

# Framing insiders by outsiders



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In this article, the author rehearses the Lukan parable of the Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5–8) as a segue from *Insiders and Outsiders and a Hermeneutic of Resonance* to provide a method she employs as an outsider sharing stories from and insights into a culture in which she was not born. She then connects her personal and existential experiences to the academic world of research.

**Keywords:** parable, Africa, frame, insiders, outsiders.

## Traditional framing of a parable

Jesus said to them, 'Suppose you have a friend who comes to you in the middle of the night and says to you, "Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine on a trip has just shown up and I have nothing to offer him." And suppose you reply, "Stop bothering me. The door is already locked and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up to give you anything" – I tell you, even though you won't get up and give the friend anything out of friendship, yet you will get up and give the other whatever is needed because you'd be ashamed not to.' (Lk 11:5–8, *Scholars Version*)

Traditional translations and subsequent interpretations of the meaning for the parable of the Friend at Midnight usually focus on the final phrase which states the motivation for helping out the friend. The Greek term *anaideia* appears to be the crux of this issue.<sup>1</sup> Here are some of the various and random English translations: 'Yet you will get up and give the other whatever is needed because of your neighbor's *improbability*' (*Wycliffe Bible* 1395), '*importunite*' (*Tyndale Bible* 1526; *King James Bible* 1611), '*persistence*' (*Revised Standard Version* 1991; *The African Bible* 1999), '*standing his ground, knocking and waking all the neighbors*' (*The Message Bible* 2002), '*shamelessness in persisting*' (*African Bible Commentary* 2006), '*impudence*' (*Lexham English Bible* 2010), '*brashness*' (*Common English Bible w/Apocrypha* 2011) and '*huzpah*' (*The Complete Jewish Bible* 2017) or turning the attention to the selfish neighbour, 'because you'd be *ashamed not to*' (Funk 2002:30; Funk, Hoover & The Jesus Seminar 1993:327). Themes that are associated with this pericope include persistency and perseverance in prayer, reconciliation (cf. Igenzoa 2001:307), honour and shame as well as the opposite shamelessness, redistribution of wealth and reciprocity (cf. Van Eck 2018:231–232; 237–238), friendship and Mediterranean hospitality.<sup>2</sup> Funk (2002) argues that the parable of the Friend at Midnight is all about trust:

'Jesus considered preparations for the morrow and concern for food and clothing to betray a lack of trust. Although he knew very well that in the real world not everyone who asks receives. Yet he urged his followers to act with confidence that a request would bring a positive response. And he advocated reciprocity by admonishing his followers to give to every beggar who asks. That requires a huge affirmation of life in all its potentially beautiful aspects. But it entails the acceptance of life's ugly dimensions as well.' (p. 34)

Interpretations also focus on the ending of the parable and are, for example, allegorical,<sup>3</sup> metaphorical (cf. Scott 1989:8), literary (cf. Fleddermann 1989, cited in Van Eck 2018:230), eschatological (cf. Dodd 1961:19) and political.<sup>4</sup> Historical Jesus scholars deem this Lukan-only

1. For a recent and comprehensive academic survey of this parable, see Van Eck (2018:227–253).

2. These last two are not necessarily synonymous with one another. See, for example, Scott (1989:87) for a description of the importance of hospitality as the basic exchange structure of (1st-century) peasant village life. He argues that this parable exploits those tensions. Funk (2002:34) argues that, '[t]he laws of hospitality are stronger than the claims of friendship. They override the inertia of inconvenience.'

3. See, for example, Adeyemo (2006:1227) where God is the awakened friend in this interpretation. Robert F. Capon argues that the parable is an allegory of Jesus' death and resurrection (noted in Van Eck 2016:229).

4. To the last terms in each of these lists (trust and politics), I must say something as a citizen of the United States – there are those who claim that we are a Christian nation. I have never known exactly what that means because it occurs to me on a daily basis that our politicians must never have read their Bibles, at least not those teachings that admonish us to advocate and act on behalf of the stranger, the poverty stricken and ill, the prisoner and the street children.

**Note:** HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

parable to have originated from Jesus although its situatedness following the Lord's Prayer is probably Lukan (cf. Funk et al. 1993:327–328; Meier 1994:205, n. 115). Ruben Zimmermann does not buy into this historical Jesus quest as such, but understands the parables in a memory approach to Jesus studies, that is, the focus should be on the parables as media for remembering Jesus and as it applies to the known reality (Zimmerman 2015:52–104).

