Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of "Telling Stories About Jesus"
8th Annual Mary of Magdala Celebration

presented on July 22, 2016
by Amy-Jill Levine, Ph.D.

Dr. Jane Regan:
We are pleased to continue our celebration with a lecture by Professor Amy-Jill Levine entitled Telling Stories About Women. We're very grateful to Dr. Levine for graciously giving us permission to videotape this presentation. It will be available as a streaming video from the STM website within about four weeks. That's at bc.edu/encore. You'll find lots of other great resources there that I'm sure you'll enjoy.

On the note of videotaping, when we reach the question and answer portion of the presentation, please keep in mind two things. First of all, if you want to ask a question, it will be videotaped, so whatever self-monitors you have, you might want to apply them. Just keep in mind that these will then be available as a streaming video forever. Not … , but anyway. And the second one, actually practical, is please raise your hand and wait for the microphone before you begin speaking, so that we have the question on the video and people can follow the discussion.

Our thanks to the Boston College Bookstore, who is here in the lobby with books by Dr. Levine at their customary 20% discount.

And now it's my honor to introduce our speaker for this afternoon. Amy-Jill Levine describes herself as "a Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Christian divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt." She is University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies, and professor of Jewish studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Sciences. She's also an affiliated professor at the Woolf Institute Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge, UK.

Professor Levine is the recipient of many honors, including (laughter)—anyway, lots of honors, lots of books. She's done a lot, OK? She's held office in the Biblical Society. OK, you get the gist. She's done a lot. Right, right, right. Got it, got it, got it. Come on, Jane. Hurry up.

She is a prolific writer, and we just found out that just before Easter of next year, she's written a children's book along with a couple of rabbis. Is that right?

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine: One rabbi.

Dr. Regan: With one rabbi. A children's book about Jesus. So it'd be something worth looking for for your children or grandchildren or for yourself. In her writing and speaking, Professor Levine combines historical critical rigor, literary critical sensitivity, and a frequent dash of humor—as you see—with a commitment to eliminating anti-Jewish, sexist, and homophobic theologies. It's with great pleasure, then, that we welcome Professor Amy-Jill Levine back to Boston College to offer this year's Mary Magdala Day lecture, "Telling Stories About Women."

Dr. Levine:
Thank you very much. Oh, you're very kind. What an honor it is to do good for Mary Magdalene. That's just fabulous. It's also an honor to be in the company of the other people who have given this lecture. Thank you to your vision for setting this up.

So we're going to talk about Jesus and women. Jesus told stories about women. There is a woman who hides—yes, hides is the right word, it's there in the Greek—yeast in 60 pounds of flour. There's a widow who threatens to give a judge a black eye if he doesn't grant her *ekdikeo*, a Greek term that most English translations render justice, but that probably means vengeance. There's a woman who

has 10 coins, notices she's lost one, and goes out [on] an all-out search to find it—lighting lamps, sweeping the house. She finds it, then she calls up all of her female friends—the Greek is in the feminine—and she invites them to a party which I think cost more than the coin was worth.

And then there are 10 virgins—yes, they're virgins. The translation "bridesmaids" conjures up more a picture of women in fairly ugly matching dresses that they'll never wear again than women of a particular independent status who are awaiting a rudely late bridegroom. After a team nap, half of them upon waking realize that they're out of oil for their lamps. And because the other half refuses to share, the virgins without the oil have to go to the 7-Eleven, because it's midnight, to go restock. The groom finally arrives, lets the five virgins with sufficient lubrication into the house, and bars the door to the ones who come late. There's no bride, and as far as I can tell, there's no happy ending.

So Jesus told stories about women, and I think he did tell these stories, despite John Meier's recent parables book—this is the Marginal Jew, whatever volume and counting—in which all the stories about women fail the tests of multiple attestation and dissimilarity. I'm a little more generous here than Father Meier.

When it comes to parables, Mark 4 tells us that Jesus did not speak to the crowds except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. Very few of those explanations have been preserved. I think Luke actually made a few up on his own. That's probably a good thing. It is the gift of the Gospel to open up the parables to us—an invitation to us to say, "You work on these things." You see how they work on you.

Anyone who has ever read Mark's Gospel—I'm trusting some of you have—look at the New Testament professor. You good? You will know that the 12 are not the brightest students in the seminar. After Jesus feeds 5,000-plus—Matthew says it's 5,000 not counting the women and the children—and then a few chapters later feeds another 4,000 or so, he says to the 12, "watch out. Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." And the 12 say to each other, "it's because we don't have any bread." In other words, the 12 would not recognize a metaphor if it hit them over the head. And Jesus, who has clearly demonstrated his ability to cater several times, is obviously not talking about pumpernickel or pita, although he may have been being a bit wry. I'm sorry, but these things are just too delicious to pass up.

Unfortunately, although we have been given the invitation to interpret, we also tend to miss the metaphors, and we, too, wind up settling for the easy and theologically obvious interpretations. We should be nice like the Good Samaritan is nice, or the Kingdom of Heaven starts small but gets big, stuff like that. We actually don't need parables to tell us that. We've got other things that will do that.

So, too, when it comes to parables about women, we settle for the easy readings. The yeast is the hidden Kingdom that will become bountifully manifest. Luke already begins to domesticate our feisty widow by making her a model of the need to pray always and not lose heart. The woman with the coin, who stands in exactly the same position as the man who searches for his lost sheep and the father who searches for his lost son—that lost son being the older one, by the way— somehow never gets to be a model for God. And it seems to me if the sheep owner is God and the dad is God, so is the woman. So I'm waiting for the stained-glass window of the baker lady. I think that's impressive. As for those virgins, they're first demoted to bridesmaids, and then they're ignored while commentators try to find the allegorical meaning of the oil.

If we stop with these easy lessons, the parables become stories about yeast or coins or prayer or oil and not about women. Further, the parables become banal. We do not need the parables to tell us that the Kingdom is on its way, that we should pray, that God loves us, or that our supply of oil, whether we take that oil to mean good deeds, faith, prayers, WD-40, or Astroglide, should be sufficient. If we stop with these easy lessons, we lose how Jesus's first followers would have heard the parables, and we lose the genius of Jesus's teaching, because those early followers were Jews. That should be clear. They're Jews. And Jews knew that parables were more than children's stories or banal statements of the obvious. They knew that parables were designed to prompt them to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and very frequently to indict.

It was once said about religion that religion was invented to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Think about the parables as doing the afflicting. How, then, do we appreciate the parables as that first audience might have heard them—that first audience who had no idea that Jesus was going to die, let alone that he was going to be proclaimed God, let alone that we would be having the feast of Mary Magdalene lecture here because he came back?

