

## Parable as a Lens for Theological Reflection

Christina R. Zaker

### INTRODUCTION

It's 7 am on a blustery Friday morning outside the Broadview Detention Center. A crowd of about thirty people are reciting the rosary over the din of traffic and wind with the help of a scratchy, aging sound system. Several volunteers with the Interfaith Committee on Detained Immigrants offer accompaniment to families as they await their five-minute window to see their loved one before he or she boards the bus for deportation. In the hustle of making sure they have packed enough for the journey, one woman whispers, "I don't know if my brother has shoes. . . They took him when he was in the shower. . . I forgot to pack shoes. . . Maybe he has sandals." A young boy asks what size her brother wears; he looks down at his own feet and says he is willing to share. But they are too small, and the moment slips away as the door opens to usher in the next family.

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As the Director of Field Education at Catholic Theological Union, I find myself attending to many different stories. Sometimes I witness stories during site visits, like that morning at the Detention Center as I observed a student of mine accompany the families. At other moments, I hear stories brought to the table by students in theological reflection seminars. Still other times, I help cultivate stories by encouraging and cajoling students and colleagues to articulate the chaos of what they are experiencing into a narrative that can help them shed light on what they might learn. These stories in their varied forms become the starting point for theological reflection.

James and Evelyn Whitehead, in their book *Method in Ministry*, set the standard for how story and experience take center stage in theological reflection as part of ministerial education. As Robert Kinast states, their work is “undoubtedly the best-known and most widely used text for theological reflection in this [ministerial training] setting.”<sup>1</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead focus on attending to the stories of one’s ministerial experiences in a dialogue with tradition, scriptures, and context in order to respond to a particular ministerial issue. Theological reflection methods of others such as Thomas Groome or Patricia Killen and John deBeer, which are seen as wisdom methods, focus on helping participants gain the spiritual wisdom that shapes praxis. Joe Holland and Peter Henriot’s approach focuses on contextual analysis but also engages experiences in a dialogue with various theological and social contextual sources. In addition, the format of reflections during Clinical Pastoral Education places emphasis on the narrative of experience through writing and discussing verbatims. The stories of life become the textbook for reflection.

Theological reflection encourages students—and all believers—to bring their stories to the table in a way that allows them to process their experiences in light of their context and their tradition. This effort to put experiences into a narrative in order to share and reflect upon them is a critical piece for integrating theory and praxis. Narratives are a way for students to dig deeper into the meaning that lies in their experiences and to discover ways to integrate that meaning with all they are learning in their theological studies. The stories may begin as their own stories, but as they delve into them, they gain insights not only for themselves as ministers but also for the wider community.

I have facilitated theological reflection in a number of different settings, and often I encounter people whose past experiences with the practice leave them questioning its value. As Stephen Pattison and colleagues write,

“While professional theological educators see TR [theological reflection] as the jewel in their disciplinary crown, a good number of their students regard this activity as an irritating and inhibiting pebble in their ministerial shoe.”<sup>2</sup> This discrepancy between what people hope for and what students are actually acquiring from theological reflection led me to do my doctoral work on the process. In critiquing various methods and examining their goals, I found many similarities in methods as well as points that needed clarification. As Kinast states, “What all these sources and synonyms have in common is a deceptively simple threefold movement. It begins with the lived experience of those doing the reflection; it correlates this experience with the sources of the Christian tradition; and it draws out practical implications for Christian living.”<sup>3</sup> Over time, theological reflection can become, as Kinast says, “deceptively simple,” and hopefully it may even become an intuitively natural process for any minister. It is important, however, to clarify the process in order to tap its wealth.

