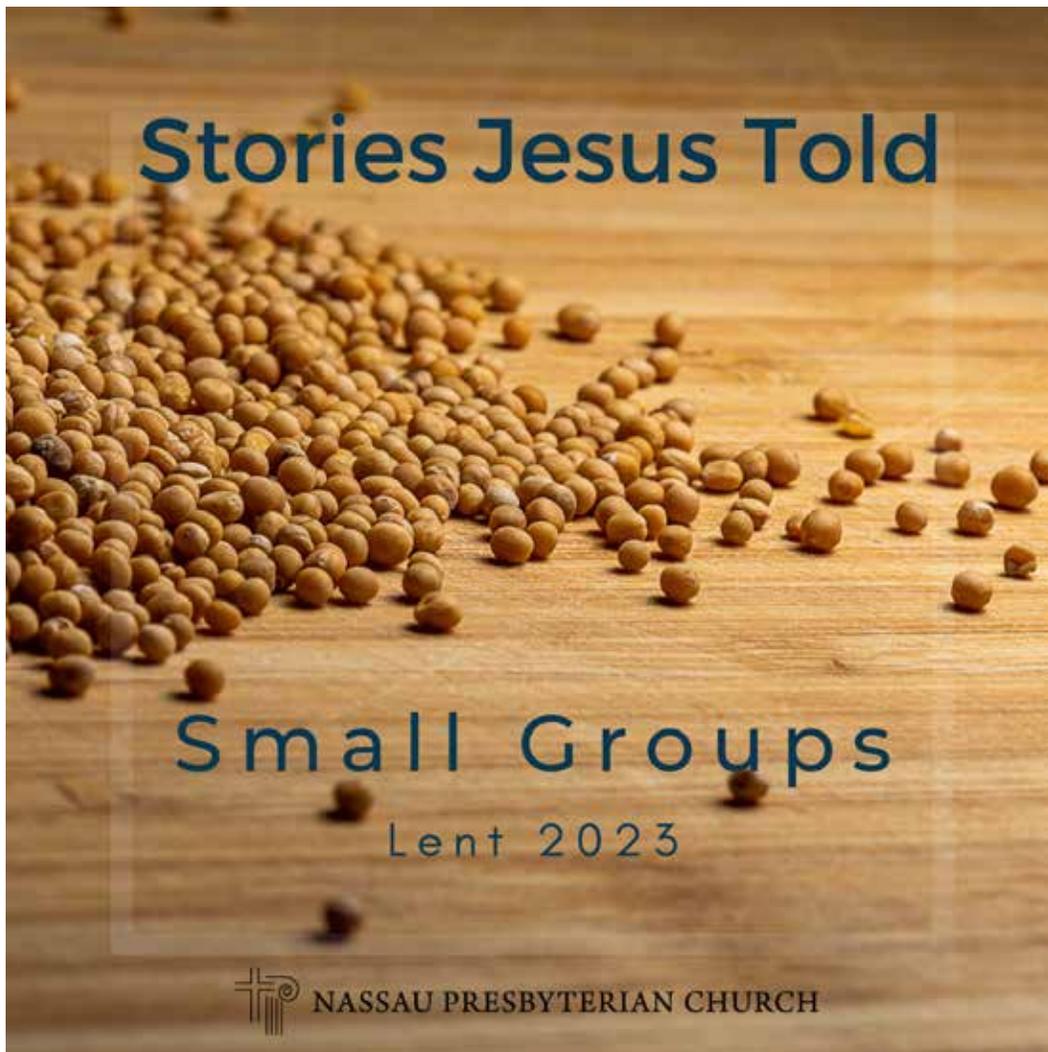


Parables



Linked-In Learning • Lent 2023

Study Guide

NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How to Use this Guide

Everyone, leader and participants, should begin by reading the introduction for its important orientation to the theme for this study.

