

STUDY QUESTIONS

the Reverend Helen McPeak

William Brosend brings rich scholarship and playful authenticity to this lively study of Jesus' parables. With vivid imagery and crisp thought, he brings his own experience of family and faith community into conversation with generations of teaching, and demands of his reader thoughtful engagement and an openness to the in-breaking of the Spirit of God.

Introduction

Before you begin Brosend's text, take some time to reflect on experiences with stories in your life.

- Who told/tells you stories? When? Where?
- How are stories a part of your life now?

Pray together for God's guidance and support in this study you are beginning.

- What do you hope to learn?
- Why do you engage it now?
- How will you open yourself to receive what God is giving?

Brosend suggests, "You should be very, very glad if your priest believes in [inductive preaching]" because you are likely to experience creativity and exploration and a wonderful sense of discovery (p. ii).

- What sermons stay in your memory days, weeks, even years after you hear them?
- What worked about them?
- What was last Sunday's sermon about?

Brosend asserts that sermons and parables are *oral*—meant to be heard, not read (p. ii).

- In what parts of your life are stories spoken?
- Who tells tales and reads aloud in your life?
- To whom do you offer spoken stories?

Read a parable aloud now. Read to a child as soon as possible.

Brosend writes, “There is something about the way we must approach the parables—reverently but not rigorously, seriously but not literally, expecting to discover something we did not know and to be delighted in both the process and product—that can be usefully applied to the Psalter, prophets, epistles, even Torah and history” (p.iii).

- How were you taught to approach Scripture?
- What guidance was offered as you engaged holy writings?
By whom?
- How is that serving you today?

Chapter One

I Love to Tell the Story: Jesus the Storyteller

Brosend writes, “There is a distinction between story and history, but in the Bible it is neither always clear nor finally absolute. Before and after we ask, ‘Did it happen?’ we must ask, ‘What does it mean?’ because as people of faith we are seekers after the truth, and not just the facts” (p. 2).

- What definition of “story” does he offer in the following paragraphs? (See p. 2.)
- What two reasons does Brosend explore in the following pages for Jesus’ using parables? (See p. 2–3.)
- How great is your own need for “individual, if not remedial, tutoring”?

Did you run screaming from the room when Brosend named it: *polyvalency*?

- What definition does he offer for this concept? (See p. 4.)
- What other definitions can you find? (Not even www.wikipedia.com is of much help here. Go to the library. Call up

a seminary professor or other biblical scholar.) How do these inform your understanding of parables?

- How is it for you to embrace this possibility?

Explore the main movements Brosend outlines in the history of parable interpretation (pp. 5–9).

- What strengths and weaknesses can you name in each?
- With which movements do you resonate?

In his “introduction to the introduction,” Brosend unpacks Vernon Robbins’s five textures found in any and every biblical text (pp. 9–12).

- What are these textures?
- What is the focus of each, the boundary of exploration?
- Which have you experienced as particularly helpful? With which do you struggle?

Brosend claims C. H. Dodd’s definition of parables for use in this study.

- Revisit it on page 12.
- How would you express this definition if you were making an illustrated medieval text of these words? What pictographs would express it? How would you draw it in Pictionary?

Try it now, on newsprint with lots of color, texture, and shape. Be sure to include all five qualities of parables that Dodd elucidates. (See pp. 12–17.)

Brosend offers some warnings about using this definition. Look at his explorations of each quality of a parable.

- What does Brosend say about assuming too much similarity between our lives and common life of first-century Palestine? (See p. 14.)
- What does he say about cultural and historical differences? (See p. 14.)
- What is said about ignoring multiple versions of a story? (See p. 16.)
- What does Brosend say about locking ourselves into the same interpretation every time we encounter a parable? (See p. 17.)

What is the broad message Brosend is sending here? How are we invited to allow the parable to read us?

So what?

- How does your deepened intellectual understanding of these basic facets of storytelling in the life of faith call you to action?
- What will you do differently because you are engaging in this study?

Chapter Two

We Plow the Fields and Scatter: Parables of Growth

Brosend shares a memory from first grade to open this chapter. What is your own experience with growth? Where in your life do you coax growth along? Where do you fight it? With whom do you share growth?

What two problems does Brosend articulate regarding introducing a parable with a claim that it is a story of the kingdom of God? What solution does he suggest?

Brosend invites us to “gather up the evidence from all the parables and sayings about the kingdom and test out our hypotheses of the kingdom on an individual parable after we have come to a tentative conclusion from the entire body of sayings” (p. 22). Revisit his discussion of the individual parables and articulate for yourself the evidence contained therein.

- In what ways do you experience these interpretations as comforting and humbling as Brosend suggests they may be (p. 27)?
- What other interpretations of these stories have you encountered?

Articulate the unique perspectives that Brosend offers in the parables of growth he discusses here (the Mustard Seed, the Seed Growing Automatically, the Unfruitful Fig Tree, the Wheat and the Weeds, and the Sower).