What did those first Jews think about this material? Well, we begin with parables in early Judaism. 2 Samuel 12 records the prophet Nathan's famous parable of the ewe lamb. The parable recounts how a rich man had many, many sheep, and there was a poor man living next door who had only one little ewe lamb. He loved her. He treated it like a daughter. Let's call it Fluffy. One day, the rich man had a visitor. Instead of taking a sheep from his own flock, he took little Fluffy and butchered her. What should be done, says the prophet Nathan to King David, to the rich man who killed the poor man's little ewe lamb? David is appropriately appalled by this and says, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die." And Nathan responds, "You are that man." The parable, which indicts David for his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah, is hardly a comforting bedtime story. It indicts.

The book of Judges records Jotham's parable, in which the trees decide they need a king to rule over them. And they ask the worthy trees—the olive, the fig, and the vine—you come and reign over us. Each tree declines the offer, because each tree has a day job. It's busy. So they finally approach the bramble, which is good for absolutely nothing else. The bramble accepts with the threat that if they don't recognize his leadership, he'll burn them all up. The parable says something about unqualified bullies who seek political office. Any way you want to go on that.

Parables challenge us, and if we miss the challenge, we've miscued the parable. We also miscue the challenge of Jesus's parables about women, because the stories we tell about women in Jesus's time are often based on faulty premises. The conventional view is that first-century Jewish women were oppressed and suppressed and repressed and depressed until Jesus came along and invented feminism. The conventional view is that Jews would have been shocked that Jesus told stories about women and even more shocked that he told stories to them.

That Jesus teaches Mary while her sister Martha is busy with her ministry—the Greek word is *diakonia*, whence deacon—that story is typically understood as a social breach at best, since no rabbi would allow a woman to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching. Nonsense. Mary and Martha are Jesus's patrons, just as other women, according to Josephus, served as patrons to Pharisees. To read Luke 10:38-42, the shorter version of the story of Mary and Martha, as indicating a break with some sort of hypothetical Jewish misogyny is just as wrong as to read the same story as saying that Jesus wants women silent, servile, and seated at his feet, but when they engage in ministry, he wants them to shut up. Neither reading is helpful.

My point here is that we do not need to make Judaism to look bad in order for Jesus to look good. To the contrary, the parables coupled with other Gospel material tell us a lot about the options Jewish women had in the first century, and we see immediately that the image of a monolithic repressive system needs correction.

From the parables as well as other Gospel texts, we realize, among other things, that Jewish women had access to their own money, and they spent it as they like. So the woman who lost her coin and threw a party, or the woman who anointed Jesus, or the woman who puts her two coins in the temple treasury, and so on. This is how Mary Magdalene, along with Joanna, Susanna, and many others came to be patrons of the Jesus movement.

Jewish women had freedom of travel, as the women who celebrate with the lady who lost her coin, the virgins who head to the market, and the women who follow Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jewish women were homeowners, from Martha who welcomed Jesus into her home, to Mary the mother of John Mark, at whose home the followers of Jesus met at the beginning of the book of Acts. The woman who lost her coin is just as much a householder as the man who lost his sheep and the father

who lost his son. And Jewish women appear in public and nobody faints, from the baker woman at the communal oven, to the virgins, to our tenacious woman in the court.

I am not saying that first century Judaism was some egalitarian Eden. What I am saying is that Judaism of the time did not epitomize misogyny, and Jesus's relationships with and stories about women should not be seen as disrupting normative gender roles.

So if the parables are not about how grand Jesus looks in comparison to early Judaism, how then do we hear them as provocative or unsettling or disruptive? Well, we might start paying attention to titles. Our first parable is usually called the parable of the leaven or the parable of the yeast, and the reference is not to those little red packets that sit in the refrigerator door. This is to sourdough starter, for anybody who's ever baked. I've tried it once. I ruined the kitchen. I'm a domestic disaster. But I know people can do this.

The parable is better labeled the parable of the woman who hides yeast in too much dough, although we'd never know that from the standard translation. Here's the parable, and I'll quote from the New American Bible Revised Edition, because that's the one on the USCCB website. So if the Catholic bishops say we should use it, and I'm at Boston College, when in Rome…

Here's the New American Bible Revised Edition. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leaven." And then, because it's a helpful Bible, it tells us what the thing means. Here's the footnote. "The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast illustrate the same point—the amazing contrast between the small beginnings of the Kingdom and its marvelous expansion." All right, not terribly interesting, but it works. And for this annotator, the parable means it's the universal Kingdom, and it simply will get bigger and bigger.

But then I thought maybe I'd check to see what the Protestants are saying, so I went to the New Oxford Annotated. Here's the footnote to the same parable. "God's rule, like yeast, working in a hidden way, will pervade one's life, giving it new quality." For the Catholics, it's the universal Kingdom. For the Protestants, it's the individual soul developing. Jesus doesn't tell us what it means. Both interpretations are possible. But neither reading is terribly interesting. They're white bread. There's not much to chew on here.

Heard with first century Jewish ears, or better, tasted with first-century Jewish taste buds, the parable is anything but simple. First, yeast could be negatively coded, as in "beware of the yeast of the Pharisees." We've already heard that. Or Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 5, "do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened." Paul goes on, as he is wont to do, "therefore let us celebrate the festival not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." Paul's here alluding to the Passover celebration.

The comparison of something good, the Kingdom of Heaven, to yeast, plausibly coded negatively in the metaphoric world of early Judaism, should've gotten a rise out of those early listeners. The point is not that yeast is unclean. Usually when purity laws get dragged into New Testament study, they incorrectly serve to make Jewish practice or Torah look oppressive. Jesus, rather, spends a great deal of time restoring people to states of ritual purity. He dries up—that's the Greek—the hemorrhaging lady; he exorcises unclean spirits; he cleanses a man with leprosy; and he raises corpses. In all cases, what he's doing is eliminating the impurity and so reinforcing the importance of purity laws. The first point for our parable is that yeast is not impure, but as a metaphor in the first century, it has the whiff of something not quite right. Having smelled sourdough starter, I take the point.

Next, the woman does not simply mix yeast or place yeast into the dough. The Greek says she hid it, or better, concealed it. The Greek term is crypto, like cryptograms or cryptic. Thus the woman is literally doing something sneaky. Further, yeast works in a sort of secretive way, as the dough rises in a warm, dark, dank place and not out in the sunshine. Third, three measures of flour weigh somewhere between 50 and 60 pounds, or for our Canadian friends, 22 to 27 kilograms, which is far more than you need to feed a family.

So what seemed originally like a simple comparison has become humorous, if not farcical: too much flour, the wrong verb, the wrong element. And so we turn to the interpreters, and perhaps we can do better than the obvious readings that I find in the study Bibles. Might the message be that we should reevaluate the meanest of domestic materials? Something that we see as negative or utilitarian may actually have spiritual potential. This would fit the companion parable, in which the mustard seed grows into an enormous tree rather than, as typical, a somewhat scrubby little bush.

