

## PARABLES FOR LIBERALS

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols  
to the First Parish of Wayland on March 9, 2014

This morning I am going to tell you three stories. They are parables about our responsibilities to ourselves and our responsibilities to others. These parables were written by Rabbi Edwin Friedman, and they speak to people who love liberal institutions – communities which are open to new ideas and seek to help people – but know the ways in which those same liberal helping institutions sometimes get in their own way and frustrate their own work. Here is the first story.

Once upon a time there was a man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life. He had tried different life styles. He made his share of mistakes and had had some bad breaks as well. But now, he felt he had put it all together. Now, he knew who he was, and what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. Now he was leaving on a literal journey, a trip to a place where he was going to begin a new life.

With each step on the new road toward finding his dream he felt more certain he had made the right decision. It was a little like being young again. It was a chance to start over again in a new community. Very shortly he came to a bridge that was built high above a deep and fast flowing river.

As he started across the bridge, he noticed someone coming towards him. The other man seemed to be about the same height and weight, and he was dressed the same except for what he had around his waist. He had a thick rope – about thirty feet of it – coiled around his waist. As they came closer, the man with the rope said, “Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end of this rope for a minute.” Surprised by this request, but not knowing what else to do, the first man agreed to hold the rope.

“Thank you,” said the other. “Now remember use two hands and hold tight.” And, having said that, he jumped off the bridge. His heavy body quickly fell the full length of the rope, and then the man holding the rope felt an abrupt pull. It almost pulled him off the side of the bridge. He had to brace himself against the edge while he looked down at the other man who was dangling – high above the water -- at the end of the rope the first man was still holding.

“What are you trying to do” the first man asked. “Just hold tight” said the dangling man. “This is ridiculous,” the first man thought and he tried to pull the other man to safety. But it was no use. The dangling man was too heavy. “Why did you do this?” the first man called out. “Remember,” said the other, “If you let go I will be lost.” “But I cannot pull you up,” the first man cried. “I am your

responsibility,” repeated the other. “Well I didn’t ask for it,” said the first man. “If you let go, I am lost,” repeated the other.

The first man looked around for some place to tie off the rope, but he could not find it. “What do you want?” he asked the dangling man. “Just your help,” the man replied. “How can I help,” the first man asked, “I can’t pull you up and there’s no place to tie off the rope so I can’t go and find someone to help me pull.” “Just hang on,” cried the dangling man. “That will be enough.”

Then the first man had a thought. Although he couldn’t pull the dangling man up by his own strength, if that man just tried climbing the rope they might both be able to hold on long enough for him to make it. He shouted down to the dangling man, “Now listen I think I know how to save you.” And he explained his plan. But the dangling man wasn’t interested. The first man was appalled. “You mean you won’t climb the rope. I told you I can’t pull you up by myself, and I don’t think I can hang on much longer.” To which the dangling man responded, “You must hang on. My life is in your hands.”

The point of decision had arrived. What should the first man do? He could not spent the rest of his life holding on to the rope, and yet to let go? Would it be wrong? Would it be cruel? Then it came to him, a revelation although heretical to his traditional way of thinking. It would be heretical to our way of thinking as well. He leaned over the side of the bridge.

“Listen,” he said, “I want you to listen carefully, because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you. “What do you mean?” said the dangling man.

“I mean it is simply up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here.” He braced himself against the side of the bridge.

“You cannot mean what you say,” the dangling man screamed. “You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. Do not do this to me.” The first man waited for a minute, but there was no change in the tension on the rope. There was no indication the dangling man was trying to help himself. And then the first man said, “I accept your choice.” With that he let go of the rope and freed his hands.

He freed his hands. Did you ever feel you had a friend’s needs or problems in your hands, and there seemed to be no end to these needs and problems, so that you began to think they might always be your problems as well. Your hands were full and yet your friend would not accept any solutions you propose nor find any for himself.

There were apparently no other ways out of the situation except that you hang in there and not withdraw your support from someone who seems unwilling to work his/her own way out of a bout of confusion or sadness. So, you became symbolically tied together: one dangling off the bridge; You struggling to hold the two of you in place.

Suppose we looked at any group we belong to – our family of origin or our place of work or our congregation or a group of friends – as an emotional system. It is understandable that people in a group usually react to one another. But what if react is all they do? What if most people in this group only get to react to whomever produces the strongest demand. Then they never get to think about what they want for themselves.

When we are not aware of who we independently are and what we want to happen then the quality of our experience is always going to be most determined by the person in a group who produces the strongest reaction. In such a group whoever is most aggressive in pursuing his/her own needs gets all the marbles, always.

What do you think about this story? In a study guide the author of this fable asks, “How much responsibility does the man on the bridge have for the other man?” “Why do the needy often get most needy when others around them are functioning best?”

Here is the second story. Once upon a time there was a Friendly Forest where all of the animals had agreed to get along and they had done so successfully for years. And in this forest there was a lamb, who loved to graze and frolic about. One day a tiger came to the forest and said to the animals, “I would like to live among you.” They were delighted for they had no other tiger in the forest.

The lamb, however, had some apprehensions, which she expressed sheepishly. But the other animals said, “Don’t worry. We’ll talk to the tiger and explain that one of the conditions of living in our forest is that you must also let the other animals live peacefully in the forest.”

So, the lamb went frolicking about as usual, but it wasn’t long before the tiger began to make growling and menacing gestures toward the lamb. The frightened lamb appealed to her friends who told her, “Don’t worry. That’s just the way tigers behave. It’s in their nature. They’re from a different culture.” The lamb tried to ignore her fears and convince herself that her friends were right. Perhaps the tiger wasn’t stalking her all of the time, but there were too many times when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught the tiger looking at her and licking its lips.

