clear that humor is an effective vehicle for communicating the Kingdom of God in Jesus' parables recorded in Matthew.

A large part of the success is due to the method of applying humor in these sermons. Humor was not added for the sake of relief or listening pleasure, but

¹⁶⁶ Interview by author, 10 September 2017, transcript, First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, 30.

¹⁶⁷ 27 August, 17-8.

¹⁶⁸ See Figure 2 in Chapter 4.

specifically to exemplify the implications of these parables and the Kingdom principles found therein. The humor itself communicates and concretizes the Kingdom principle. In the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, the humor in the sermon was about hypocrisy because of the servant's hypocrisy to his fellow. In the Parable of the Sower, the sower wastes seed by casting it in unprepared soil. Similarly, the humor in the sermon centered around how inefficient people are. These concepts are abstract and difficult to grasp, which is why Jesus embodies them in a story. In the sermon, inefficiency as a virtue becomes easier to grasp through a story about a five-year old that demands a lot of attention who finally says something heartwarming. Humor humanizes the abstract idea of Kingdom. Once the Kingdom resembles something we see in our world, we are able to recreate it.

Possibilities for Further Research

The results of this research opened a new query that I plan to pursue. Participants responded to humor in a variety of ways, from self-reflection to amusement to inspiration to action. The most notable example is Louie's declaration that self-deprecating humor led him to self-reflection. There were several others. Humor helped Tina feel more optimistic rather than fearful about a parable.¹⁶⁹ Kate commented extensively on how the everyday examples allowed her to see herself in the subject matter. The implications could suggest that a particular kind of response (boldness, reflection, empathy) can be encouraged by the kind of humor employed by the

¹⁶⁹ 10 September, 27-8.

preacher. I plan to explore correlations between the methods of using humor and elicited responses.¹⁷⁰

The scope of this research was on the Kingdom of God parables in Matthew's Gospel, but further research on the efficacy of humor in communicating other biblical genres is necessary. Several texts defend the humor within the biblical texts. Elton Trueblood's classic work *The Humor of Christ* suggests that other texts in the Gospels could be natural candidates.¹⁷¹ Steven Walker argues that humor can be found throughout Scripture, even in unlikely places like the Book of Acts.¹⁷² Both works overstate their cases. More recently, Mark Biddle distilled the work of his teaching career to argue that the scriptures are intentionally humorous.¹⁷³ One of the most compelling books on biblical humor is Melissa Jackson's superb work on the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷⁴ Jackson highlights the subversive humor surrounding feminine characters of the

¹⁷⁰ Some research has already demonstrated humor's ability to connect preacher and listener. See Craig Adolf Finnestad, "The Use of Humor in Preaching and Its Relationship with Ethos, Relational Solidarity, and Affective Learning" (D.Min., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2010), accessed September 21, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/religion/docview/759470755/abstract/4181796F331D4890PQ/5>.

¹⁷¹ Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (New York, Harper & Row, 1964).

¹⁷² Steven C. Walker, *Illuminating Humor of the Bible* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013). Walker jests that if humor can be found even in such a serious book as Acts, then it can be found in all of Scripture.

¹⁷³ Mark E. Biddle, *A Time to Laugh: Humor in the Bible* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2013).

¹⁷⁴ Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Hebrew Scriptures. Jackson does the legwork of explaining the humor in these stories, so a preacher would only need to find similar humor from our world to use in the sermon. In the same way, the Hebrew prophets seem like a natural fit for using humor since so much of the prophets' rhetoric was surprising or even ridiculous. Humor is in the Bible and is therefore a viable technique for communicating the truth of the Bible.

That is not to say, however, that employing humor in the sermon is always appropriate. Certainly, there are texts that would conflict with a humorous reading. The binding of Isaac or David crying over Absalom have no humor and would likely clash with a sermon importing humor. The aforementioned scholars make the case for humor in many biblical texts and further research on how humor aids the preaching of different genres would be welcomed. Could humor help a congregation truly hear the prophet's call? Could the Hebrew Scriptures come to our hometowns by sharing a laugh with the characters? How might a person hear Jesus' words differently if she hears the wry humor in his words? In the coming year, I will use humor in each of the major genres of texts to gauge the response, albeit in a less formal measurement structure. The goal is to test how humor communicates outside of the parable genre. I suspect that biblical genre will not alter the efficacy of humor in the sermon. The only way to confirm the hypothesis is to test it.