- What “take home” message does he coax from each of these stories?
- Which do you find most persuasive, most compelling?
- Which is your favorite at this moment?
- With which do you struggle?
- Does this feel like good news to you?

Think of some contemporary examples from common life that might express these same concepts. What key facets of the story capture the interpretation?

Having gathered and examined the evidence, what tentative conclusion do you make for the entire body of the parables of growth? To what is God calling you if the kingdom of heaven starts small and spreads everywhere?

- if we are responsible only for sowing and not for growing or even reaping?
- if ours is not to worry about the weeds or another's eternal judgment?
- if profligate evangelism is our charge?

What is this dynamic, this way of life in which we share?

Chapter Three

Seek Ye First: Parables of Seeking

Brosend begins his chapter on seeking by examining two parables of finding. (See pp. 43–48.)

- What conclusions does he come to at the end of this examination?
- What quality of the kingdom of God does Brosend highlight?

In exploring the story of the Lost Sheep, what key lesson from the parable of the Sower does Brosend call forward? (See p. 50.)

- To what are we invited here?
- What challenge does Brosend articulate? What promise will result?

As we continue exploring parables of seeking, on what actions does Brosend focus? What larger pattern of action is highlighted?

- What is the effect of these actions on the individual?
- What is the effect upon the community?

Revisit Brosend's unpacking of the parable of the Prodigal Son on pages 54–61.

- What details do you notice anew in Brosend's examination?
- What is familiar from previous study?

Brosend suggests a pattern of progression and regression in the three stories of seeking (pp. 61–62).

- What pattern does he name?
- How does this match up with your own experience?
- How does this pattern (that the more there is at stake, the less there is the seeker can do about it) sit with you? What do you like about it? What discomforts you?

Brosend cites Thich Nhat Hanh who reminds us that peace is “not just a goal, it is a means to its own fulfillment . . .” (p. 63). Brosend continues with assurance that seeking comes in different guises as evoked by the particular occasion.

- What is your own style when it comes to seeking?
- What experiences shape your willingness to risk?
- Where is God in that?

Chapter Four

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder

In your own words, jot down a definition of “judgment.”

Go ahead. Hum the theme from *Dagnet* together. How old were you when this show was broadcast? What did you know about judgment at that age?

In exploring the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Brosend offers a historical perspective on the roles of the Pharisee and tax collectors of Jesus’ day that defies our Sunday school memories. Revisit those descriptions.

- How does Brosend change our expectations of these characters from “Bible Central Casting”?
- Who asked for what in the prayers?
- What is the surprising juxtaposition that Jesus uses in this parable?

In the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge, the characters are less of a surprise.

- What is it that Brosend labels “the very stuff of faith” (p. 71)?
- How do you feel about judgment when it is in your favor? Is this different than when it is against you?

Revisit Brosend's discussion of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, our first harsh judgment story.

- What two fundamental principles at work in this story does Brosend name?
- How precisely did the rich man fail?
- What is your belief about heaven and hell? How has this belief evolved over time? How does it compare with the world of this story?
- Having heard this parable, how are you feeling about your own life choices? Why?

In Brosend's exploration of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the emphasis is on the inability of the first servant to learn from his undeserved forgiveness. Brosend also emphasizes the "absolute necessity of learning from our experience, of learning from God's grace" (pp. 76–77).

- How does one learn to learn from experience? What can facilitate this kind of learning?
- What examples in your own life still haunt or inspire you?

In the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the normal wage is no longer satisfying to the full day workers. Why?

- What do you hope your own response might be in that situation?
- How can you build a life that makes such a response not only possible, but natural?

Brosend next examines three stories about choices and consequences: the parables of the Talents, the Ten Maidens, and the Sheep and the Goats. Revisit his discussion of each.

- What failures lie at the heart of each story?
- What might have helped in each situation?

What will you do differently after thinking about this study?

- What are you going to do with what you know?
- How will you use the grace you have been given (p. 84)?
- What is your job in light of these parables of judgment?
- What is God doing?

Chapter Five

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus: Parables of Decision

Brosend in this chapter shifts attention to the process of deliberation and decision.

- What contrast does Brosend point out in his discussion of the parable of the Two Sons?
- What does Brosend assert is the central decision in this parable? (See p. 88.)
- What exhortation does he give?

In his exploration of stories about planning well to accomplish the task, Brosend comments on the intriguing aspect of this passage: “Jesus treats the life of faith as a matter for deliberate decision and not as a spiritual response to a moment of inspiration” (p. 89). Or, “Can you finish what you start?”

- What is your own history with difficult, almost impossible decisions?
- Do some research on Paul and Luther and Wesley. What can you find about their decision-making processes? How do you imagine it went?
- Are you more like Pascal, wagering on belief, or like Luther, unable to resist God’s pursuit? (See p. 91.)
- What calculations did you make before embarking upon a life of faith? How is that working out for you?