#### *What Is the Goal of Theological Reflection?*

One area that often needs clarity is understanding the overall goal or focus of theological reflection. Each of the authors mentioned earlier have clear statements that describe their work. For example, Whitehead and Whitehead note, “A complex and changing world challenges us to discern the continuing presence and action of God and to respond, faithfully and effectively, to this presence.”<sup>4</sup> Later they reiterate, “The goal of Christian ministry is the formation of reflective communities alive to the presence of God.”<sup>5</sup> Killen and De Beer state the goal as “to help us access the Christian tradition as a reliable source of guidance as we search to discover the meaning of what God is doing now in our individual and corporate lives.”<sup>6</sup> Although these goals for theological reflection speak of recognizing or discerning God’s movements, somehow this often gets lost in the details. As John Trokan notes, “It is the specifically theological dimensions of these models that often is poorly attended due to the complexity of the social and cultural analysis.”<sup>7</sup>

In my work, I have found that clearly defining theological reflection and developing a process that integrates that goal as the method unfolds refocuses attention on discerning God’s movement. I define theological reflection in the following way: “Theological reflection at its best is a communal effort to discern God’s presence in the world, to carve the space for that pres-

ence to invite us into a new vision, and to lay the groundwork for that new vision to take root in how we live our lives.”<sup>8</sup> Recognizing that theological reflection takes many different forms, from individuals reflecting on their own to students in ministry practicum to groups discerning their parish’s response to a pressing pastoral need, this definition attempts to offer insight into how theological reflection happens at its best. When students understand theological reflection as a way to discern God’s movement in their lives and as a communal space that allows that vision to challenge them, they are better able to navigate the process.

*Can We Simplify the Process of Theological Reflection without Losing Its Depth?*

A second area in need of clarity is the act of facilitating theological reflection. Facilitators often miss the forest for the trees, so to speak, when they focus on the steps of a method but forget to keep the central goal of discerning God’s movement at the forefront. The various steps to follow in any process of theological reflection can feel cumbersome at times; at other times, it can be derailed into a self-help session. The loss of focus can be frustrating and is sometimes a waste of time. As John Trokan states when describing various methods of theological reflection, “The problem in the praxis of these synthetic models is that so much is being attempted that their implementation can be exhausting.”<sup>9</sup>

I set out to see if there is a way to simplify the process without losing its depth. How do we keep the focus on discerning God’s movements while at the same time engage in depth the social, political, economic, theological, and other conversation partners? Whitehead and Whitehead attempt to offer clarity by emphasizing that the central focus should be a ministerial issue in need of a response. But without focusing on the goal of discerning God’s movements to inform the response, this process can fall into a sort of group counseling session. Killen and deBeer encourage people to discern the “heart of the matter” as a way of maintaining focus for the reflection. But without clarity of focus on a question of faith, the heart of the matter doesn’t always end up highlighting a theological construct and therefore the session becomes more reflection and dialogue rather than theological reflection.

*Can Parables Offer a Lens for Theological Reflection?*

With these issues in mind, I found myself drawn back to stories and the notion of parables. I have been intrigued by how often the stories of Je-

sus and the parables he told become rich pieces guiding students as they engage in theological reflection. Andrew Greeley confirms this in his book *The Catholic Imagination*:

Nonetheless, the origins and raw power of religion are at the imaginative (that is, experiential and narrative) level both for the individual and for the tradition. . . . None of the doctrines are less true than the stories. Indeed, they have the merit of being more precise, more carefully thought out, more ready for defense and explanation. But they are not where religion or religious faith starts, nor in truth where it ends.<sup>10</sup>

Parables hold a “raw power” for understanding faith, and I wondered if parables could offer a lens for theological reflection. One aspect of parables that is intriguing is their simple yet provocative dynamic. Parables are stories that are made up of the simple stuff of everyday life, yet they are provocative enough to invite us into a new vision. C. H. Dodd’s 1961 work, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, provides a foundation for understanding parables: “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.”<sup>11</sup> Dodd is here pointing out a flow that is evident in most parables; they begin with the familiar stories of day-to-day experiences, but there is some aspect in them that is shocking or surprising that reveals an invitation to active thought. John R. Donahue, in his work *The Gospel in Parable*, affirms Dodd’s definition and points out the provocative nature of this open-ended invitation: “The most fundamental message of Jesus’ parables is that things are not as they seem, that you must be open to having your tidy vision of reality shattered.”<sup>12</sup> Bernard Brandon Scott also points to the challenge inherent in parables in his introduction to Robert Funk’s work: “Parables are metaphors that disclose a new way of construing or envisioning reality.”<sup>13</sup> This dynamic of parables, this way of inviting hearers in with a familiar story and then exposing them to a new vision, is exactly the type of depth of reflection that I look for in theological reflection seminars. Whitehead and Whitehead express this same longing for theological reflection to jar us from our comfort zone: “As long as our personal experience and our religious heritage seem to fit comfortably (‘God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world’), there is no special need for reflection and the purification it brings. Otherness—in the face of the poor and the sick and the outcast—interjects tension into our shared life of faith.”<sup>14</sup> The stories students bring to the table, when looked at from the angle of perceiving God’s movements,