- * Participants can best prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned text in advance at least once. They can also read the material that will guide the discussion, although this is not necessary to enter into the discussion.
- * If you are unable to attend a small group or the adult education class, you can use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday or during the week on the Nassau Church website.
- * This guide can also help in your preparation for the adult education presentations. Or read the text and discuss the questions together as a family or couple.
- * If you didn't sign up for a small group because the times were not convenient, you can gather three or four friends on Zoom to talk about "Stories Jesus Told" using this guide.
- * Leaders of small groups can prepare by reading the text in advance as well as looking over the discussion plan to see how it will fit your group and the events of the day.
- * However and whenever you enter into this study, bring your own questions as you grapple with this material and Christian discipleship today. May your faith increase even as you find new questions in these stories from the Bible.



Introduction

In her book, *Short Stories by Jesus: the Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, Amy-Jill Levine writes on page 1:

The Gospel writers, in their wisdom, left most of the parables as open narratives in order to invite us into engagement with them. Each reader will hear a distinct message and may find that the same parable leaves multiple impressions over time. Different audiences inevitably hear different messages, just as today a listener who is poor or in ill health may form a different interpretation of the Rich Man and Lazarus than a person with a seat on the stock exchange or extended credit from Neiman Marcus. The parable of the Lost Son will convey different nuances to parents than to children, to the irresponsible and indulged (if such children pay attention at all) than to the faithful and overlooked. Reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential. This surplus of meaning is how poetry and storytelling work, and it is all to the good.

Thus, our goal for the Lent 2023 Small Groups, *Stories Jesus Told*, is to open up each parable or short story to multiple meanings rather than to find the appropriate or best interpretation of it. Therefore, this study guide is set up a bit differently than previous ones. For example, a series of questions that can be asked of each parable has been written and will be included in Weeks 2–5. Each plan will also include a quote from *Short Stories by Jesus*. Levine, who describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominately Christian divinity school [Vanderbilt Divinity School] in the buckle of the Bible Belt.” Her interpretation and study of parables in general and in particular often lend an edge we might otherwise miss.

Even with this change in format, the overall goal of small groups remains the same as previously: to provide an occasion for disciples of Jesus to grow in faith and fellowship. May this study of the *Stories Jesus Told* fulfill that intent for you and those in your group.



WEEK ONE

An Introduction to Parables

Pray Open with prayer or pray after the first activity.

Transition from everyday life to the small group setting Invite the participants to introduce themselves and answer one of these questions or one of your own:

- * Why did you decide to be a part of the small groups this Lent?
- * Where were you born?
- * What significant thing has happened in your life since Christmas? (This doesn't have to be newsworthy, just important to you.)

Make these opening moments light and a way to get to know each other. If there are a number of people who don't know each other in your group, you might choose a more general question to begin to build trust in this group setting.

Guidelines for Small Groups Review the "Group Covenant", even if only one member is new to your group. Make any comments particular to your group, such as "I like to start promptly and end on the agreed time" or "I will have tea ready for you each week" or "Please let me know if you will not be here."

Our approach to the parables Read, or ask a volunteer to read, the paragraph in the introduction from *Short Stories Jesus Told*. Ask:

- * Why do you think this paragraph was chosen?
- * What is your reaction to its message?
- * What does this suggest about the way we will ponder and discuss the parables each week?

A trial run A parable that is not included in this series (but is a favorite of the writer of this guide) is the Widow and the Judge (Luke 18:1–8). Read it aloud from at least two translations. (If there aren't two translations among the participants, ask someone to look it up and read a different translation on the Bible Gateway app on their smart phone.)

Discuss the parable, using these questions as well as your own, depending upon the flow of the conversation:

- * When do you remember hearing this parable before?
- * With whom do you identify in the parable?
- * Does the person you identify with change in the course of the story? When?
- * What is the setting provided by the gospel writer for this parable? (You may need to go back several verses to find the setting.)

Read the parable aloud again from one of the two translations or a third one. Suggest that they listen for things that didn't capture their attention in the first reading. Ask:

- * What did you notice this time?
- * How did knowing the setting change the way you heard the parable this time?
- * Jesus likely told many, many parables, why do you think this one is included in this Gospel?
- * Look at the stories before and after this parable. What does the placement of it here suggest to you?

Read the parable one more time. Suggest that they listen this time for connections with life in the 21st century. Ask:

- * How does this parable connect with life today?
- * Where does it disturb or afflict you?
- * What might it teach us about Christian faith and discipleship?

