Having cautioned ourselves against presupposing too much, we are in a better position to acknowledge certain tendencies, at least, in the parables of Jesus. The remainder of this chapter seeks to describe these patterns in the hope that familiarity with them may sharpen our sensitivities to what the parables intend.

The Aspect of the Earthy

The parables are secular stories; they point to the actual world of mundane objects, occurrences, and relationships. In the tales told by Jesus we encounter no talking animals, no giants or heroes or magic or mighty works. Nor do the parables take us to exotic places; they unfold right here at home. Two parables form an exception by reporting afterlife conversations (Matt 25:31-46; Luke 16:19-31), but, strikingly, both do so only to point back to the most common earthy acts. The stock-in-trade of Jesus' parables is always the familiar mundane: crops, a coin, a callous judge, employers and employees, farmers, cooks, travelers between two actual cities, family conflict.

Theologically, this is rich. As Amos Wilder said, "What does this mean except that he brought theology down into daily life and into the immediate everyday situation? Here is a clue for the preacher, indeed for the Christian whatever his [or her] form of witness." Jesus in the parables "shows that for him [our] destiny is at stake in [our] ordinary creaturely existence, domestic, economic and social."[15]

Even so, the fact that the parables have their setting in common life presents us with a problem. The everyday life of Jesus' day is far removed from our own, which means that the effect of the parables can be easily lost on us. To our ears, stories about kings, masters, slaves, Pharisees, toll collectors, and the road from Jerusalem to Jericho have a long-ago-and-far-away feel—almost the feel of fairy tales—and so precisely the opposite effect that they originally had. The first hearers of the parables lived among these figures and places, and also within the customs, values, laws, and economic relationships that underlie the stories. The parables, in other words, took place within the actual landscape of their lives and did their work by means of what we call "the scandal of recognition." Since our lives are lived on foreign landscapes, how can the parables do their full work with us? How can preachers bridge the gap to create the starkly real-life recognition that the parables intend? The answer to that question is complex enough and crucial enough that we will return to it often.

A Profusion of Surprises

From their settings in the ordinary, the parables have a wild way of leaping to the extraordinary. Almost all of them take strange turns, ranging from the quirky to the truly astounding. Clearly, Jesus used parables as strategic instruments of surprise. Consider some examples.

A rich man hears that his chief business officer mismanaged funds. "You're fired," he says. "Turn in the books." The manager goes out talking to himself: "What will I do? I'm too weak to dig and too proud to beg. I know what I'll do; I'll make me some friends." So he tracks down everyone who owes money to his boss and tells the people to pay less than they owe—for which the boss praises him (Luke 16:1-8*a*). Strange.

Or again, a king gives a wedding feast for his son. After some unpleasant business with invited guests who refuse to attend, the king invites people from the streets to join the party, and they fill up his hall. Mingling among the street people, he spots one who isn't in proper dress for a wedding and flies into a rage. "How did you get in?" he says and then throws him into outer darkness (Matt 22:1-14). Very strange.

Sometimes the plot of a parable comes from comparing God's reign with something unclean. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:21). To us there is no surprise here. But in Jesus' world, yeast was a symbol of impurity. And the kingdom is like a *woman ... hiding ... that stuff* in a mountain of dough till all of it is infected? Or again, the kingdom "is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden" (Luke 13:18-19; cf. Matt 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32). But the law forbids planting mustard in the garden. Mustard can be planted only by the edge of the field, separate from the garden; otherwise the whole garden is rendered unclean.[16] Besides, the standard botanical

image of God's reign is the great cedar (Ezek 17:22-24), not a weedy shrub.