She went to her friends, again, and said, “I just can’t take it any more. I’m going to have to leave the Friendly Forest.” Her friends wouldn’t hear of it. If the

lamb were to leave it would shatter their image of what the Friendly Forest was all about. They said, “Surely this whole thing can be worked out. We’re all reasonable here. Stay calm. This is just some misunderstanding that can be easily resolved if we all sit down together and communicate. The important thing is communication.”

But the lamb wasn’t so sure. Such attempts at “communication” usually end in some suggested compromise, but what was she going to compromise? If the tiger agreed to be less aggressive would the lamb have to tolerate some aggression? Why did the tiger’s aggression have to be her problem at all? She tried to explain this, too, but her fellow animals said, “Look, maybe the tiger doesn’t understand. Don’t be so sheepish. Speak up when these things happen.”

Finally, one of the less subtle animals in the forest – a West Highland White Terrier who often played the curmudgeon to the Friendly Forest’s idealized image of itself – did say, “This is ridiculous. If you want a lamb and a tiger to live peacefully in the same forest, you have to put the tiger in a cage.”

Why do the animals in the Friendly Forest excuse the tiger’s behavior but try to make the lamb adapt? Because they want to keep the more aggressive tiger happy? If the tiger eats the lamb, whose fault would they think that was? Does the intrusive or aggressive party to a dispute ever have any justification for claiming he has equal rights? And how can we tell when an individual’s assertion of his/her point of view has gone beyond the bounds of individual rights to free speech to become aggression.

Is it possible that a group with an orientation toward seeking consensus often gives extremists a strength they don’t normally have and don’t deserve, because it permits them to block the consensus until they get their way? How do you feel when the only reasonable resolution to a problem is, “We just have to stop the tiger.”

Edwin Friedman, who has developed many of his thoughts through the study of families and congregations, has said, when a group is faced with the choice between trying to satisfy the desires of everyone and doing justice – and the group always chooses trying to keep everyone happy over doing justice – that group will never be content with itself. Everyone cannot always be kept happy. Most people can be content with justice.

This is the third story. Once upon a time, there was a man who came home one evening and announced that he was dead. Immediately his neighbors tried to show him how foolish this was. He walked. He talked. He spoke. He breathed, and all of this is the essence of living. None of these arguments had any effect. In fact, no matter what reason was brought to bear against his assertion, no matter how sensible the argument the man insisted he was dead.

He seemed to have a way of putting the burden of proof on other people. He never quite said, "Prove that I am not dead," but that seemed to be the message. Every now and then someone thought they had him pinned down with proof of his aliveness, but the man always wriggled away.

Eventually many of his friends began to tire of the game, and they went away. His wife and family were beside themselves. They came at him constantly with attempts to disprove his assertion. As the mixture of fear and frustration thickened, they decided to call in a psychiatrist, who came and went into a private room with the man.

After thirty minutes the psychiatrist bolted from the room. He said, "This man is hopelessly psychotic. He has lost all sense of reality. If you want, I'll call the hospital." To which the Man Who Said He was Dead replied, "Oh really? What kind of therapy would you prescribe for a dead man? Who's losing whose grip on reality, Doctor!"

Then they decided to call a clergyman. They decided that an evangelist might shake the man out of his delusion. The evangelist came and went into a quiet room with the Man Who Said He was Dead. Twenty minutes later the evangelist bolted from the room and, clutching his Bible to his chest, he ran out of the house.

They now decided they needed to call the family doctor, who had known this man since infancy. The doctor came quickly, considered the situation and then asked the man in no nonsense way, "Tell me, do dead men bleed?" "Of course not," said the man. "Then", said the doctor, "Let me make a small cut on your arm. I promise you I will treat it quickly and bandage it so that it will not become infected." "Dead men do not bleed or get infections, Doctor," said the man.

With everyone watching the doctor made a small cut, and the blood came gushing out. There were gasps of joy. Some laughed. Some applauded. Everyone seemed relieved. The doctor said, "Well, I hope that puts an end to this foolishness." As the doctor was accepting congratulations the man was heading toward the door. As he opened it, he turned back and said, "I'll admit that I was wrong. Dead men do, in fact, bleed."

Sometimes people come up with a fixed idea, and it will not be shaken. We use all of the persuasive powers at our command, and, for all of our efforts, all of our arguments, all of our pleas the idea becomes more, not less fixed in their minds. Some parents might recognize this behavior from experiences they've had with their children, but, really, all of us are capable of it.

And we, middle class liberals, are particularly inclined to misunderstand it because we like to think that everything is potentially reasonable and

discussable. But, sometimes people do what they do, and continue to do what they do, simply in order to get a reaction from us. This is hard for us to understand, because it doesn't make sense in any conventional way but it makes a lot of sense to the person who is getting the reaction he wants. What if the wife of the man who thought he was dead had not spent hours arguing with him, but had simply said, "I'm not feeding any dead men in this house?"

The world of human relationships is tricky, and sometimes it is hard to understand. There are some things we can know about ourselves, and although it takes some hard work to know them, they will guide us through. We can know what we believe. We can learn how we react to situations and we can try to avoid those reactions that are not helpful to us or to others. We can know the limits to what we will or will not do to help other people. We can determine that we will not be trifled with, and we can determine what we can do when someone does not seem to be acting in good faith.

In the end, the only real possession we can honestly claim will be the full possession of our selves.

\*The stories in this sermon are paraphrased from Edwin Friedman's book, which is titled, Friedman's Fables.