Closing Save five to ten minutes for a time of closing and transition. Invite the participants to sit for a moment and ponder this question:

- * What do you personally want to take from this parable at this point in your life?

It is not necessary that people speak their intention, but some may wish to do so. Close the time with prayer requests and a closing prayer.



WEEK TWO

Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–13)

Pray Open with prayer or pray after the first activity.

Transition from everyday life to the small group setting Invite the participants to introduce themselves and answer one of these questions:

- * What event in your life will mark 2022 for you?
- * If you were a bird, what kind of bird would you be?
- * Who was an adult other than your parents who was influential in your childhood?

Recap and review Before beginning discussion of the parable for this week, invite comments and questions about the presentation by Professor Allison on Sunday in adult education. Were there points of connection with the small group discussion in the first week? Of divergence?

On parables From Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus* (p. 3):

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. 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.

Ask:

- * What does this short piece suggest to you about how to approach Jesus' parables?

Parable of the Friend in the Night Read it aloud from at least two translations. (If there aren't two translations among the participants, ask someone to look it up and read a different translation on the Bible Gateway app on their smart phone.)

Discuss the parable, using these questions as well as your own, depending upon the flow of the conversation:

- * When do you remember hearing this parable before?
- * With whom do you identify in the parable?
- * Does the person you identify with change in the course of the story? When?
- * What is the setting provided by the gospel writer for this parable? (You may need to go back several verses to find the setting.)

Read the parable aloud again from one of the two translations or a third one. Suggest that they listen for things that didn't capture their attention in the first reading. Ask:

- * What did you notice this time?
- * How did knowing the setting change the way you heard the parable this time?
- * Jesus likely told many, many parables, why do you think this one is included in this Gospel?
- * Look at the stories before and after this parable. What does the placement of it here suggest to you?

Read the parable one more time. Suggest that they listen this time for connections with life in the 21st century. Ask:

- * How does this parable connect with life today?
- * Where does it disturb or afflict you?
- * What might it teach us about Christian faith and discipleship?

Closing Save five to ten minutes for a time of closing and transition. Invite the participants to sit for a moment and ponder this question:

- * What do you personally want to take from this parable at this point in your life?

It is not necessary that people speak their intention, but some may wish to do so. Close the time with prayer requests and a closing prayer.



WEEK THREE

Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3–7)

Pray Open with prayer or pray after the first activity.

Transition from everyday life to the small group setting Invite the participants to introduce themselves and answer one of these questions:

- * What is your favorite sign of Spring?
- * What is one short story you can tell about one of your grandparents?
- * Where was your mother or father born?

Recap and review Before beginning discussion of the parable for this week, invite comments and questions about the presentation by Bill Creager on Sunday in adult education. Were there points of connection with last week's small group discussion? Of divergence? A surprising twist of on the parable presented?

On parables From Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus* (pp. 18–19):

When it comes to parables and to ancient texts in general, our listening skills are not as developed as they should be. Not only do we frequently miss the original provocation, and not only do we frequently default to simplistic interpretations; we also often import historical and anachronistic readings that deform the good news of the gospel into something Jesus would neither recognize nor condone.

. . . in a number of churches, the parables function as children's stories. That is because children can understand those simple messages. We don't need to know who a Samaritan is or what the term connotes in order to know that the traveler in the parable helps someone who is injured and helping someone is a good thing. Therefore, parables provide excellent "children's sermons" or "events for all ages".

Ask:

- * What does this short piece suggest to you about how to approach Jesus' parables?

Parable of the Lost Sheep Read it aloud from at least two translations. (If there aren't two translations among the participants, ask someone to look it up and read a different translation on the Bible Gateway app on their smart phone.)

Discuss the parable, using these questions as well as your own, depending upon the flow of the conversation:

- * When do you remember hearing this parable before?
- * With whom do you identify in the parable?
- * Does the person you identify with change in the course of the story? When?
- * What is the setting provided by the gospel writer for this parable? (You may need to go back several verses to find the setting.)

Read the parable aloud again from one of the two translations or a third one. Suggest that they listen for things that didn't capture their attention in the first reading. Ask:

- * What did you notice this time?
- * How did knowing the setting change the way you heard the parable this time?
- * Jesus likely told many, many parables, why do you think this one is included in this Gospel?
- * Look at the stories before and after this parable. What does the placement of it here suggest to you?