Brosend discusses four thoughts that come from reading the story of the Rich Fool. Look at them on pages 95–99.

- What definition do you use of “enough”? How do you show it?
- In what do you think life consists? What has shaped this understanding?
- What in the way you lead your life manifests your beliefs stated above?
- What are you storing up here?

Enjoy the freedom Brosend gives as he invites us into the exploration of the parable of the Dishonest Manager.

- Do we understand our economy today to be a “zero-sum” economy?

- What does that mean? (See p. 99.) How does it affect your reading of the parable?
- Revisit some of the explanations of this parable which Brosend says have failed.
- How comfortable are you with the questions raised and left unanswered about this parable? Are you persuaded?
- What was the result of the decision of the manager?
- What from this story can you apply to your own decision making?

Brosend states that “the parable of the Banquet is about hospitality” (p. 107).

- What light does his discussion of the socio-economic facets of this story shed for you?
- How might you safely and creatively “provide hospitality to those who cannot return the favor” in your own context (p. 106)?
- How does your faith community measure up to the standard of the gospel?

What concepts do you glean from this study to aid and focus your decision-making process individually and corporately? What do you need to support you in this challenge?

Chapter Six

Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life

Keep in mind Brosend’s “limited goals” for this chapter: to tell us everything we need to know about the Good Samaritan, to show us how to use what we have learned from reading parables to develop a method for reading all Scripture, and to change our lives.

- What in your experiences of this study makes you open to these goals?
- Are you still enjoying his wit and clarity?

Brosend offers us extensive comment on the dearth of historical evidence, on Greek linguistics, and on the socio-historical significance of the characters involved in the Good Samaritan parable.

- Which facets of Brosend’s discussion of the Good Samaritan are newly engaging to you? Which are familiar?

- How many times in this chapter does Brosend state or imply of the details he shares that “it does not matter”? What does matter?
- How do you get at the “truth at a different level” he discusses around page 121?

In what ways did Jesus go for maximum rhetorical impact in this parable?

- What sharp contrast is elucidated, giving impact to the story? (See p. 114.)
- How do you experience Brosend’s question, “But what if we are not the Samaritan?”

Brosend writes of the Good Samaritan, “Because he was willing to stop, he could see what was really going on. . . . And because of the sort of person he was, he had compassion” (p. 116).

- What other examples can you think of from Scripture that commend such stopping?
- How is this parable unique?

Brosend and other New Testament scholars include the story of Mary and Martha in the context for reading the parable of the Good Samaritan (p. 117).

- What impact does this have on the interpretation of the parable?
- Where does the balance lie in your own life between discipleship and ministry? Where is the balance in the life of your community?
- How do you know where that balance belongs?

Have you understood Brosend’s explanation of *hermeneutic*? What other explanations can you research and share? (Hey! www.wikipedia.com is not half bad here . . .)

What two juxtapositions does Brosend name as “key to understanding the meaning of the narrative (p. 122)? Together, what do these juxtapositions reveal?

Brosend reveals one of his “foundational principles for interpreting Scripture: the Bible is the Word of God because it speaks God’s truth to all people for all time, not because it can be demonstrated to be historically accurate to a given time and place.” He celebrates the

very openness to more than one interpretation as parables' ways of teaching us that "Jesus *liked* polyvalency . . . thrived on it" (p. 122).

- If this is indeed the case, how do we as individuals and communities of faith discern the authentic voice of God in the Scripture? How do we know which message is ours to claim?
- Revisit what Brosend has to say on the suppleness required to read parables, on the lightness of reading they demand. What is the invitation parables issue? (See p. 124.)

On page 103, Brosend writes, "The *hermeneutical* issue is to determine the basis on which you decide to read one command literally and binding across all time, and another as not. I said it was important." He goes on to name as a false choice and something from which we are freed, the "rote literalism that privileges one reading to the exclusion of all others and makes our approach to Scripture a perpetual choice between right and wrong" (p. 103).

- What guidance does Brosend offer to help us avoid losing the meaning of the text?
- What assumptions does this approach make?

Brosend closes his study with a statement of things that matter in ministry.

- List the five things that he names. (See pp. 127–129.)
- Review his discussion of how he reached this conclusion and how it impacts his decisions in ministry. Would you alter his list to make it your own? How?
- What primary tasks does Brosend call us to based in his understanding of the gospel in parables? What effects are anticipated?

Did Bill Brosend succeed in the third of his goals for this chapter? How are you different for having engaged in this study together? How do you claim the gospel's unique message for you and live into the kingdom of God anew?

The Rev. Helen McPeak lives in Las Vegas, Nevada where the strangeness of life often arrests her. Parish priest, marriage partner, and parent of two boys, her mind is frequently left in doubt sufficient to tease it into active thought.