often surprise us with the nearness of God and a new way of thinking. If we allow the flow of parables to shape the way the discussion unfolds, we may gain clarity of focus. This type of progression is provocative in challenging students to integrate what they are seeing and learning into their developing ministerial identity.

This dynamic of parables that invites a new way of envisioning reality highlights the second intriguing aspect of parables: their conversational nature. As Donahue points out, "The parable is a question waiting for an answer, an invitation waiting for a response."<sup>15</sup> The notion of parables as conversation begs the question, With whom are we speaking when we engage a parable and what is the vision the parable opens up to us as the listener? Donahue offers a possibility when he notes, "The parables speak of that change of heart (*metanoia*) which is necessary to respond to the presence of God."<sup>16</sup> Barbara Reid also discusses parables in her *Parables for Preachers: Year C, The Gospel of Luke*, highlighting the basic flow of parables and the way parables invite the hearer to respond. "Jesus' parables do not stay at the level of the familiar. Always there is a catch. . . . They were startling and confusing, usually having an unexpected twist that left the hearers pondering what the story meant and what it demanded."<sup>17</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx states it best in his focus on Jesus as the parable of God: "Jesus' message seems appropriately understood as essentially concerned with being a message about God and from God."<sup>18</sup> Jesus and the parables he spoke invite us in or carve out a space for us to recognize God's nearness in the familiar world. In turn, that vision invites or demands a response. Schillebeeckx writes in another volume, "Not many people understand the story that Jesus himself represents . . . but the parable is so provocative as to make a neutral attitude towards it impossible."<sup>19</sup>

### PARABLES AND SOLIDARITY

As I continued my work with parables as a lens for theological reflection, I found myself asking a new question: How does theological reflection encourage a stance of solidarity with the marginalized? If, as Schillebeeckx says, there is no possibility for a neutral response to parables, then engaging in theological reflection through the lens of parable becomes a way of discerning how to respond.

Parables offer a provocative way of seeing the world. As Barbara Reid states, “The preacher always tells the story slant, inviting the hearers to take a particular position in the narrative . . . and the stance to which [Jesus] invites his hearers is with the marginal.”<sup>20</sup> Even beyond the notion that parables challenge the listener with the message of good news for the marginalized, there is a way in which the parable actually “teases into active thought” a self-critique. As Schillebeeckx states in his work *God Among Us*, “A parable does not need a speaker to comment on it . . . or an interpretation. The parable itself interprets our life, our existence, our actions.”<sup>21</sup> Funk continues with this line of thinking by noting, “Parable as metaphor is designed to retain its own authority. . . . The parable is not meant to be interpreted but to interpret.”<sup>22</sup> William R. Herzog II, in his book *Parables as Subversive Speech*, suggests there are two types of parables—those that are “a prophetic critique of the systems of oppression and of the ruling class and proposals for prophetic action.”<sup>23</sup> This thought that parables can offer critique and a proposal for action is provocative for theological reflection as well. Parable as a lens for theological reflection moves us from a focus on noticing God in the world to becoming acutely aware of how God might see us and our lives. This moves us from discerning God’s movements to discerning how we might respond to God in our lives.

