By Lee Logue

Among the many teaching methods that Jesus used the Parable is probably the most well known but sometimes misunderstood.

The sayings of Jesus can be a puzzle to us. Much of the difficulty comes from not seeing the nuances of their Jewish style and context.

Even though Jesus was a master at using parables in his teaching, he didn't invent them. In fact, thousands of parables are on record from Jewish rabbis.

A parable was a way to explain a theological truth in terms of physical images and stories. Just as the Hebrew language uses concrete pictures to express abstractions (God's "outstretched arm" meant God's power, to be "stiff-necked" meant to be stubborn, etc), the parable explained truth in terms of everyday experiences. The logic was that we can understand things we don't see by comparing them to things that we can see and know about. This is where we can stumble; we see the literal but fail to grasp the spiritual concept.

Typically, a rabbi told a parable to make one major point, often as an illustration of a larger teaching. Many times two or three parables were told that had the same instruction. To get the full understanding one must use the complete set. The rule derived from Deuteronomy 19:15b *A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.* The set of parables prove the same thing. Jesus often used this, as when he tells the parable of the leaven and the mustard seed – both describing something that starts out very small, then grows huge. By reading the two parables together and seeing the similarities, we can often understand the common conclusion better.

Some elements were common motifs in many parables, and they usually were drawn from the scriptures. For instance, a king was often the subject of the parable, and the king was almost always symbolic of God. Jesus told several parables about kings, all making a point about the nature of God. Parables of this type were the main way Jews communicated their theology of God.

Another image that was used for God is the shepherd. When a sheep strays from the pasture, who seeks whom? Does the sheep seek the shepherd, or does the shepherd seek the sheep? Obviously, the shepherd seeks the sheep. In the same way, God looks for the lost.

Other rabbis had the understanding that God has mercy on the lost, and pursues them to bring them back to himself. Many parables use the shepherd image because in several places in the Old Testament, God is described as a shepherd looking for his sheep (Ezekiel 34, Jer. 23). The Messiah is also called the "shepherd" as well – linking God to the Messiah. When Jesus speaks of himself as "the good shepherd" (John 10), all of these images would have come to mind.

Another closely related teaching method that Jesus often used was called *"kal v'homer"*, meaning "light and heavy". The idea was to communicate a larger truth by comparing it to a similar, but smaller truth. Often the phrase **"how much more"** would be part of the saying.

One instance where Jesus used this, is when he taught about worry.
Think about the wild irises, and how they grow. They neither work nor spin thread; yet, I tell you, not even Shlomo (Solomon) *in all his glory was clothed as beautifully as one of these. If this is how God clothes grass, which is alive in the field today and thrown in the oven tomorrow,* **how much more** *will he clothe you! What little trust you have!* Luke 12:27-28 (CJB)

He uses it again when teaching about serving others.
So if you, who are sinful, know how to give your children good gifts, **how much more** *so does your Father in heaven, who is perfect, know how to give great gifts to His children!*   Matthew 7:11 (The Voice)

In both of these cases, Jesus is teaching theology in non-theological terms. Understanding these teachings is dependent on our grasping the concept of *"kal v'homer"*.

In the Old Testament we see Abraham, the most revered of all of Israel's ancestors, acting as a humble servant by serving a meal to God and two angels (Genesis 18). Understanding the *kal v'homer* allows us to see that God himself serves us and even the animals when he gives us food.

God himself is the ultimate model of serving others; rather than wanting to be served. Certainly, if one as great as God serves his lowly creation, **how much more** (*kal v'homer*) should we serve each other!