Finally, further study should be done on the specific types of humor and their effects on the preaching event.¹⁷⁵ The scope of this study did not include differentiating

¹⁷⁵ Joseph M. Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998). Webb's book is one of the foundational texts of this study.

the results of various kinds of humor. A researcher might explore how congregations receive sermons with humorous stories as opposed to satire, wit, or self-deprecation.¹⁷⁶

My suspicion is that some genres of humor would be more effective than others, but research would have to prove that hypothesis. How do each of these types of humor affect the engagement with the text?

Impact on Ministry

Researcher

On a personal level, this research has been an affirming experience for me as a preacher. My hope was to effectively communicate Christ's challenging Kingdom and the sermons succeeded. I have been interested in the rhetoric of humor for years, but to study its use in the pulpit was a joy. What was once a hunch is now confirmed through experiment. I look forward to further exploration.

Since the end of this series, I have felt a sense of creative liberation. The preaching event is both scholarship and artistry. The work of this project has inspired me to attend to the art of preaching. The successes in these sermons challenge me to be as creative and thorough in my other preaching tasks, and not only through humor. Humor is one tool, but other rhetorical devices can be explored. I would like to experiment with the judicious use of pathos and other emotive elements to aid in

¹⁷⁶ Bradley M. Rushing, "Toward a Methodology Which Equips Pastors to Use Humor Intentionally in Preaching" (Ph.D., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), accessed September 21, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/305275038/abstract/BF5ACCBDC35A4A97PQ/1>. Rushing's research suggests that wit and anecdotes show great effectiveness in preaching.

communicating the texts. Success breeds a confidence that encourages further experimentation.

The responses of the participants in the study have helped me understand *why* certain elements work. Humor can illustrate, but it can also connect the preacher and the text to the hearer. Whereas I have been reticent to allow myself to be prominent in the sermon, I am now pointedly seeking to create moments in the sermon where engagement between preacher and congregation can happen, because it aids in communicating the text. This is indeed some of what Phillips Brooks meant by his definition of preaching as “truth through personality.” The study has given me a better understanding of an appropriate way to engage the congregants without becoming the focus of the sermon.

First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge

A delightful result of these group sessions was to watch relationships form among the participants. Members of the research group were diverse in terms of age, biblical experience, and how long they have been a part of this community. After these six weeks, they got to know one another. Seeing members minister to one another in these conversations was an especially sweet experience. Elder members empathized and related to the young parents in the group. Those with more insight into Scripture encouraged others who were struggling with interpretation. People who did not know one another on the first day were playfully picking on one another by the end, everyone smiling. Relationships were formed in the group that have continued since they disbanded.

Another benefit to the sermon series is an increased sense of the Kingdom of God among the congregation at large. Anecdotally, there has been an increase in people using Kingdom language in prayers and discussions around the church, even among those who were not a part of the research group. There seems to be a shared vision that our work as Christians is to help create the Kingdom that Christ preached. Ideas from these sermons are still being discussed and shaping our life together.

Several church members eagerly ask for updates on the status of this project. Those members who have written theses and dissertations are empathetic and supportive. A copy of this thesis will be given to the church's library for anyone to peruse. I will present my findings and explain the project (without divulging participants' identities) at one of our Wednesday night meetings.

Wider Community

My current context provides several opportunities for sharing the research with the broader community. FBCOR enjoys a longstanding relationship with the Oak Ridge Ministerial Association (ORMA), an ecumenical group of clergy and non-profit workers who meet monthly and band together for various collaborations. This group would likely welcome a presentation on the findings of this research. Similarly, there is a cohort of pastors of CBF congregations in East Tennessee that meets monthly. I have been keeping them updated on the progress of the research. They will receive the conclusion and results of this research with celebration.