Or given the enormous yield, is the point that we adapt our lives in light of the Kingdom and do something foolish, something extraordinarily generous, something that might seem wasteful to those on the outside? Here we might recall the Pearl of Great Price or perhaps any organization that has set up a food pantry or that seeks to feed the hungry. Extraordinary generosity, and we do it even though we know the problem will not be solved.

I've already noted the connection of yeast to Passover, but we can do more. In Genesis 18, Abraham says to his wife Sarah, "make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." The occasion is the visit of three strangers. If you're Christian, it's the Trinity. If you're Jewish, it's God and two angels. And if you're a Biblical scholar, it probably never happened anyway, so it doesn't matter who they are. But the visit culminates with the prediction of the post-menopausal Sarah's pregnancy. A side note —were my husband to invite three strangers to lunch and then text me saying, sweetie, take 60 pounds of flour and start baking, I will guarantee you that conceiving a child would not be on my agenda that evening.

So hearing our parable, would Jesus's followers remember Genesis 18 and so think of the Kingdom in relation to Abraham's hospitality and generosity or to the possibility of a divine messenger standing at our door? The connection to Genesis 18 is enhanced when we think of one common metaphor for pregnancy in antiquity. Ancient writers compared women's bodies to ovens. And you can see this in Herodotus and Aristophanes, or we might think of the relatively modern expression, she's got a bun in the oven. Uncivil, but you understand the metaphor.

Metaphors for pregnancy were also used to express the urgency of the messianic age, as in the phrase the birth pangs of the Messiah. So does the parable speak to us not only of women's work, but also of women's ability to bear a child, and thus to celebrate both? Perhaps indeed the parable does encourage respect for women, who in antiquity did most of the baking.

The Gospel of Thomas, a collection of Jesus's sayings preserved in the Coptic language, contains the following parable. "The kingdom of the Father is like a woman who took a little leaven, hid it in dough, and made it into large loaves of bread. The one having two ears should listen." In this version, it's not the yeast, but the woman, who is first compared to the Kingdom. Here again, "the Kingdom of heaven is like a woman who" —that sounds nice.

Or perhaps our parable is ironic or even world-shattering. We may have grandiose ideas of the Kingdom—angels and harps and golden slippers and pearly gates. But perhaps we might find the Kingdom of Heaven at the communal oven of a Galilean village where there's enough bread for all, and people break bread together.

And on to our tenacious widow of Luke 18. Here's the translation, again from the New American Revised, and I'm going to separate what I think is Luke's contextualization from the parable proper. Luke says, "Then he told them a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary." And here's the parable. "There was a judge in a certain town, who neither feared God nor respected any human being. And a widow in that town used to come to him and say, render a just decision for me against my adversary. For a long time, the judge was unwilling, but eventually he thought, while it is true that I neither fear God nor respect human beings, because this widow keeps bothering me, I shall deliver a just decision for her, lest she finally come and strike me."

And then Luke returns with the interpretation of the parable. I think this is Luke: "The Lord said, pay attention to what the dishonest judge says. Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones

who call out to him night and day? Will he be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily, but when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

So how we identify this parable already determines how we understand it. The traditional designation is the parable of the importuning widow, and the NAB has it as the parable of the persistent widow. That's not bad, because it's her persistence that drives the plot. But persistent or tenacious, they don't really give her the agency that she has. Persistence conveys neither the problematic of her motive nor the violence of her threat nor the impact on the judge, and it just makes her sound like a nag. The parable of the unjust or dishonest judge is also popular, but he's only unjust or dishonest in verse 6, which is Luke's commentary. There's nothing in the parable proper to prove that the judge is corrupt: self-important, yep; foolish, most probably; but unjust, not clear.

I like the title Parable of the Vengeful Widow and the Co-opted Judge, but that doesn't preach. But it could be a starting point. If a parable cannot be domesticated, if it cannot fit neatly into our preconceived notions of morality, if it shakes us up, then we're probably on the right track.

The judge in this parable says "this widow keeps bothering me." I agree with him. The widow keeps bothering me, too, because she refuses every stereotype, every box into which I want to put her. Biblical widows, it turns out, are the most unconventional of conventional figures. The majority view today about biblical widows is that they are helpless and oppressed. Exodus begins the convention—this is Exodus 22— "you shall not abuse any widow or orphan." And the mandate suggests that widows and orphans were especially vulnerable since they lack the husband or the father who traditionally would have provided them support and protected them. Deuteronomy 10 and 24 offer the preferential option, God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the strangers providing them food and clothing." I would like to hear that verse cited at some presidential campaign at some point.

Deuteronomy 27 requires economic care for the alien—let's just stop there for a minute—the orphan, and the widow, and includes the threat, "cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice." And the Torah's concern for the widow continues into the prophets and writings. Isaiah equates seeking justice with rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow. Jeremiah connects oppressing the alien, the orphan, and the widow to the shedding of innocent blood.

And in the deuterocanonical materials, whereas Ben Sirach attributes to the widow some agency, stating, "God will not ignore the supplication of the orphan or the widow when she pours out her complaint," Sirach also sees the widow less as demanding justice from her oppressors than as complaining to God about her circumstances. She is the pathetic figure of whom Sirach states, "Do not let the tears of the widow run down her cheek."

So we expect women, and widows especially, to be victims. But when we actually look at stories about widows, they're anything but. Tamar is the Bible's first widow. She winds up engaging in sexual relations with her father-in-law, and when she turns up pregnant, he seeks to have her killed, but he relents when she announces that he's the father, and she proves it by demonstrating that she has possession of his staff and his signet. I believe the correct modern analogy would be MasterCard.

Naomi and Ruth, as well as Orpah, make lives for themselves in the absence of husbands. Abigail I think actually gave her first husband his heart attack. She eventually winds up marrying David. Bathsheba continues as queen mother in Solomon's court following David's death. Then there's the wise woman of Tekoa, who pretends to be a widow in engaging in political discourse. The widow of Zarephath, who hosts Elijah the prophet and actually demands that he heal her son.

And then there's Judith. I love Judith. I have such canonical envy for Catholics, because you've got Judith in your canon. Judith beguiles, besots, and then beheads the enemy general—with his own sword, no less. What's not to like?

So all these women defy the convention of widows as the least and the last. The so-called persistent protagonist of Luke 18 similarly shatters the stereotype of poor, dependent, and weak widows, even

as she epitomizes the strength, cleverness, and indeed problematic motives of many of her husband-bereft predecessors. But what happens? We readers, beguiled by Luke, still want to see her as the victim. Perhaps we want to stereotype women as helpless. I'd hate to think that the scholarly move to depict the woman as a victim is prompted by lingering anti-Jewish tropes, but that may be the case.