Most often the element of shock in a parable occurs in a strange course of action taken by a central character. Typically, this action is a kind of absurd extravagance. What kind of shepherd is so obsessed with a single stray that he leaves ninety-nine sheep untended in the wild to look for it (Matt 18:12-13; Luke 15:4-6)? What kind of woman, so poor she turns her house upside down to scrape up a single coin, would throw a party for the neighbors when she found it (Luke 15:8-9)? What farmer, finding his wheat infested with weeds, says, "Let 'em grow!" (Matt 13:24-30)? If a landowner's tenants have murdered the servants he already sent to collect what they owe, what kind of insane risk does he take to send not the cops but his son to their door (Matt 21:33-41; Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16)? Sensible employers don't pay a day's wage for an hour's work (Matt 20:1-15). A respectable father doesn't throw a party for a son who just blew a third of the estate on a joy ride, or go equally eager to embrace a son who hates his ways (Luke 15:11-32).

Soon, we will consider a particular implication of these oddly behaving central characters. For now, let it suffice to say that they are one manifestation of a consistent pattern in the parables: the factor of surprise. It would be wrong to claim that every parable does its work this way. A man builds his house on sand and it comes crashing down (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:48-49)—no surprise there, except that the man is surprisingly dumb! Or again, when Jesus speaks of someone estimating the cost of a tower before starting to build it, or a king calculating his troop strength before going to war (Luke 14:28-32), no shock value is present. But in so many parables is something unexpected or somehow "off" that we would do well—always—to look for it. Since we already know these stories, or think we do, this openness to embedded surprises becomes something of a discipline. Without such discipline—coming to these stories each time as if for the first time—we will reduce the parables to object lessons for our use instead of finding in them the occasions of encounter.

The Function of Disorientation

The element of surprise in a parable can leave listeners in a quandary. We are left to sort out what this strangeness means.

We are pressed into having to decide something about the story, which may also invite us to decide something about ourselves.[17] Many parables do this forcefully by means of a very sudden, unexpected ending—an ending that springs open like a trapdoor at our feet and sends us falling, sliding down the curve of a question.

C. H. Dodd gave a definition of *parable* that is classic: "At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."[18] The novelist Ron Hansen puts it this way:

> Parables invite the hearer's interest with familiar settings and situations but finally veer off into the unfamiliar, shattering their homey realism and insisting on further reflection and inquiry. We have the uneasy feeling that *we* are being interpreted even as we interpret them.[19]

The "veering off into the unfamiliar" creates disorientation, "leaving the mind in sufficient doubt" that we must rethink everything, including the possibility that "*we* are being interpreted."

It is as if a parable were a journey on which Jesus is our guide. He takes us through landscapes that we know. We recognize this feature and that, and relax into comfort. Then, abruptly, the scenery turns strange, even surreal. The inhabitants become bizarre. Suddenly, Jesus disappears; the tour is over. Looking around us, we see we have arrived at nothing that looks like a destination; it is more like a crossroads. Where we go from here is a puzzle left for us to discern.

For an altogether different analogy of the disorienting quality of parable, consider the poem "Pitcher" by Robert Francis. The poem describes a baseball pitcher and is apropos of the teller of parables.

> *His art is eccentricity, his aim*
> *How not to hit the mark he seems to aim at,*
>
> *His passion how to avoid the obvious,*
> *His technique how to vary the avoidance.*

The others throw to be comprehended. He
Throws to be a moment misunderstood.

Yet not too much. Not errant, arrant, wild,
But every seeming aberration willed.

Not to, yet still, still to communicate
Making the batter understand too late.[20]

There is often something in Jesus' parables that seems intended to baffle. Like a good pitcher, "He / Throws to be a moment misunderstood. / Yet not too much." He sets up an expectation, then gives us something else. We can't tell what the pitch will be. It seems to head for the center of the plate, then curves wide, beyond our reach. It zooms at our heads—bail out!—then cuts to the plate for a strike. He varies his pitches: fastball, off-speed, inside, outside, knuckleball, curve. We are kept off balance. We can't hit him. But all the while, he is teaching us. It is not purely "content" that he teaches. It is the baffling experience itself he teaches, an experience that communnicates more than we expected (or wanted?) about who God is and who we are. Perhaps he is also teaching us in the parables to listen and live with sharper ears and wider eyes, paying closer attention everywhere, holding freer and wilder expectations.