## A different kind of framing

I think there is another approach to the parables of Jesus, and I refer to it as the experiential. It is different from the reader response theory because that method focuses on the reader, their reactions and applications of the reading to their own lives. The experiential method is a way of getting at the historical context. Let me explain.

Several years ago, I retreated with faculty colleagues for a day at the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio. The purpose was to combine moments for reflection and times of conversation with one another in the physical and experiential context of artwork that provided interdisciplinary foci on our individual research and that expanded all our disciplinary frames. As a result, I created a method for New Testament studies that is dependent on the museum's programme that promotes conversations and deeper looking when engaging with art, one that provides experiences in art to promote cultural thinking and other 21st-century skills such as creativity, collaboration and communication. Indeed, there is evidence that looking at and talking about art can improve critical thinking skills. The Museum's Quick Guide to their strategy is dubbed as *ODIP*<sup>5</sup>:

- **Observe:** Look hard:
  - Look closely.
  - What did you see?
  - What information is there?
- **Describe:** Describe what you see:
  - If you were asked to explain the appearance of a photograph, for example, to someone on the phone, what would you say?
  - What prescriptive words best describe this piece?
  - What details could you give?
- **Interpret:** Use your imagination:
  - What is going on?
  - What is the story?
  - What is the context?
- **Prove (Argue):** What are the clues or the evidence for your interpretation?

## Look inside the frame

Whilst this method may seem obvious, it is not when it involves anything outside of our own time or culture. For example, look at Figure 1, from Zimbabwe, with the proposed questions:

5. For further information, see [www.columbusmuseum.org/wp-content/themes/cma/pdf/odipquickguide.pdf](http://www.columbusmuseum.org/wp-content/themes/cma/pdf/odipquickguide.pdf).

- What do you observe?
- How would you describe it to someone who cannot see the picture?
- Interpret what you see.
- What is the evidence for your interpretation?
- What additional observation, description, interpretation and evidence do you need to understand it better – or at all? What *frame* do you need?

## Now, look outside the frame

How did you do? Could you tell that the picture, Figure 1 is taken in Dzobo Village, Zimbabwe?<sup>6</sup> Could you tell that this was a glorious day of storytelling, singing and dancing for their guests from the United States? Could you tell that it is a school-yard setting? Could you tell that the picture includes many who are plagued with and/or dying of schistosomiasis, malaria and HIV-related illnesses as well as other results of poverty? Are you wondering why the men are sitting on one side and the women on another side? Did you know that the elders get to sit on benches and others not? Could you tell that the woman in the front (Samuel's mother) is dancing to the story of the day the lion came to their village? Did you know that the woman standing is the chief's oldest sister and, therefore, the most powerful woman in the village? Of course not. The answers to these and other questions cannot be found within the frame of this snapshot.

## Framing parables in real life

One can look at pictures and other artworks, of course, through various sets of frames or lenses. We can also hear words from various listening styles and biases. When I began working with the graduate students in theology at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Cameroon, for example, we had some basic work to do, and I knew I first had to listen. Our initial conversation revealed that we had a wide array of understandings, from the literal to the allegorical, from moral declarations and prescriptions for all of humanity throughout the history to descriptions of living real lives in the 1st century. Funk's (2002) understanding of the parable covers the range:

'The foreground of the parable consists of commonplaces, concrete events and things. Jesus distorts or parodies those commonplaces by hyperbole, metaphor, caricature, ambiguity, or paradox. Having begun with typifications, he then detypifies by distorting or parodying the everyday world. In the process, Jesus turns the story or picture into a fantasy, a fantasy about God's domain, an order of reality that derives from but subtly transforms the everyday world. It is about an order of reality that lies beyond, but just barely beyond, the everyday, the humdrum, the habituated. Because the parable sets the ordinary in a new *frame of reference* [italics added], the parable is also an invitation to cross over, to leave the old behind and embrace the new.' (p. 8)

Because my emphasis is on 'the ordinary in a new *frame of reference*', students from all over the world suddenly see the

6. Picture taken by Gary L. Jackson and used with permission from the Revd Dr Samuel Dzobo who is sitting to my left in the middle of the picture. He is the grandson of the founding chief of the village and was an undergraduate at Africa University at the time.



Source: Photo courtesy of Gary L. Jackson

**FIGURE 1:** Dzobo Village, Zimbabwe.

possibilities, and their understanding of the parables very often becomes that of a new order – when the window gets cracked open, going from the literal to the truly parabolic cannot be stopped – particularly in seeing a new order of justice in whatever world readers of the parables live in – including those in the United States, and especially those who live in unjust and/or poverty-stricken societies. But that new *frame of reference* comes in many forms, depending on our cultures.