Here are the comments I found in major academic research studies. One scholar describes her as almost resourceless, probably illiterate, and clearly lacking political influence. Another invokes the image of "the enraged bag lady." A third sees her as "the victim of a man who undermined the economic foundation of her life, for although"—I'm still quoting here—"the parable gives no indication that the widow was an exception to the rule of social reality, the majority of the population was poor, and the majority of widows were extremely exploited and oppressed on account of their class and their gender." A fourth goes as far as to call her an outcast. And a fifth sets her in the "ugly and oppressive socio-legal world of first century Palestine."

Well, how would we know that the majority of widows in Jesus's time were extremely exploited and oppressed? I think we're doing stereotyping here and not history. No one mentioned any exploitation or oppression to Babatha of Maoza, the early second-century twice-widowed woman whose personal papers, preserved in the Cave of Letters, attest inter alia that she seized her deceased second husband's property in Ein Gedi, petitioned the Roman courts to gain custody of her son by her first marriage, and was actually sued by her second husband's co-wife over the estate. She's got access to the courts, she's got money, and she's got gumption.

Whereas Jewish law encoded in the Mishna prevented widows from inheriting—here's Mishna Bava Batra—"a woman bequeaths property to her sons, a wife to her husband and maternal uncles, but they do not inherit from them"—the law could easily be circumvented by a deed of gift. And the very idea that the law says a woman can bequeath property suggests that women can own property. Moreover, Jewish widows had two means of receiving support, their marriage contract as well as her claim for alimentation. You can find this in the Mishna as well.

Even the church had problems with independent widows who had their own money, which is why documents like 1 Timothy want to get them married off so they won't run around and spend their money on fun things rather than ecclesial matters.

I am not saying that all widows were rich or economically savvy, nor am I denying the greater social vulnerability of single women. I am saying that it is inappropriate to stereotype widows then or now as helpless or hapless. Here I may well be projecting my own experience. I grew up not too far from here. My mother was a widow. She was widowed quite young, and we lived with her mother, who was widowed quite young as well. Three Jewish women in the family—how we did not kill each other is a miracle right there.

But I learned from my mother and my grandmother, widows both, how one makes one's way in the world without a husband. And I've learned much from the Bible, where numerous widows are resourceful and clever. Finally, I've seen how both church and synagogue communities throughout history support those in need. So I see no reason to jump to the conclusion that a woman is exploitable or expendable.

As far as that woman in our parable, she's likely a woman of some means: she has access to the courts; she does not evoke poverty as a reason for her appeal; she addresses the judge in the imperative, which suggests some sort of classy quality; and she insists not that she be granted justice, but that she be avenged—that's what the Greek term means—and not against an exploiter or a thief, but against an adversary or opponent. Our widow sounds less like an illiterate outcast and actually more like Cersei Lannister fighting for her dead husband's Iron Throne.

Another clue to her economic status is her location. The parable is set in an unnamed city—the Greek word here is polis—although the NIB, NAB inexplicably reads "town." The setting evokes Luke 7:37, where a certain woman in the city shows tenacity and achieved what she wants, to the distress of a Pharisee whose banquet she crashes. This woman in Luke 7:36-50, the one whom Luke calls a sinner

and whom the NABRE calls "the pardon of the sinful woman," is by no means poor, as her high-end alabastron indicates. And as Sister Barbara Reid has trenchantly and appropriately noted, why do we keep calling her the sinful woman, when she should be called "the woman who loves much," because that's what Jesus calls her?

A third clue to our widow's economic security is her persistence. The woman kept coming—*archeto*, the imperative—to the court. Time to continue to visit the court is a luxury those who work in a subsistence economy would not have. And the widow finally presumes she will be heard. She makes no argument and presents no evidence, but she does repeat, "avenge me against my opponent." Her desire is comparable to the vengeance—same term—executed upon Egypt's first-born sons by God, by Israel against the Midianites, by Samson against the Philistine, and by Judith against Holofernes.

Yet unlike these other cases, we know nothing about the widow's situation or even if her desire is just. This is a parable, after all, and parables do not always go the way we would expect. If we see the widow as rich and vengeful, rather than poor and seeking justice, the parable takes on much different coloring. The widow's insistent pleas prompt the judge's equally consistent refusal. For a long time, the judge was unwilling. She, however, bests him.

The New Revised Standard Version blandly quotes the judge's saying to himself, "because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out." The NABRE is better here: "Because this widow keeps bothering me, I shall deliver a just decision, lest she finally come and strike me." The Greek is even sharper. "Bothering me" literally means "causing me labor," or colloquially, "giving me work." "Wear me out or strike me" is *hupópiazó*. It's a boxing term that's better translated "beat me up, strike me in the face, or give me a black eye." And grant her justice or deliver a just decision is literally "avenge her." The widow will get what she wants—vengeance. The judge states, "Because this widow keeps giving me work, I will grant her vengeance, so she won't give me a black eye."

The parable proper ends with the judge's decision, but we do not know if the decision was just. We lack the details of the widow's case. We lack any information about her opponent or any good reason to see her desire as one of justice rather than of revenge.

But Luke likes to clean things up. Luke cannot really abide a topsy-turvy world. He wants his widows in place, remaining silent, letting men lead, and whenever possible, paying bills for the church. Aside from the infancy materials, Luke restricts women's roles to ancillary positions, and a number of these women might be widows. Simon's mother-in-law, perhaps a widow, who requires Jesus's rescue and then responds with service. Luke 8:1-3 restricts women's roles to patronage position. They support Jesus and the apostles, and it's the men who do the preaching, the teaching, and the healing. The women follow Jesus not because of their assessment of his message or divine revelation or personal call, but in gratitude for his medical care.

The other widows in Luke are similarly domesticated. They are, in order: Anna, the prophet, but whose words are not recorded; the widow of Zarephath, mentioned in Jesus's sermon in Luke 4, but she's presented here only in need of the food that Elijah supplies, and not, as she is in her original story, a very active agent; the widow of Nain, also silent, whose son Jesus raises; the multiply married and thus victimized Levirate widow, whose story is a hypothetical test case; the widows whose houses scribes devour, since yes, some widows were exploited, as they are in every culture; and the widow who puts her coins in the temple treasury—she says nothing. She provides an object lesson.

However, in light of rereading the parable's active, morally ambiguous widow, it's possible these other widows in Luke have a different story to tell. Our widow threatens the judge, or at least he perceives himself to be threatened, and so we have another problem. A punch thrown by a widow may be weaker than a punch thrown by Muhammad Ali, but a punch is still a punch, and a threat of violence is still a threat of violence. The picture of the violent widow may be humorous, but it only works as humor if we again resort to stereotypes and reinforced gender roles. So, the parable asks, is physical violence ever excusable? One of the reasons I appreciate Judith is the story is clearly fiction.