The Smallness of Titles

If all we have observed about the parables' lively freedom is true, then we should know that the titles we assign to them are generally a bad idea. All the titles of Jesus' parables are our inventions. The habit goes back at least to the third century in a Gnostic tractate called *The Apocryphon of James*. But can you imagine Jesus saying, "Here's a little story I like to call 'The Good Samaritan' "? He didn't announce his pitches.

To face a parable with a title in mind is like watching it through thick tinted glasses. Colors are screened out, movement blurred, nuances unseen. What if we didn't call it "The Good Samaritan" but "The Parable of the Pathetic Priest and the Lousy Levite" or "The Parable of the Wounded Traveler"? Would we see something

different, miss something different? The most famously disastrous naming of a parable is, of course, "The Prodigal Son," a title that lops off half the story. But even to call it "The Prodigal Father," as some have done, is to assume a certain position toward the story before we hear it. It is best to face the parables, insofar as possible, without position and without the protective, limiting shades of our names for them.[21]

The Witness of Extravagance

G. K. Chesterton once commented on the strange style of the speech of Jesus. He said, "The diction used about Christ has been, and perhaps wisely, sweet and submissive. But the diction used by Christ is quite curiously gigantesque; it is full of camels leaping through needles and mountains hurled into the sea."[22] Chesterton didn't single out the parables in this connection, but he could have. They are the central specimens of the shocking size of Jesus' speech.

We have already discussed the factor of surprise in most parables, how the ordinary keeps bursting into the extraordinary. Now it is time to notice that most of these surprises occur by means of action or event that is extreme. Paul Ricoeur called this phenomenon "the extravagance of the parables," referring to their frequent hyperbole and "outlandishness."[23]

Extravagance takes various forms in the parables. We see it in the recurrent images of growth—seeds yielding great crops in spite of failed plantings (Mark 4:3-8), enemies (Matt 13:24-30), and oddly passive, clueless farmers (Mark 4:26-29). We see it as well in the total divestment of assets for the claiming of a prize—a hidden treasure (Matt 13:44) or a priceless pearl (Matt 13:45). We see it most of all in the central figures of many parables: a father, a Samaritan, a shepherd, certain women, various farmers, landowners, masters, and kings. These figures take action of enormous and surreal proportion—the huge gesture, the lavish invitation, the withering or dazzling response. Though in many guises, roles, and moods, all these figures are possessed of a roaring flamboyance. Consistently, they rise to the shocking. At times it's a shocking severity, at times a shocking risk; but most often by something

lavish, exuberant, and impossibly grand, these figures astound and strangely expand, their faces filling the sky.

In part, these extremes may serve to arrest our attention, to seize us and shake us from our sleepy, dull assumptions. Flannery O'Connor, with a keen-eyed Catholic faith, filled her short stories and novels with grotesque, bizarre characters and outsized events. She accounted for her strategy this way:

> When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.[24]

Jesus drew "large and startling figures," in part, perhaps, because of our near blindness. For our hardness of hearing, the extravagances of the parables are a shout.

More essentially, they bear witness to the size of the mystery that Jesus proclaimed, and to the shocking size of his God. Perhaps this lies at the root of why he told stories less to explain than to perplex, less like illustrations and more like a blow. God is beyond illustration. Jesus' parables did paint pictures, and God was in them; but pictures of God must always be painted too large for a frame, too "other" to be comprehended at a glance. Beyond instructing us or helping us, the stories Jesus told are for reducing us to something like laughter, wonder, fear, and awe.

Perhaps we are invited to one thing more. As we witness these constant crazy moves from the common to the extravagant, from the small to the outrageous, the risky, the beautifully grand, in time it dawns on us that this insistently repeating shift is more than a pattern in parables; it is a way that human lives might come to be lived. Kafka said, "If you only followed the parables you yourselves might become parables."[25] God's best parable was Jesus himself, who told the largest tales and lived the largest life, and kept saying over his shoulder, "Follow me." In those with ears to hear, this Christ isn't finished turning the common and the small into the stunning surprise of parable. Toward these ends, we read, ponder, preach, and follow the parables—and the Parable—of Jesus.