## Frames from Africa

I had not thought about the parable of the Friend at Midnight to be much about poverty, because it is often placed in an allegorical or eschatological context. The person knocking at the door was obviously without resources to feed a late-night visitor, but I had not thought to wonder why or what his context was. I actually have been that late-night hungry person when traveling with Malawian friends, and it was not a case of poverty, but our not thinking ahead or the journey taking more time than expected because we could not continue on a flooded dirt road and had to turn around and start over (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> It had not occurred to me that the time of night in the parable was anything but a reality of traveling or maybe a dramatic effect – or that the dramatic effect could entail danger or be a story of a disenfranchised friendship. And so, the students in Cameroon offered background information from their cultural settings and their own experiences. They remarked that this story contains elements of embarrassment and shame – to have to go to a friend at midnight (long past a normal Cameroonian bedtime) to ask for rice bread indicates the gravity of the need. They observed that the hour of midnight must have been specifically chosen by Luke to demonstrate the especially embarrassing moment, that is, an odd hour to test friendship. I learnt about their cultures and probable parallels to 1st-century customs and values through their

7. Can you figure out what is inside the framed photo above? It is a story of hospitality: we arrived at Justice's grandmother's house, and whilst she could not offer us food, she did offer me a smoke on her pipe! I was an honourable guest and took her up on the invitation! (picture taken by Justice Khimbi and used with permission).



Source: Photo courtesy of Justice Khimbi

**FIGURE 2:** Malawi.

foci on the element of time. One seminary student chose to read the 'middle of the night' allegorically as follows:

'A radically new way of looking at this parable can be from the perspective of time. The arrival of the guest and the request for three loaves of bread are surprisingly told to have coincided with a specific time, i.e., midnight. If we consider this parable as authentically the word of Jesus and not the interpretation of Luke, then we can hear something that is totally new, shocking and challenging. Midnight means that a transition has begun. The period of darkness is over and the dawn of a new day is at hand. Seen from this perspective, Jesus must have, most likely, used this story to declare that the reign of the wicked regimes of the world is giving way to that of the Messiah. Perhaps the most convincing point in the argument is that the breaking of that new Kingdom in *not* based on human effort – the day will break without human effort. At the same time, this Parable of the Friend at Midnight should challenge us to work for the transformation of the world and to seek just economic and social systems, regardless of the time of day or night.'

Seminary students also spoke personally about the seriousness of friendship as follows:

'Early last year, I faced a serious financial drought. In one of those days my wife's nephew paid a visit to us without letting us

know in advance. This however is a normal phenomenon in the African context in general. But truly speaking, it was an embarrassment to us; yet, we could not ask him to go back home because it is simply impossible in our culture. So, I conceded and let my wife borrow money from a friend to entertain our visitor. But that wasn't the end of the story or the parable because in the end we spent a nice moment with our nephew, but I faced a lot of stress to have resources to take care of the situation.'

A somewhat idealistic picture of what might have been 2000 years ago, or perhaps the seminary student's own situation is rendered here as follows:

'A scarcity of goods at any given time challenges traditional values of hospitality. This parable portrays a society of collectivism; i.e., the peasants accept each other and cooperate with one another. They live in kinship and they extend this love even to strangers. It is therefore an open-minded community, inclusive community, a community of love and compassion. Even in the midst of oppression and suppression, the parable offers us a picture of a world that offers us with the choice of God's Kingdom.'

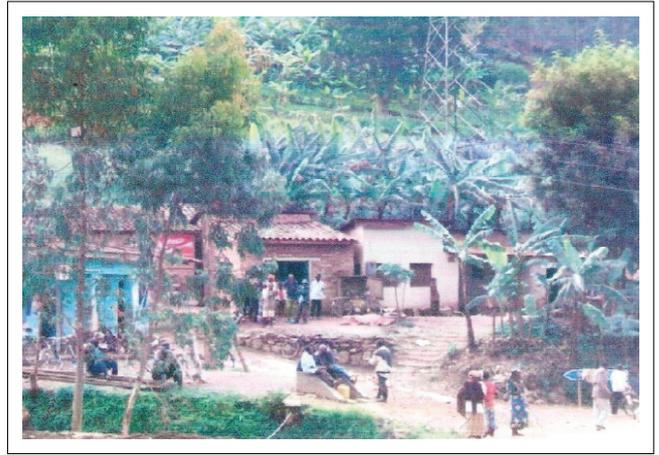
And another element of the story that students noted was the context of unspecified danger, as provided by Jackson (2013):