More, the parable asks us if we can distinguish between justice and vengeance. We ignore the widow's interest in vengeance when we ignore her opponent. He too has a story to tell. Reference to an adversary or opponent appears elsewhere in Luke to show the potential violence that litigation creates. This is Jesus speaking: "For as you go with your opponent before a ruler, on the way work to settle the case, lest you be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison." The widow does not follow Jesus's advice, and everyone, including the reader attempting to make some sense of the parable, suffers.

We should also query the idea of vengeance at the end of the parable. The NABRE's, "will not God then secure the rights," or the NRSB's "grant justice to them" is literally, again, "avenge them." Do we want God to do avenging? Do we want eschatological vengeance? For some people, it's unimaginable that God could be anything but merciful. But others, perhaps those who have been tortured, sex trafficked, imprisoned, or killed in the name of whatever deity or government, perhaps they might want the perpetrators to suffer. Justice without mercy is intolerable, but so is mercy without justice.

So when we, to put it on a more mundane level, participate in a court case or sit on a jury or attend a parole hearing, are we seeking justice, or are we seeking vengeance? And there's a fine line between the two. I walked this line—that's an allusion to Johnny Cash, I am from Nashville—since for the past 14 years I've been teaching Vanderbilt classes at Riverbend Maximum Security Institute in Nashville. (This is where Tennessee's death row is located.) My students at Riverbend well understand the drive for vengeance. It's that drive that leads to the death penalty. The widow's desire for vengeance will prompt her violent approach to the judge, and the judge perpetuating the system of vengeance makes a decision that likely prompts violence against the opponent.

So this widow should keep bothering us. I can't support her or the judge, and I don't have enough information to speak about the opponent. And since I cannot find justice in the parable, I have to look elsewhere. For example, I have to cross-examine myself. What are my presuppositions about widows and judges? Or, what are our presuppositions about what some of us describe as the "criminal justice system" and others describe as the "New Jim Crow"? What about human nature and the desire for vengeance?

Parables should afflict the comfortable. They're like stink bombs tossed into the status quo. They're profound teachings that force us to ask the right questions, challenge our presuppositions, require creative reflection, and bring us closer to the Kingdom of God if we just listened enough.

How do we hear our parable of the Woman with the Lost Coin? I've noted that she stands in the same position as the man who lost his sheep and the father who lost his son. Christian tradition takes the man and the dad to be God. She should be, too. I don't think, however, first-century Jews were thinking any of these folks as God. I think they're thinking of these folks as people who have lost something and then have to do some finding.

The parable of the Woman with the Coin is the second of three parables, each of which have the same structure. The first, Luke 15:4-6 begins, "which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that's lost until he finds it? And when he is found, that he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." I do not, by the way, think they care.

Luke then turns the parable into an allegory. This is Luke: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance." This is not what first-century Jews are hearing. The sheep owner is never called the Good Shepherd or a shepherd at all, so I have no direct reason to presume that he's God. If he is a shepherd, he's a lousy one, because he lost the sheep. God doesn't lose us. Nor is he an adept sheep-searcher. If you leave the 99 in the wilderness to seek the one, at the end of the day you will have only one sheep, because sheep stray.

So my friend Deborah Appler, who teaches at the Moravian Seminary in Pennsylvania, mentioned to me that she was reading this parable with friends in Tanzania, and her friends in Tanzania responded, "If the sheep goes astray, we shoot it." I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind either.

Nor would the first listeners get a message about repenting. Sheep do not repent. There is no such thing as sheep shame, angora angst, or for those of you who do Greek, merino metanoia.

So what those early Jews would have been hearing was counting, because if you have 100 sheep and you've lost one, how do you know? You can't tell the sheep to line up in groups of 10, nor can they be distinguished by hair ribbons or colorful socks. You have to pass them through a sheepfold, which means you have to count.

Here's the structure. The fellow had 100, counted, noted one missing. Then there's an all-out search. Then you call up your friends and you have a party. It's the same structure for our woman. This is Luke 15:8-9: "What woman, having 10 silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her women friends and neighbors and says, rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." I don't think they cared either, by the way. The outline is the same. Like the man with 100 sheep, the woman had 10 coins. And like the man, the woman counted, because the only way you know you've lost one of 10 coins is you have to count them.

Then Luke comes in and gives us an allegory. "Just so," says Luke, "I tell you, there's joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Look, if sheep don't repent, coins are less likely to repent. There is no such thing as penny penitence or quarter contrition. The issue, again, is counting.

And so we come to Luke's third parable, the Prodigal Son, which is probably better called the Parable of the Absent Mother, but that doesn't get any traction. Even better, it should be called the Parable of the Man who had Two Sons, since it begins, "There was a man who had two sons." We don't have time to run the parable, but we can see the provocation. From the man who counted his sheep and the woman who counted her coins, the man only had two sons, but he doesn't count. And the provocation of the parable comes to us heartbreakingly after the younger son has returned and Dad has thrown the party to celebrate.

His elder son was in the field, and when he approached the house, he heard music and dancing, and he called one of the slaves to ask what was going on. They had enough time to call the band and the caterer, and no one called the older son, because there was a man who had two sons, and he forgot to count.

So the three parables together, ask "have you counted?" In other words, have you made everyone feel counted? Are you sure you have discounted no one? And when you do count, do you make sure your counting is not for rote or out of obsession—like the six times a day counting that's done to prison inmates—but out of love? The woman is the exemplar of one who counts, and when she notices something is missing, she seeks and she finds. That's what makes her a role model.

So now, very late in the talk, much like the very late setting of the final parable, we come to our Wise and Foolish Virgins of Matthew 25. They are independent women outside paternal control, but not under a husband's roof. They also all fall asleep, and given the delay of the bridegroom, who could blame them? They do what they want with their oil, with their money, and with their time.

Matthew tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like these 10 women, save at the end of the story, there's a separation. Five of them run out of oil when the other five refuse to share. Hurry to the market, they suggest—at midnight, no less—and stock up. While the five oil-less virgins are purchasing the oil, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet, and the door was shut. Later, the other virgins also come, and they say, "Lord, Lord, open to us! But he replied, "Amen, I tell you, I do not know you."
And the parable concludes with the Evangelist's warning, "Keep awake then, for you know neither the day nor the hour." I think that's Matthew, because in the parable, actually they all fell asleep. So I

wonder if we could see something here more profound than make sure you have enough oil or good deeds or faith or prayers or whatever. Parables should make us think; they should disturb; and so this one does as well.