The Mercer Preaching Consultation is an annual meeting of various clergy and laypeople that focuses on the preaching event. A keynote speaker is a national figure in

the field of preaching or theology, but several preachers give papers on various aspects of the craft. I could see a presentation on this research fitting into a session, if I were invited to present.

Similar presentations could be made as breakout sessions on preaching Matthean parables at the Tennessee CBF Annual Meeting or at the CBF General Assembly. Such a session would include a brief overview of the research demonstrating why humor works in communicating these parables. The rest of the time would include a short workshop on how to create a sermon that uses humor to illustrate the Kingdom principles in the parables. Participants would be encouraged to find the Kingdom principle in the parable, find the humor at work in the parable, and think of examples in their own lives that fit the humor necessary to communicate the parable.

In the wider community of preachers, this research could be the foundation of a book on preaching the parables. The project would be a resource to inspire preachers toward a new way of preaching the parables to engage their congregations in the world of God's Kingdom. Like a spoken presentation, the book would first explain why humor works as a rhetorical device for preaching the parables. Then the focus would shift to inspiring examination for humor.

My hope in any wider sharing of these findings is that the Kingdom of God that Jesus teaches through these parables would have a greater chance of being heard, treasured, and created in our world. Through this study, I have become enamored with these parables and have enjoyed stepping inside of their worlds. I found treasures and truths that I did not expect at the outset and have delighted in the discoveries. My hope

is that others would share my wonder and surprise in the deep truths found in these parables. The greatest achievement that a preacher could hope for is that those who hear the sermon would see Jesus Christ and be moved to be a part of the Kingdom that he is planting all around us.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

APPENDIX A

Group Interview Guidelines

1. The facilitator will not ask another question until everyone has had ample opportunity to share.
2. The facilitator will guard against any participants monopolizing the conversation or invalidating any other participant's findings.
3. The facilitator reserves the right to ask a follow-up question for more elaboration at the discretion of the facilitator.
4. The facilitator will make notes of any behaviors, body language, or emotional responses to aid in giving more detail to the transcription.
5. The facilitator will open and close the interview session. The facilitator will offer the notepads at the beginning, explain their usage, and invite the submission of the notepads at the end of the session.
6. The facilitator will remind the group at every interview that participants may opt out at any time without explanation or recourse.
7. The participants will respect their fellow participants and allow others to speak without interruption, discouragement, or any sort of judgment. Disagreement in opinion is welcome, but always expressed with respect and courtesy.
8. The participants will offer only their own opinion and will not attempt to guide answers toward a conclusion.

APPENDIX B

GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX B

Group Interview Questions

1. What did you experience in the sermon last Sunday morning?
 2. What comes to the front of your mind about the sermon? Why did you remember that piece?
 3. Was there anything that you learned that you didn't know before the sermon?
Was there something about the sermon that aided your discovery?
 4. What truth about the Kingdom is Jesus telling us through this parable?
 5. Do you feel like you need to do anything differently because of what you understand from the parables? Have you had an opportunity to practice Jesus' words over the past week?
- <Between the sections, there will be a ten-minute break to avoid fatigue.>*
6. What did you experience in the sermon this morning?
 7. What comes to the front of your mind about the sermon? Why did you remember that piece?
 8. Was there anything that you learned that you didn't know before the sermon?
Was there something about the sermon that aided your discovery?
 9. What truth about the Kingdom is Jesus telling us through this parable?
 10. Do you feel like you need to do anything differently because of what you understand from the parables?

APPENDIX C
STUDY ADVERTISEMENT SAMPLE

APPENDIX C

Study Advertisement Sample

Article in Bi-Monthly Newsletter and on the church website:

Pastor Rory needs volunteers to participate in a study about the field of preaching. Participants must be over the age of 18 and be willing to attend 4 out of the 6 worship services from August 6 to September 10. In addition to the worship services, participants will participate in 3 group interview sessions conducted by Pastor Rory about the sermons. Dinner will be provided in Room 206 and discussion will last around 90 minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can back out at any time without any ill will. If you are interested in volunteering, please contact the church office no later than July 31. Thank you!