'In the year 2000, some friends of mine had a problem in their home village and had to escape from there in the night. ... They had to pass through where I was living. Because the distance they had to cover to reach safety was so far away, they were unable to continue their journey because it was already about midnight – and midnight is a dangerous time to be out under any circumstances. But to stop at my house had the same dangerous potential because at one time we had had a clash that kept us apart in our differences. So this occasion was a great opportunity of reconciliation as I got up at the sound of knocking and since there was no leftover food on hand, I had to prepare something for my guests. We were truly reconciled by these events and have become good friends again as a result. In this case, a need for food and shelter forced us to give up strange hatred and to seek love and revive a relationship with an estranged friend.' (p. 243)

I have taken students to Rwanda a number of times, and so this interpretation hit me hard – imagine how difficult it would be to trust a former friend who may have been involved in the genocide that killed nearly one million people in less than 3 months. Imagine running into these hills! (see Figure 3).

There is nothing so humbling as to have to ask a favour from an enemy, a disenfranchised friend or someone we do not like. This is another seminary student's personal story about danger that adds a bit of persistence:

'There is a saying in my dialect which goes as follows: 'You can only know a true friend when he/she is behind you in the "days of the sun and in the days of the rain." The Lukan writer comes from a hilly area with fast running streams, especially in the rainy season. Any attempt to travel in the night especially with no torch-light is very risky, coupled with the fact that leaving from one village to another requires trekking for long distances. I was a victim one day when I left a neighbouring village to go to



Source: Photo courtesy of Glenna S. Jackson

FIGURE 3: Rwanda.

my village under heavy rain and the local torch-light I had was soaked by the rain. To reach my village was still very far with only one or two houses spotted here and there along the way. I knocked several times and persistently at the door of one of my friends to get a torch-light to enable me to continue the journey, but to no avail. I continued to stop and knock and finally a friend with a thunderous and scary tone questioned, "Who is that person disturbing people in this deep night?" I responded with some fright in me, "I am the one." "What do you want in this hour?" "I need your help – a light to go back home." After some time the friend finally opened the door wearing a heavy and twisted face and with no sign of friendliness. With no more favourable conversation my request was granted at last. And so, do you know what consequences you can encounter when travelling in the night or darkness? Have you ever asked something and it is denied you? How many times have you asked or insisted on your demand? Be persistent ... Create a disturbance if you must, according to Jesus!

Almost in the same breath, however, students questioned the historicity of such a story on Jesus' lips because they argued that, in their communities, much value is to be given to someone who is hungry. In a community where food is wasted or is held back out of greed is considered sacrilegious. The attitude of the man who refuses to open his door and give a desperate friend some bread for his visitor would sound bizarre in the communities from where these students come. An example is presented below from a seminary student:

'In my native community, sharing food with needy kinsmen and entertaining guests are considered honourable. Food or drinks, no matter how small it is, makes a person put his/her hand in the mouth. So quantities and amounts are highly secondary. For that reason, people who become greedy or selfish with their food and drinks risk to face disaster alone. I think that Jesus told this parable of the Friend at Midnight to challenge us to share our belongings, especially food and drinks with those who are hungry, because in feeding the hungry we experience the Kingdom of God here and now in a special way.'

And so the students in Cameroon gleaned their understandings of Jesus' parables from their own contextual and experiential frames, not based on western academic sources. They in turn

gave me new insights and a far better view into what might have been in the Ancient Near East.<sup>8</sup>

And yet another twist comes from this parable in a Zimbabwean perspective. When I was teaching at Africa University, my daughter Wendy and I had invited the Parables Class to our flat for pizza. Before they entered my home – they were literally at the threshold – they let me know that if I invited them in and they came in, and they ate food that we provided, then we had a reciprocal notion, not just of friends, but of family commitment. And, we were told, that commitment could come at any time of day or night. There was a pause on all of our parts ... And, believe it or not, they reminded me of the parable of the Friend at Midnight, one that we had studied that very week! So perhaps there was more at stake in Jesus' parable of the Friend at Midnight than we can possibly imagine.

## Looking inside the frame again

Using the *ODIP* method again, look at Figure 4 and ask the same questions (observe, describe, interpret, prove).

## Looking outside the frame again – What could you not possibly know?

See Figure 4. The tree is Emmanuel's house, literally.<sup>9</sup> He died of untreated epileptic seizures shortly after I was there. How could you have known any of that? Would it have occurred to you that a young man living under a tree would be hospitable to the many neighbourhood children who came to play?