Do we want the 10 women to be in solidarity with each other, rather than to divide themselves for the sake of a man who, in this story, is just a late bridegroom, and not without some allegorical help, Jesus. Should we fault people who are simply foolish? That's what Matthew calls them—foolish. The Greek is moros, whence moron. Or should we perhaps recognize that not all have the same cognitive abilities? And here, disability studies may be helpful.

Do we recognize what happens when selfishness overcomes sharing? Do we want to see people left outside, or perhaps, just perhaps, might we query, is this really a wedding we want to attend? Should we celebrate when the door is barred to anyone? Surely the Kingdom of Heaven is not a barred door or a pearly gated community. And should we, on the inside, demand that the door be opened, or should those on the outside keep knocking, or should they take their oil and go make their own party? Where, at the end of the story, do we want to be? And where is justice or compassion or friendship or loyalty or love?

If we read the parables as a genre in which cultural critique, indictment, and challenge are all component parts, then they will remain necessary. They will remain necessary as long as we have the human propensity to selfishness and stinginess, revenge, failing to make others feel counted, stereotyping, and division. The parables offer us a means to think of different forms for behavior through which we can instantiate the Kingdom of Heaven among us.

The parables about women do all this and more. They reveal to us a glimpse into Jewish women's history and thus Jewish women's agency. They reveal that one does not need to make Judaism look bad in order to make Jesus look good. They should help men identify with women, just as women will identify with the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. They help us all recognize the complexity of gender roles, the dangers of stereotyping, and the need to ask the right questions.

If I as a non-Christian can find such powerful messages in these stories—if they provoke me and they challenge me—then as we say in Hebrew, *qal v'chomer*, how much more so should they be appreciated by people who claim Jesus as Lord? The parables are splendid stories. I envy you that you get to hear them in a worship context. And I join you when we get to celebrate them and Mary Magdalene and women's power and the greater glory of Jewish-Christian relations. Thank you for letting me speak with you.

Questioner:
I have to hold it really close. Is this working? Thank you for your wonderful presentation. This isn't directly about your talk, but I have got to ask it. How did you, as a Jewish woman, choose to become a scholar of the New Testament?

Dr. Levine:
Oh, why do I do what I do? Yeah, I actually grew up not too far from here. I was born in New Bedford, as was my mother. So I go way back in southeastern Massachusetts. The neighborhood where I grew up was entirely Portuguese Roman Catholic, except it was St. Julie Billiart Church, but they're all Portuguese. And I became very interested in what my Catholic friends were doing. I'm old enough to remember the Latin Mass, because we did sleepovers, and then you'd go to church, right? I still can do the old rosary. They kept one for me, because they said the rosary at night. And I was fascinated by this religion which seemed very similar to the religion that I practiced. I lived in North Dartmouth, so we went to the synagogue in New Bedford.

A little girl one day said to me on the school bus, "you killed our Lord." And my parents had told me that Christianity, which meant Catholicism, was much like Judaism. We worship the same God; we took authority from the same Scripture; we prayed the same prayers, like the Psalms; and a Jewish man named Jesus was very important. The church was like a synagogue we did not go to. And then I got this thing. So I said, "no, I didn't." She said, "yes, you did. Our priest said so."

I couldn't put together how this religion, which seemed so lovely and so beautiful, was saying hateful things about me. Obviously I came in under the wire of *Nostra Aetate*. So I started asking questions, and I started attending catechism class with my friends—religious education class. I thought it was a translation problem, because in the synagogue, we were learning Hebrew. Nobody told me the New Testament was written in Greek. Plus, I'm seven years old.

I had very, very wise parents who basically said to me, "as long as you remember who you are, go. You might learn something. It's good to know about other people's religions."

I mean, great parents. The sisters who taught me my catechism did not mind that I was there, because I actually wanted to be there, and I was probably the only one who did. And what happened was I fell in love with the stories. When I got older, I realized not only did I like the stories qua stories, I liked them because they were Jewish stories, and I was getting my own history back to me.

So I have multiple reasons for doing this. Now, my primary job is to train people who want to be Christian ministers or religious educators, and I want to make sure that when they get up in front of the classroom or they're in the pulpit, they don't say something that will bear false witness against women or against Jews and Judaism or against gay people or against any of the folks who have been harmed by the biblical text—to make sure that it comes out as a text of love, rather than a text of prejudice.

Questioner:
This is my second time seeing you. I saw you last time you were here, and I own some of your books. I'm a Christian chaplain in a Jewish facility. My job is to help the people who live in this Jewish facility see each other and hear each other and make choices about how they want to live their lives together. You have been so incredibly helpful to me, and I just wanted to tell you that your writing, your work really is changing the world.

Dr. Levine: Oh my God.

Questioner:
I know. I do this really little thing, but I do it so much better because I can see the Jewish perspective on the Christian stories, and I can see the Christian's dependence on the Jewish perspective. It's fascinating to hear you talk about texts I've heard about all my life. And I can take that to them. I can have respect for everyone in the room, and they can start to have respect for everyone in the room.

Dr. Levine: That's lovely.

Questioner:
It's hard to say to somebody, "well, they're just like you," because nobody wants to hear that. That's maybe not even true. But to know that you share stories in a way, it's just very powerful stuff. I just wanted to say thank you.

Dr. Levine:
I appreciate that. Thank you so much. Just let me say something about that as the mic's being moved. I particularly appreciate your being able to cross these boundaries. You stay where you are, and you don't give up who you are, but you can still talk to other people. The reason I can do what I do—it actually goes back to the earlier question—is because of *Nostra Aetate* and because of Vatican II. If the Church had not reached out to the Jewish community and said, "gee, we need to do better in terms of how we're relating to you," there's no possible way I could do what I do. So all of this is mutually informative. I can't do what I do unless the Church gave me the stuff to work on. I become a better Jew by listening to Christian materials, and if Christians become better Christians by listening to Jewish material, how fabulous is that?

Questioner: [inaudible; off mic]

Dr. Levine: Amen to that.

Questioner:
Hello, I'm Sharon Chase. I'm a (inaudible) graduate of Weston Jesuit. My question is, I wonder if my take on the Parable of the Leaven resonates. The main idea is that the Parable of the Leaven is like unto the Parable of the Talents. Baker woman participates in a divine nature and possibly suggests a feminine mention of God. I'm not making a strict analogy, which is sort of like algebra. But anyway, she participates in the divine nature of God, and maybe the yeast or the sourdough starter is like the talents, and different people get different amounts of talents depending upon the amount of bread they are supposed to make. And like an unused talent, sourdough starter can go from sour to rancid very quickly. I'll spare you the story of how I know this. So anyway, to summarize again, my main point is that the parable of the leaven may be like unto the parable of the talents, and I wonder if that thought resonates.