Read the parable one more time. Suggest that they listen this time for connections with life in the 21st century. Ask:

- * How does this parable connect with life today?
- * Where does it disturb or afflict you?
- * What might it teach us about Christian faith and discipleship?

Closing Save five to ten minutes for a time of closing and transition. Invite the participants to sit for a moment and ponder this question:

- * What do you personally want to take from this parable at this point in your life?

It is not necessary that people speak their intention, but some may wish to do so. Close the time with prayer requests and a closing prayer.



WEEK FOUR

Parable of the Soils (Matthew 13:1–30)

Pray Open with prayer or pray after the first activity.

Transition from everyday life to the small group setting Invite the participants to introduce themselves and answer one of these questions:

- * What television show or podcast do you listen to regularly?
- * What is your very favorite dessert?
- * If you were a plant, what plant would you be?

Recap and review Before beginning discussion of the parable for this week, invite comments and questions about the presentation by Jade Hage on Sunday in adult education. Were there points of connection with last week's small group discussion? Of divergence? A surprising twist on the parable presented?

On parables From Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus* (p. 282):

The parable should disturb. If we hear it and are not disturbed, there is something seriously amiss with our moral compass. It would be better if we perhaps started by seeing the parable not as about heaven or hell or final judgment, but about kings, politics, violence, and the absence of justice. If we do, we might be getting closer to Jesus.

Ask:

- * What does this short piece suggest to you about how to approach Jesus' parables?

Parable of the Soils Read it aloud from at least two translations. (If there aren't two translations among the participants, ask someone to look it up and read a different translation on the Bible Gateway app on their smart phone.)

Discuss the parable, using these questions as well as your own, depending upon the flow of the conversation:

- * When do you remember hearing this parable before?
- * With whom do you identify in the parable?
- * Does the person you identify with change in the course of the story? When?
- * What is the setting provided by the gospel writer for this parable? (You may need to go back several verses to find the setting.)

Read the parable aloud again from one of the two translations or a third one. Suggest that they listen for things that didn't capture their attention in the first reading. Ask:

- * What did you notice this time?
- * How did knowing the setting change the way you heard the parable this time?
- * Jesus likely told many, many parables, why do you think this one is included in this Gospel?
- * Look at the stories before and after this parable. What does the placement of it here suggest to you?

Read the parable one more time. Suggest that they listen this time for connections with life in the 21st century. Ask:

- * How does this parable connect with life today?
- * Where does it disturb or afflict you?
- * What might it teach us about Christian faith and discipleship?

Closing Save five to ten minutes for a time of closing and transition. Invite the participants to sit for a moment and ponder this question:

- * What do you personally want to take from this parable at this point in your life?

It is not necessary that people speak their intention, but some may wish to do so. Close the time with prayer requests and a closing prayer.



WEEK FIVE

Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

(Matthew 20:1–15)

Pray Open with prayer or pray after the first activity.

Transition from everyday life to the small group setting Invite the participants to introduce themselves and answer one of these questions:

- * What was your first real job?
- * What living figure (political, religious, sports, etc.) do you admire today?
- * Where would you like to go on vacation this summer?

Recap and review Before beginning discussion of the parable for this week, invite comments and questions about the presentation by Keith Mertz on Sunday in adult education. Were there points of connection with last week's small group discussion? Of divergence? A surprising twist on the parable presented?

On parables From Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus* (p. 198):

Despite the fact that the parable has multiple characters (householder, workers, manager), multiple settings (vineyard, marketplace), and multiple elements (timing, move from vineyard to market and back, the moment of payment), the traditional title of the parable is "The Laborers in the Vineyard."

Titles are always deceptive; they necessarily focus on one aspect of a story and so deemphasize or mask the importance of others. They already slant the interpretation, for good or for ill.

Ask:

- * What does this short piece suggest to you about how to approach Jesus' parables?

Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard Read it aloud from at least two translations. (If there aren't two translations among the participants, ask someone to look it up and read a different translation on the Bible Gateway app on their smart phone.)