What I have found through my research into parables is that the lens of parable offers great richness to the process of theological reflection. Not only does it clarify the process—it can also draw participants further into reflecting on how their stories are good news for the marginalized. I have developed a process that I call “theological reflection in parabolic mode.” This is a process that follows the flow of parables and offers a framework for engaging participants in a discussion that both discerns God’s movements but also offers a challenge or invitation. I developed this in my thesis-project for my doctor of ministry degree at Catholic Theological Union; here, I will lay out the basic steps and guide you through an example of the process.

There are three main steps to theological reflection in parabolic mode. The first is to begin with the familiar. In this step, we begin with a narrative that one participant brings to the table. The narrative is read, and then we begin to dialogue about which pieces of the story are familiar to the participants. In this portion of the dialogue, we engage various sources. I have found that at this stage we can follow any method or adaptation of various methods to engage tradition, context, feelings, insights, scriptures, etc. We talk about what is familiar about this story in our context, in our tradition.

Why is it familiar? What makes sense about the way the situation played out and the way the people responded or acted in the moment? We might look at familiar scripture stories, or familiar cultural actions, or familiar aspects of social psychology. Engaging the sources in this first step allows us to uncover all of the obvious and underlying ways we act and think and respond to a particular incident.

The second step focuses on aspects of the incident that surprise or shock us. The conviction here is that in the upheaval of being surprised or shocked we will get a glimpse of God's invitation to a new way of seeing. In this stage, the questions we ask focus on how might this be good news for the marginalized, on how the moment of surprise reveals God's presence or absence in a way that might jar us into acting differently. We ask what surprised us and why. In the surprise, which of our ways of seeing the world were rearranged or challenged? We might ask what happened that was not what we expected and what these challenges to our expectations reveal about God's movement. We might also ask whether nothing surprised us and, if so, what should have surprised us . . . what should have been done differently to allow God's grace or good news to break through and offer a critique.

The third step focuses on acknowledging the invitation. Just as the parables are open-ended, leaving the listener with the freedom to decide how to respond to the story, so too is each participant in theological reflection in parabolic mode challenged to formulate his or her own response to the invitation. Through theological reflection, participants are invited to see how their narratives are parabolic, challenging them to a new vision that recognizes God's presence and stance with the marginalized. It is difficult to wrestle with the meaning of the insights gained in this reflection. As John Dominic Crossan states in his book *The Dark Interval*, it takes a "willingness to be parabled."<sup>24</sup>

## AN EXAMPLE OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION IN PARABOLIC MODE

The following is a summary of a theological reflection seminar that employed the method of theological reflection in parabolic mode. A few years ago I encouraged a group of students to try this new format for theological reflection. This was a group that had already been working together over the course of a semester, so they were familiar with one another and their con-



texts of ministry. The format for previous theological reflections had primarily been the Whitehead and Whitehead model, and their familiarity with theological reflection as a whole was an asset to the discussion.

One student brought his story to the table. He was moving from his apartment to one right next door. In his work with immigration issues, he knew where day laborers would hang out in the morning, so he chose to hire a couple of these men to help him and his friends move his belongings. He shared his story of inviting the men to help, haggling a little over the day's wage, the conversations that transpired while working alongside them throughout the day, and then thanking them for their help at the end. He ended by saying that he and his friends had chilled out at the end of the moving day and ordered a pizza.

In the process of unpacking the story, we talked about all types of familiar moments regarding immigration issues, day laborers, the dignity inherent in working and haggling for wages, the sharing of little bits of our personal stories with strangers, and the hassles of moving to a new apartment. We discussed at length the choice to hire day laborers, which for the storyteller was an intentional effort in solidarity and justice. We spoke of scriptures and parables and aspects of Catholic social teaching that gave us insights into this one life experience and its challenge to us as ministers. The discussion was rich and varied. At this point in the dialogue, any of the theological reflection methods would bring out further angles to explore and questions to raise about our response as ministers and our response as a community. As we moved through the wide array of resources to discuss and perceptions to explore, it was tempting to feel that the rich discussion was enough; it is easy to see how we can miss the forest for the trees, so to speak. The whole discussion up to this point, however, was only the first step, the one that is focused on what is familiar.

