

A drop of grace

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Preachers and teachers are really missing those summer days when we got to preach on wonderful parables about mustard seeds and loaves of yeast bread. Now it's judgment-parable season, and many of us wish we were on vacation.

I believe that difficult texts should not be read in the midst of worship and then flatly avoided in the preaching. Paul's words from Philippians are marvelous with their call to "Rejoice in the Lord always," to "not worry about anything," but in many of our congregations this reading will be followed immediately by a very difficult parable from Matthew.

There are many trustworthy commentators on this parable. I always find Fr. Robert Capon most helpful in his thoughtful and creative work on parables of grace and judgment. However, even the most trustworthy of interpreters will not massage out the story's tension between grace and judgment. Rather than attempting to explain this parable away until it's most comfortable, I suggest letting the tension work on our transformation. Rather than turning ourselves into theological pretzels trying to faithfully interpret the parable, we might allow the parable to interpret us.

In my *Century* lectionary column for this week, I give an example of how this might be done. Some of us use the hermeneutical strategy of allowing scripture passages that are bright and clear to shine a light on those that dwell in dark mystery. Instead of starting with the difficult tension in this parable, I suggest starting with an affirmation of your core beliefs about the kingdom of God, about God's purpose in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Consider how those core beliefs shine a light on the message of this parable.

Not everything will become clear. This can certainly be acknowledged without lengthy complaint. Even if it seems like you are squeezing a single drop of grace out of a tough turnip this week, recall one of Jesus' clear teachings about the kingdom of God: that in that dominion, tiny things have wondrous power. Perhaps one drop will do.