This surplus of meaning is how poetry and storytelling work, and it is all to the good.

It may also be a good thing that we do not have the explanations that Mark's disciples heard and remembered. The Twelve, despite their commission by Jesus, consistently misunderstand him. They do not understand the parable of the Sower, and Jesus despairs of their understanding any of the other parables: "And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?'" (Mark 4.13). Their lack of understanding shows when Jesus tells them to feed the crowds and they sarcastically respond, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" (6.37). Following the feeding miracles, Jesus cautions them, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod" (8.15). The disciples then say to one another, "It is because we have no bread." Not only have they forgotten that Jesus can cater; they have also missed the implications of Jesus's metaphorical message. No doubt when they heard the parable of the yeast they worried about whether the dough was gluten-free.

Although Peter, Andrew, James, and John are seasoned fishermen, they are afraid of being shipwrecked in a storm, and Jesus—who had been asleep in the boat—has to rebuke them for their lack of faith (Mark 4.40). They doubt his awareness of his healing powers (5.31); they don't understand his argument that "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (7.15); Peter questions his mission, and Jesus responds by calling him "Satan," which is not a compliment (8.33); they seek to prevent parents and caregivers from bringing their children to Jesus (10.13–16) despite his telling them to welcome children (9.37); Judas betrays him (14.45); Peter, James, and John fall asleep when he is in agony in Gethsemane (14.37); Peter then denies him (14.68); and they all flee from the cross.

Nor, alas, are the named women followers much better when it comes to understanding him. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb on Sunday morning to "anoint" the body (Mark 16.1). Not only do they ask, too late to suggest any advance planning, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" (16.3); they are too late with their ointments: at the first supper of Jesus's final week, an unnamed woman had already anointed him (14.8).

Mark's disciples are not the best candidates for accurately preserving explanations of parables. Whether they were as clueless as Mark portrays them, or whether the evangelist has deliberately portrayed them as in need of remedial instruction, the literary effect of their descriptions is the same. Mark is telling readers, "Go beyond the disciples, be open to the mystery and the challenge, interpret for yourselves." And we readers should be reassured that if Peter, James, and John, even after failing, can find rehabilitation and stay with the program, there's hope for the rest of us.

Granted, we should not be too hard on the disciples. They were looking for something within their comfort zone and, like many, resisted what the parables might convey. Moreover, Jesus was requiring that they do more than listen; he was asking them to think as well. He tells the Twelve, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand'" (Mark 4.11–12; see also Matt. 13.11–13). "Mystery" is here not indicative of something arcane or in need of a special key to unlock a singular meaning. What makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge. Our reaction to them should be one of resistance rather than acceptance. For our own comfort, we may want to foreclose the meaning rather than allow the parable to open into multiple interpretations. We are probably more comfortable proclaiming a creed than prompting a conversation or pursuing a call.

Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, "I really like that" or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough.

not have access to Jesus directly; he leaves us no writing, no autobiography, no sanctioned biography. To be blunt, he leaves us neither a physical body nor a body of writing. If the only Gospel we had were that traditionally attributed to John, we would have no parables; nor would we have accounts of Jesus's baptism by John, his exorcisms, or his famous saying, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22.21; Mark 12.17; Luke 20.25). The parables appear only in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), although a few are repeated and a few distinct ones are presented in the noncanonical Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*.

Instead of having an unmediated Jesus, all we have are the memories preserved and filtered through the concerns and confessions of those who proclaimed him Lord or Savior. Moreover, those filters included linguistic ones. Jesus, raised in lower Galilee, would have spoken Aramaic and probably some Hebrew; if he knew Greek, it would have been the Greek needed by an artisan who might take a contract from a Greek speaker in the larger Galilean cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. Thus when we attempt to interpret his parables, we are interpreting them in their Greek version. As with any translation, something is always lost and something is always added. We do the best we can with what we have.

I do think Jesus spoke in parables despite their absence from John; he would have been at home in the genre. There are several other reasons for thinking he told many, if not most or even all, of the parables recorded in the Gospels.

For example, the parables often express concerns that appear elsewhere in the Jesus tradition; they echo themes heard in his teachings and debates. Jesus is concerned about economics: about giving to those who beg, about the blessings that will come to the poor, about mutual dependence rather than top-down brokerage, about what can be summarized as "kingdom economics," in which the prayer "Forgive us our debts" meant more than sins and included monetary loans. His focus is on laying up treasure in heaven, not on accumulating bank accounts on earth. The parables, with their attention to wealth management,

debts, daily wages, land ownership, and lost coins, speak to the same concerns. Luke retains several parables that begin "There was a rich man who . . ."; none is likely to be well loved by owners of Fortune 500 companies. One could claim that Luke invented all these parables, but this would be an overstatement. Rather, the parables sit uneasily in his Gospel. The Rich Man and Lazarus presumes a judgment of heaven and hell already in place prior to Jesus's death and so complicates the role of the cross in salvation; the lines following the parable of the Dishonest Manager show Luke attempting to bring order to a story with no clear morality.