The second step asks the question, What surprised you in the story and how does that reveal God? When we asked that question, several students in the group mentioned that they were surprised by the intentional effort of the presenter to include day laborers as an act of justice, revealing an effort to be in tune with God's will. There was conversation about being surprised by the haggling over the wages and the presenter's insights into its merit as an act that encouraged dignity. All of these moments of surprise revealed a bit about God's movements in the presenter's actions that were intended to be in right relationship with others. Participants spoke of God's presence in the moment, in the people, and in the intentionality.

But then we asked again, What else surprised you here? One student stated that she was surprised that as intentional as the presenter was in striving for solidarity, he still missed the point a little when he sent the day laborers on their way at the end of the day and then enjoyed pizza with his friends. That surprise threw us into a whole new discussion of what is expected of us if we are to participate fully in bringing about the reign of God. We discussed how at every stage of our journey of faith we are beckoned further along. For some, hiring day laborers was enough of a move to the margins; others felt that perhaps God is asking even more of a movement toward solidarity with those at the margins. The discussion and its insights moved into the third step of theological reflection in parabolic mode, that of acknowledging the invitation.

In this third step, we recognize that discerning the movement of God in daily experiences comes with an invitation. Just as parables invite the listener to some type of a response, so too does this method of reflection. If we have allowed ourselves to be “parabled,” then we have a sense of seeing things differently and needing to decide how we might respond. For our group that day, each of us saw in the insights from the discussion our own summons. Some students realized the need to be more intentional about immigration issues. For others, the deep insight was the need to identify and cultivate moments of dignity for those at the margins. The student who presented the story was challenged by the question about who were his friends and how does justice and solidarity have its grounding in friendship as the core of right relationships.

This truly was a rich discussion. It had depth from the start, but the turn to allow the story to interpret us, the turn to allowing ourselves to be “parabled,” brought us to an even more intense level of reflection. I have consistently found that this way of framing theological reflection provides a focus and a challenge that draws participants further along.

## CONCLUSION

This is a quick introduction to the concept of theological reflection in parabolic mode. What I have found in continued exploration of this model is that it is a lens for theological reflection that can be layered over other methods and multiple adaptations. A parish vestry attempting to discern their community’s response to the issue of training for eucharistic ministers

might use an adaptation from the approach of Whitehead and Whitehead in *Method in Ministry*. A group of college students on a spring break service trip might use an adaptation of social analysis. A group of deacon's wives on retreat might lean more on the wisdom in Killen and de Beer's *The Art of Theological Reflection*. In any case, the lens of parable allows participants to adapt methods, discern sources, consider whose voices they invite to the table, and reflect together using a simple guide that keeps them focused. By exploring what is familiar, where they see moments of surprise, and what they identify as the inherent invitation, participants are drawn deeply into discerning God's movements and identifying ways they might respond in their lives.

The process of gathering students together, of encouraging them to bring their stories to the table, and of allowing the conversation to unfold in surprising ways is a grace-filled encounter. It expresses a deep sense of what we attempt to do when we prepare students for ministry. Schillebeeckx states, "The church becomes a community in which those who have opened themselves to the critical force of the parable of Jesus' life tell stories around a shared table."<sup>25</sup> As students work toward their degrees, along with all of the systematics and scriptures and liturgy they learn we also need to help them understand how to be reflective practitioners and how to invite others to the shared table. We need to help them and their communities open up to the "critical force of the parable." I hope that through this exploration you will find theological reflection in parabolic mode a helpful tool as you continue your own work with theological reflection.

I have not yet brought the story of the morning at the detention center to the table with my students or colleagues. I have yet to unpack what is familiar about the prayers or the faces or the politics of that morning. Nor have I begun to explore what is shocking about that morning in the cold with the wind and the hum of the bus just a few feet away, where a young teenage boy offered the shoes on his feet and a guard offered a smile to toddlers in their pajamas. I look forward to unpacking that story, knowing that even as I write the landscape of deportation has changed and our wider community is being challenged by it. I am certain there are parabolic insights there for ministry and for living. Schillebeeckx suggests that we gather around a shared table to tell our stories. I believe the stories we should tell are parables—it's time to start surprising God.

## NOTES

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