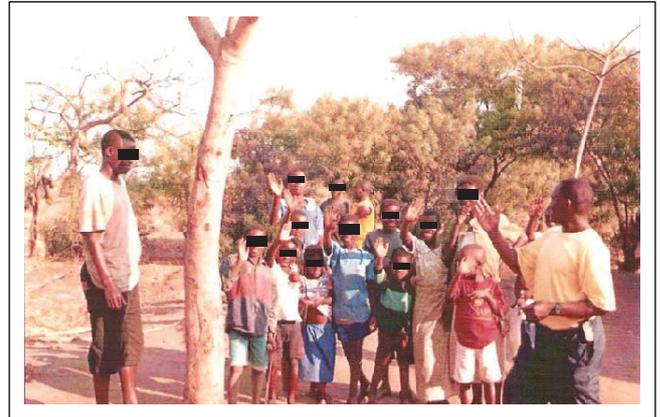
## Framing the question of insiders and outsiders again

This is actually a question of ethics. One aspect of my research that I can 'frame' quickly is that of a focus on poverty. Moreover, as a white Western feminist who is not living in poverty, one of the first of many ethical issues that surface in this kind of research is the objectification of the poor or disenfranchised. How, for example, do I show pictures of rural Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Cameroon, Namibia or South Africa to my own communities, including you as readers, without immediately objectifying them? How do I tell stories and show pictures of children living and dying in poverty when I do not have the systemic resources to change anything? Our involvement with this topic is a complex one methodologically, contextually, intellectually and even emotionally, to which we must be committed to respect, value and honour (see Figure 5 and Figure 6).

For nearly 20 years, I have been arguing that Africans, especially those who live in rural areas, have more knowledge from an experiential context about the Ancient

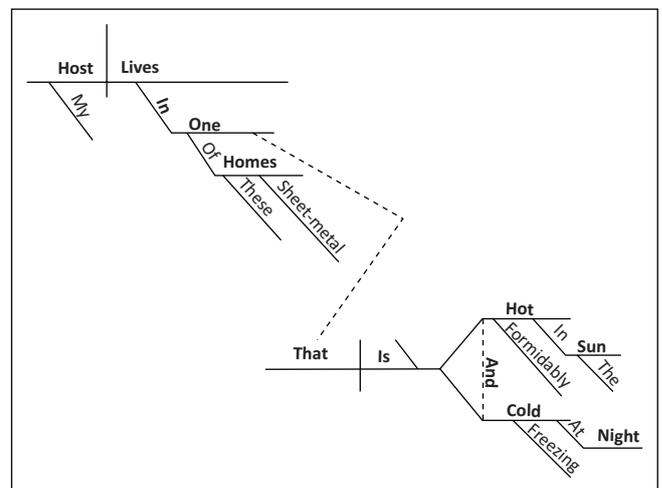
<sup>8</sup>Thanks to the students in the parables class at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary for allowing me to include their stories and also to Prof. Ernest van Eck for inviting me to co-teach the class.

<sup>9</sup>Picture taken by Glenna S. Jackson and used with permission from Mike Mwali, brother of Emmanuel and standing in the right foreground.



Source: Photo courtesy of Glenna S. Jackson

FIGURE 4: Emmanuel in Malawi.



Source: Photo courtesy of Wendy Jackson

FIGURE 5: The complexities of poverty – Even in a sentence diagram.



Source: Photo courtesy of Glenna S. Jackson

FIGURE 6: Katatura Township, Namibia.

Near East than we westerners can possibly hope to have, knowledge that cannot be found in books. It is my contention that contemporary rural African life may reflect the 1st-century Galilean rural life – one's dependence on the land on a daily basis, the need to trust one's neighbour no matter the time of day or night, the lack of technology and industrialisation, illiteracy that does not exclude

brilliance and so on. Furthermore, for all of those years, I have struggled with the question as to who gets to tell their stories. Indeed, every time I leave a village or a community, I ask if I have permission to share. The answer is always, 'yes, please' and with a huge sense of pride. I have been telling the stories, but always with fear and trepidation, with the worry that I am guilty of promoting stereotypes or even falsehoods. But, what I think I have come to realise is that, indeed, stories and pictures *should* be shared by both insiders and outsiders. Perhaps the better question is, from *whose* perspective? Or even, from how many *different* perspectives?<sup>10</sup> On a spectrum of a colonialist's perspective on one end to a position as an effective ally on the other, how do we tell the story? It is all in the *framing*.

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### Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

### Author(s) contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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<sup>10</sup>.See Zimmerman (2015:Chapter Five) for his discussion on the need for multivalent interpretations of the parables.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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