Jesus is also concerned about relationships: between parents and children, siblings, neighbors, and leaders and followers; he emphasizes caring for the other, mutual reciprocity, servant leadership, and humility. The parables sound all these themes. The Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25.31–46) insists that it is not religious confession, but caring for others—feeding the hungry, visiting people in prison, clothing the naked—that will bring entrance into the heavenly kingdom (if you are unfamiliar with the parable and you find yourself at the pearly gates, where there are lines marked "Sheep" and "Goats," get into the sheep line). Again, the parable runs contrary to church's (later) focus that it is belief in Jesus, Jesus's own fidelity, or the cross and resurrection that conveys eschatological blessing, so despite the parable's presence only in Matthew's Gospel, it most likely comes from Jesus himself.

Next, Jesus is concerned about prioritizing. Expecting the kingdom of heaven to break in, indeed, seeing it already as present in his actions, he demands a reaction: choose life, choose to live the way God wants us to live. His message echoes the warning of his former teacher, John the Baptist: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1.15; cf. Matt. 4.17). Given this urgency, new forms of living are required: we need to determine what is necessary and what is not (so the Pearl of Great Price); we need to determine when practicality should give way to generosity (so the Laborers in the Vineyard); and we need to be assured that the kingdom is coming, both with our help (the Yeast) and without it (the Mustard Seed).

With regard to Jesus's own presentation, the parables fit his comments about himself and the kingdom he proclaims. In his teachings and his actions, Jesus displays such respect for the people he encounters that he does not spoon-feed them what can only be understood in the heart, not the head. Yes, he makes direct statements—"You shall not murder," "Love your enemies"—but he also teaches through challenge.

For example, he refers to himself as the "son of man," and in so doing he forces his listeners to make a decision. Is he speaking of himself as one human being among others, one who does not know the mysteries of heaven, as in, for example, God's address to Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" (37.3, KJV)? Is he recalling humanity's almost divine nature and so almost limitless potential, as in Psalm 8.4–5: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour" (KJV; cf. Heb. 2.7, 9). Or is he alluding to the "Son of man" in Daniel 7.13–14, to whom was given "dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (KJV)? Or again, is he simply using the Galilean Aramaic idiom for "I"? Any hearing him would need to ask: Is he making messianic claims about himself? Is he speaking of another? Is he talking about all of humanity? Who is this man?

Another reason to see Jesus as speaking not only in parables, but in these parables that have come down to us from the Gospels is their frequent motif of celebration. What is infectiously appealing about Jesus is that he likes to celebrate. He is consistently meeting people not at the altar but at table, whether as host, guest, or the body and blood to be consumed (as in John 6 and the synoptic Last Supper accounts). He is indiscriminate in his dining companions, who include Pharisees, tax collectors, sinners, and even an upscale family consisting of two sisters and a formerly dead brother. The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the one miracle story recounted in all four Gospels. To be in his presence is not only to be challenged and comforted; it is to celebrate at table.

There is feasting at the end of the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, and a fatted calf awaits the Lost Son.

Such images are not arbitrary. One dominant Jewish view of the *olam ha-ba,* the "world to come," was of a banquet, a great feast at which one "reclined at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (see Matt. 8.11). In his dining, Jesus is providing a foretaste of that messianic age. These images add depth to the parable of the Leaven in particular and to the various stories about banquets. Jesus's parables, with their frequent theme of celebration and their warnings to those who fail to share this joy, unsettle, and at the same time the more we chew on them, the greater the smile that will cross our lips, the more food for thought we have, and the more we want to taste.

In addition to the presence of parables in Jesus's own cultural context and their numerous thematic consistencies with the rest of his teaching, there are other very good reasons for thinking that Jesus taught in parables. For example, not only do we today often think of the parables as a genre especially associated with Jesus; so did the majority of his followers. The non-canonical Gospels and Acts stemming from the second century and later tend not to recapitulate parables as a genre. Most of the so-called Gnostic texts move instead into esoteric teaching, teaching that could not be comprehended by bakers, textile workers, or folks in the Galilean fishing industry.

A fourth reason to think that he spoke the parables is that we see the evangelists wrestling with an attempt to control their meaning. We've already noted Luke's concern for domesticating the parables beginning, "There was a rich man who . . ."; Luke's wrestling continues with other unruly stories that defy easy moralization. As we'll see when we turn to the Widow and the Judge, Luke attempts to domesticate the parable by turning it into a lesson about constant prayer. That's not the message a first-century Jewish audience would have heard; nor, as I found in my multiple test readings with both Jewish groups and Christian groups unfamiliar with the parable, is it an interpretation today's listeners come up with either. The same domestication occurs with many of the other parables: the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin were not, *pace* Luke, originally heard as stories of repentance and forgive-