Discuss the parable, using these questions as well as your own, depending upon the flow of the conversation:

- * When do you remember hearing this parable before?
- * With whom do you identify in the parable?
- * Does the person you identify with change in the course of the story? When?
- * What is the setting provided by the gospel writer for this parable? (You may need to go back several verses to find the setting.)

Read the parable aloud again from one of the two translations or a third one. Suggest that they listen for things that didn't capture their attention in the first reading. Ask:

- * What did you notice this time?
- * How did knowing the setting change the way you heard the parable this time?
- * Jesus likely told many, many parables, why do you think this one is included in this Gospel?
- * Look at the stories before and after this parable. What does the placement of it here suggest to you?

Read the parable one more time. Suggest that they listen this time for connections with life in the 21st century. Ask:

- * How does this parable connect with life today?
- * Where does it disturb or afflict you?
- * What might it teach us about Christian faith and discipleship?

Closing Save five to ten minutes for a time of closing and transition. Invite the participants to sit for a moment and ponder this question:

- * What do you personally want to take from this parable at this point in your life?

It is not necessary that people speak their intention, but some may wish to do so. Close the time with prayer requests and a closing prayer.



WEEK SIX

Parable of the Tenant Farmers (Matthew 21:33–46)

Pray Open with prayer or pray after the first activity.

Transition from everyday life to the small group setting Invite the participants to introduce themselves and answer one of these questions:

- * What is your favorite parable?
- * What is one Lent or Easter tradition that you observe?
- * With whom will you celebrate and feast on Easter?

Recap and review Before beginning discussion of the parable for this week, invite comments and questions about the presentation by Kathie Sakenfeld on Sunday in adult education. Were there points of connection with last week's small group discussion? Of divergence? A surprising twist on the parable presented?

On parables Levin closes her book *Short Stories by Jesus* (p. 282) with these words:

One does not need to worship Jesus as Lord and Savior for the parables to have meaning. The people who first heard him did not, at first, worship him. Yet they paid attention, because for those with ears to hear and some patience to ponder, the parables spoke to their hearts. I do not worship Jesus as Lord and Savior, but I continue to return to these stories, because they are at the heart of my Judaism. They challenge, they provoke, they convict, and at the same time amuse me. At each reading, when I think I've got the details explained, something remains left over, and I have to start again. The parables have provided me countless hours of inspiration, and conversation. They are pearls of Jewish wisdom. If we hear them in their original contexts, and if we avoid anti-Jewish interpretation that frequently deforms them, they gleam with a shine that cannot be hidden.

Ask:

- * What does this short piece suggest to you about how to approach Jesus' parables?

Parable of the Tenant Farmers Read it aloud from at least two translations. (If there aren't two translations among the participants, ask someone to look it up and read a different translation on the Bible Gateway app on their smart phone.)

Discuss the parable, using these questions as well as your own, depending upon the flow of the conversation:

- * When do you remember hearing this parable before?
- * With whom do you identify in the parable?
- * Does the person you identify with change in the course of the story? When?
- * What is the setting provided by the gospel writer for this parable? (You may need to go back several verses to find the setting.)

Read the parable aloud again from one of the two translations or a third one. Suggest that they listen for things that didn't capture their attention in the first reading. Ask:

- * What did you notice this time?
- * How did knowing the setting change the way you heard the parable this time?
- * Jesus likely told many, many parables, why do you think this one is included in this Gospel?
- * Look at the stories before and after this parable. What does the placement of it here suggest to you?

Read the parable one more time. Suggest that they listen this time for connections with life in the 21st century. Ask:

- * How does this parable connect with life today?
- * Where does it disturb or afflict you?
- * What might it teach us about Christian faith and discipleship?

Closing Save five to ten minutes for a time of closing and transition. Invite the participants to sit for a moment and ponder this question:

- * What do you personally want to take from this parable at this point in your life?

It is not necessary that people speak their intention, but some may wish to do so. Close the time with prayer requests and a closing prayer.

GROUP COVENANT

- * What happens in the group stays in the group. To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- * Speak and make space for others to speak. Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- * Stay with the group. Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate.
- * Focus on ideas, not the person. If you disagree, disagree with the idea, but don't belittle the person.
- * Speak from your own awareness. When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- * Everyone in the group is a learner. In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.