Dr. Levine:
Yeah, I like that very much, and I like reading one parable in light of another. Any sort of intertextual work where you put something against something else, which is what parables are—the word just means to cast two things next to each other—you begin to see different things. So when you mention the talents in relation to the leavening—oh yeah, that opens up yet another possibility.

As soon as Jesus told these stories, they're out there for mass consumption, and I have a feeling that he'd tell one, and then Peter would look at Andrew and say, let's go talk to Mary Magdalene; she's probably got a clue. And it helps us, because as you did today, they then become occasions for conversation. I think that works.

Think about the Parable of the Talents—remember, the guy who buries the talent, and then it gets taken away from him and given to the guy with 10. It shows you that if you're competent at the work that you do, you wind up at the end of the day with more work. So I'm a little wary about whether this is a blessing or not.

Questioner:
I was interested to hear that you are teaching in prison, and I was wondering if you could share some of your learnings or insights from that work.

Dr. Levine: Yeah, thanks. I very much appreciate the question, because whenever I give a talk, I try to mention Riverbend. You talk about forgotten people or ignored people, and I don't want my guys at Riverbend to be ignored. For 14 years I've been either teaching a course out there—so I bring Vanderbilt students out to the prison, and we hold regular courses. We're just doing it in a maximum security prison. Or on Thursdays when I'm in town, I'm on death row, hanging out with my guys on death row, some of whom are locked up 23 hours a day, and some of them can be out in like a special pod where they can interact with each other.

For my guys on death row and for my guys just in the regular prison system, they want to read those three parables in Luke as about repenting and forgiving, because it is essential for them to think that God will love them no matter how badly they've screwed up. There's no way I want to take that away from them. What I want to do is add on.

But their readings go from highly humorous to extraordinary and profound. I'll share one with you, which given where we are, may be appropriate. One of my guys is a defrocked priest who, as you can imagine, did what he did. And we were talking one day in class about something the Gospels refer to as the unforgivable sin. The unforgivable sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Now, I don't think it means you wake up in the morning, you stub your toe, and you go, "God damn Holy Spirit," and then you lose your immortal soul. There has to be something more than that. What this fellow said is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is believing that God could not love somebody like him. That's extraordinary.

Or in working on the Our Father, in Matthew it's "forgive us our debts," and in Luke it's "forgive us our trespasses." I'm in church a lot, and I always have to check myself what church I'm in to figure out whether it's a debt-y church or a trespass-y church, because you shift. And I once made the

argument that the original was debt, because Jesus was interested in economic reform and a pay it forward model. Somebody needs, you have, you give, and you give without expectation of return. And then the church got into the sin-forgiving business, so it was the church that shifted it over, because it's easier to forgive a sin than a debt. If you sin against me, I can forgive you. But if you owe me $100,000 and I've got two kids, I want to put them through BC, I want the money.

One of my guys looked at me and he said, in effect, "Lady, you don't have a clue." He went on to talk about being a participant in a victim-offender mediation program, part of what's known as restorative justice. He met with the family members of the people, plural, he killed. After about a year, they said to him, as he explained that night, "we've come to realize you're not the person you were when the murders took place. This was a drug deal that went very, very wrong. We've gotten to know you as a person. We can't hold this anger in us any longer. We forgive you."

And he looked at me, and he said, "Lady, your problem is that you don't understand sin. Because you don't understand sin, you don't understand forgiveness." What they had offered him was worth more than any economic that could ever be offered.

This is the sort of thing you hear in prison. I am not saying, "let's open up the doors of every single prison and let people out." For some of these people, I'm very, very happy they're locked up. Very happy they're locked up. Because they have told me that if they were out, they would offend again. And a number of others—when we talk about, in the book of Acts, there are prison break stories. So I said to them, "Let's say an angel opened up the door to your cell. What would you do?" To a man, they said "We would stay here." Either "we're afraid if we got out, we would sin again," or "we are here because we are paying the penalty for what we did." Or "if we left, the guards would get into trouble, and they are our friends." Or "we would have no place to go."

These guys are my friends, and I don't want—the incarcerated American is yet another one of our minority groups, and we tend to ignore them. They may have done horrible things, and my guys have done horrible things. But they are also in the image and likeness of God. Thank you for asking.

Questioner:
Good afternoon. Thank you very much for your talk. It has been a very enlightening opportunity here. You spoke a lot about Matthew, Luke, and Mark, but I didn't hear much on John's perspective of women. I'm currently in a Gospel of John class, and what we have talked about is that actually it portrays women in the best light of all the Gospels. If you could give your insight, I think that would be . . .

Dr. Levine: You're working on a paper?

Questioner:
Specifically what I'm getting at—and yes, what I'm going to write on my paper—is the Samaritan Woman—yes, the first woman—in a book that we read by a Protestant, he continually talks about Mary Magdalene running away from the tomb afraid; she's running away because she's afraid. And my argument was, no, she's not afraid. She's running to share the Good News. She's the first disciple. She's happy. She's going to share it with the people that she's been this great news. So let's look at it in that picture, because again, this is a good thing.

There's another image—oh, the Samaritan Woman. She goes to the village to tell the people, "he has told me everything that I have done." Once again, she's running to deliver the Good News. Women are running to deliver the Good News to their communities, to the people around them, and that this is a beautiful and empowering thing, and if we recognize this in our communities—I'm from a Hispanic/Latina community—this can be a source of empowerment in the Church, especially a Church that's changing. The color of our Church is changing. So women being respected, acknowledged, loved for their talents in the Church.

Dr. Levine: Oh, that was beautiful. Yeah, I liked that. So between me and you, here are some pointers. I didn't talk about women in John, because there aren't any parables in John. John's just like one giant parable, but technically there are no parables in John. Samaritan Woman at the Well—I

think she's fabulous. She's the first successful evangelist. She manages to convert her entire community. She is not the town slut, as she is typically portrayed, because if she were, the people never would have paid attention to her in the first place.

And she gives as good as she gets. What she and Jesus are doing, I think, is flirting. Any time you have a man and a woman meeting at the well, if you've ever read the Bible, you know what they're there for. Today, it's like Whole Foods around the arugula about 8:00 at night, where the single people are trolling. Back then, a Jewish man meets a woman at a well, obviously they're going to get married, and then she doesn't turn out to be quite the Jewish virgin. What they're doing in their language is flirting.

All this language of wells and buckets and streams and fountains – read Song of Songs and read Proverbs, and they're all sexually coded. When she says to him "the well is deep, and you don't have a bucket"—well, yeah. "I got living water flowing up into eternal life." Whoa! It's fabulous, and it's funny. There's so much in the Bible that's humorous and profound, because humor and profundity are not mutually exclusive.