Verbal announcement during Sunday morning worship:

Pastor Rory will be conducting a study in the field of preaching required for his doctoral work from August 6 through September 10. Worship will be conducted in a normal fashion, but participants in the study will be interviewed as a group on 3 different Sunday evenings with Pastor Rory. If you would like to volunteer to participate in the study, please contact the church office by July 31. All participants must be over the age of 18, however all are welcome to listen to the sermons on those Sundays.

Thank you!

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT



McAfee School of Theology
Mercer University
3001 Mercer University Drive
Atlanta, Georgia 30341

Truth by Surprise

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what will be asked of you.

Investigator

The investigator for this research study is Rory Naeve, M.Div. Rev. Naeve is the Pastor of First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge, TN and a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at the James & Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University under the direction of Dr. Brett Younger. Rev. Naeve can be reached at 912-577-3909 or rory@fbcoakridge.org.

Purpose of the Research

This project will measure how effective humor can be in delivering Jesus' descriptions of the Kingdom of God in a series of six sermons on parables in the Gospel of Matthew.

Procedures

If you participate in this study, you will be asked to attend six worship services and listen to the sermons on Jesus' parables. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in three group sessions that will last between one to one and one half hours. You will be provided with a notepad during these meetings if you should choose to write anything down. You may be asked to participate in individual interviews to clarify or expand upon responses to focus group questions. You will have the opportunity to verify your responses used in this study. To maintain confidentiality, your name will not be used in print, but will be represented by a pseudonym known only to the Investigator.

Potential Risks or Discomforts

Some participants may find sharing their thoughts in a group format uncomfortable. Guidelines will be provided to the group to maintain the highest level of respect and to foster a place that is safe to share opinions or perspectives.

Potential Benefits of the Research

The potential benefits of this study include personal insight and passion for Christ's vision of faith and developing a vision for our church.

Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate at any time. If you choose to withdraw, none of the information you share will be included in the study and all written materials you provide will be returned to you immediately.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Rory Naeve at 912-577-3909 or rory@fbcoakridge.com. You may also contact Dr. Brett Younger at byounger@plymouthchurch.org.

Audio Taping

The focus groups and interviews will be audio recorded via a digital voice recorder. The recordings will be stored by the investigator for at least three years after project completion in a locked file cabinet in a locked office.

Reasons for Exclusion from this Study

This project has been approved only for volunteers 18 years of age or older. This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University's IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Participant Name (Please Print)

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX E
MERCER IRB APPROVAL

APPENDIX E

MERCER IRB APPROVAL



*Institutional Review Board
For Research Involving Human Subjects*

Thursday, June 15, 2017

Mr. Rory Naeve
3001 Mercer University Drive
School of Theology
3001 Mercer University Dr.
Atlanta, GA 30341

RE: Truth by Surprise: Subverting Expectations of the Kingdom of God Through Homiletical Humor (H1706164)

Dear Mr. Naeve:

On behalf of Mercer University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 07-Jun-2017 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with Federal Regulations [21 CFR 56.110\(b\)](#) and [45 CFR 46.110\(b\)](#) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) 6, 7 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 15-Jun-2017. The protocol expires on 14-Jun-2018. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:

The study will measure the effectiveness of humor in the sermon to communicate the purpose of the Bible passage. The sermon series will aid the congregation of the First Baptist Church or Oak Ridge in living the manner which Jesus Christ offers in the parables.

NOTE: Please report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and **ALL** accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our [Satisfaction Survey](#) and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ava Chambliss-Richardson".

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIM.
Associate Director of Human Research Protection Programs (HRPP)
Member
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization's (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."

Mercer University IRB & Office of Research Compliance
Phone: 478-301-4101 | Email: ORC_Mercer@Mercer.Edu | Fax: 478-301-2329
1501 Mercer University Drive, Macon, Georgia 31207-0001