In terms of the running, you've got a bit of a problem. When Mary Magdalene runs to get the Beloved Disciple and Peter, she does not know yet that he has been raised, right? She's running because the body's not there. I don't think she's afraid. I think she's running because the body isn't there. Yeah, get a couple of other people around to say, you know, did I miss something? Is there something wrong? Check it out.

The Samaritan Woman runs and says, "I met this man. He told me everything I've ever done." And then she asks a question: "Do you think he could be the Messiah?" She's not sure yet either. So in both cases, they're women running with a question. They know there's something profound there. But the profundity is not quite there yet. So they're messengers, but the whole thing doesn't take shape until the belief system comes in. You've got them at a stage, but you haven't gotten them to where they actually need to be. But you know they're going to get there. You know they're going to get there, and here's why you put them together. Because the Samaritan comes at high noon, which is when Rachel met Jacob at the well, and it's almost dawn when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. You know when John's been playing with light and dark imagery—you know as soon as the sun comes up—you can spell that S-U-N or S-O-N—she's going to get it. You know through the imagery.

Finally, Mary Magdalene is in the position of a lover because John 20 is—which we read in Mass today—is the Hellenistic romance. It's Romeo and Juliet, only good. So what happens in the Hellenistic romance? There's like the Barbara Cartland novels of antiquity. Lovers are separated. One thinks the other one's dead. There's a case of mistaken identity. That's when she thinks he's the gardener. And then there's a reunion, and like everything else, John shatters the convention. You think the two lovers are just going to run off and be happily ever after? No, it's go tell the guys. Go be the apostle to the apostle. You've got lots to play with here.

Questioner: Yeah, thank you.

Dr. Levine: You're very welcome.

Questioner: I will cite you, I promise.

Dr. Levine: Just give me a footnote.

Questioner:
Dr. Levine, in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." I've heard you speak about that on a couple of videos I saw of you online. Would you please explain to us or tell us that delightful—your version—parable, dream of getting into heaven?

Dr. Levine: I can do that. Thank you. My students worried about this and my friends worried about it, because if Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by him,"

what about me? What we've been doing before is history or literary criticism. This I made up, because that's what theologians do on occasion, because you have to speculate.

Here's the way I think this plays out. After a very, very long and happy life, I die. I find myself at the pearly gates. Couple of things about the pearly gates. First of all, they're wide open. Because as you've heard, I don't think heaven is a gated community. Second, the word for pearl in Greek is margarita, so you can work with that. There's a little Jimmy Buffett music in the background.

There's a line, but it's heaven, so it moves quickly. Standing at the front of the line is St. Peter. You know he's St. Peter, because he's got a little rock insignia on his lapel. It's this little heaven humor thing. I also, by the way, tell my Jewish friends, if you get into heaven and there's a goat line and a sheep line, just tell them to get into the sheep line. Don't ask any questions. Just get into the sheep line.

So Peter says to me, "AJ, welcome to heaven. Here's your harp and your halo, and you can get your wings and your slippers at the next table." And I said, "Wait a minute. I have questions. What happened to your wife? Because we know Jesus healed your mother-in-law, so there had to be a wife. Who won the food fight that you had with Paul in Antioch, and where did you wander off to in the middle of Acts, and were you crucified upside-down? Can you read?" All these other questions that we have—can you speak Greek? Peter says, "Not now, lady, but we'll talk after dinner." I'm thinking this is Bible scholars' heaven.

Standing behind me is a fellow who in his previous life was a television evangelist. You can tell. Perfect hair, perfect teeth—you need sunglasses—pants creased so sharply you'd get a papercut. He's managed to find in the heavenly antechamber a copy of a red-lettered King James Version—leather-bound version of the Bible. If you've ever seen these things, all the words of Jesus are written in red letters so you can find them more easily. You can also find in this heavenly antechamber the Jewish Publication Society version of the *Tanakh*. For those of you who are Jews, there's some ArtScroll stuff there, but it's under lock and key. There's the Koran, there's the Bhagavad Gita, there's the Book of Mormon. There are the complete works of Mary Baker Eddy. That's my image of heaven.

But he's got his New Testament there, and he's got it open to John 14, and he's becoming somewhat apoplectic. He says, "Lord, Peter, Mr. Apostles—Simon, I don't mean to make trouble here, but did not our Lord and Savior say right here in red letters that he is 'the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father'?" He points to me and he says, "I've seen this woman before. I've seen her on TV. She's thinner in person. I know she's read the New Testament, and I know she likes Jesus a whole lot, but she doesn't worship him as Lord and Savior, and she's not baptized. So, pardon the expression, "What the hell is she doing in heaven?" Peter says, "Oy, gevalt, wait here."

So he comes back in a couple of minutes with a fellow who's maybe 5'4", 5'5", which we think is the average height of men in Galilee—archaeology—in the first century. Dark, piercing eyes that look like they're going right into your soul and holes in his palms. That's the Gospel of John, right—the Doubting Thomas story. Now I've got lots of questions, like can you read, and can you speak Greek? But this is clearly not the time.

So Jesus says to the fellow, "What is it, my son?" And give this guy credit for his convictions. He's going for it. He says, "Lord, all my life I've proclaimed you the Savior. I've brought people to baptism. I've proclaimed the Gospel. And now you're telling me that I'm wrong? I don't understand."

Jesus responds, "Well, the Gospel of John does have me saying that. Very carefully phrased. John does have me saying that. But if you flip back into the Gospel of Matthew, where I tell the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats"—this is Matthew 25—"I make it very clear that it's not those who say 'Lord, Lord,' but those who do the will of the Father. What's that? It's feeding people who are hungry and clothing people who are naked—oh, and visiting people in prison, and giving a cup of water to the least of these, which I actually think for Matthew means Christian missionaries. It seems to me that my daughter AJ has done—to use your image—she's done the best she can with the talents that she's been given."

The fellow says, “That’s works righteousness. You’re saying she’s earned her way into heaven. But getting into heaven is supposed to be a free gift.” Jesus says, “Go back to John 14, where I make it very clear that I am the Way. Now, let me repeat that. I am. I am. Not you, and not your narrow understanding of salvation, and not your constipated view of soteriology. I say she gets in. Do you want to argue?” And the last thing, before going off to get my heavenly accessories, is I have this image of Jesus handing the man a tissue to help get the log out of his eye.

So if the Christian wants to make Jesus the gatekeeper, by all means, make him so, because that’s what the New Testament says he is. And I don’t think, as mentioned before, you give up the particulars of your own religion on the altar of interfaith sensitivity. Hang on to that. That’s what makes you Christian. But the Jesus that I understand through history, this Jewish guy, is going to be a whole lot more concerned about how I love my neighbor as myself than of the particulars of my theology. So this one works for me, and I hope it works for you, too. Thank you very much.