

Sermon June 13.21

Silverado and Small Beginnings.

(next week: a power greater than all that we fear, as we focus on First Nations matters)

Pray

Any truck owners here?

Dianne and I have owned several mini vans, and cars over the years, but not a pickup truck. It's always good, however, to know a guy or a gal who does own a truck they can lend you to haul stuff. Thank you, Dave.

A colleague mentioned this week that, "You folks at Christ Church have a stained glass window with a truck on it!" And that's correct. We do.

So here's a trivia question. Which stained glass window here at Christ Church Oshawa depicts a truck? Don't shout it out! Who is the central figure in that window? No, there were no trucks in bible times. And yes, there's a truck in the top left of that window. If you think you know, fire off a reply with the words, "Got it" in the comments – don't give the answer away! Just type, "Got it." Or you can send us a reply to today's email with your response. I'll reveal the answer at the end of the service. If you're not familiar with our building or the stained glass windows, here's a clue: think of a person in the New Testament who didn't say much, but used tools.

That's our focus as we begin a Sermon Series on Mark's Gospel: Jesus' teaching and the tools he used to get the great message across of the coming kingdom of God. Over the next number of weeks we'll be exploring Jesus' teaching in Mark's Gospel, teaching in still unsettled times, that will challenge us to deepen our discipleship and we trust, and by putting His the teaching in gear, influence the world for good.

Jesus used the tools and technology of his day (like we're using stained glass window technology or live streaming) to teach about the Kingdom of God that was breaking in.

One of those tools was the parable. A parable is a tool for hauling truth like a Chevy Silverado pickup is a tool for hauling stuff. Jesus would refer to an object that people would recognize, a seed for example, and use it to describe something they could not see, except in their mind's eye. Simple. Brilliant. Greek and Hebrew rhetoricians recognized the power of a parable, allegory or metaphor as tools to aid understanding or persuasion.

Jesus' teaching could unsettle the comfortable and encourage those who felt unsettled. It still works today.

In today's Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus tells two parables in quick succession that He had to explain later to His disciples. That's the problem of the parables, of course, that they tell us everything and nothing at the same time. Maybe parables don't explain but invite; parables invite us to explore, living in the in-between times as we are. More and more being vaccinated once and a growing number having received their second dose.

Like a toddler's first time playing in a kiddie pool in the backyard, just taking it all in, her developing brain looking for connections, in the in-between moment, checking things out. At first, she's a little unsettled. "Gee, this isn't my normal tub where I have my bath, and I'm outside! but the water's just right and I can see Mommy and Nana and Papa," then she feels free to explore her new pool toys. Parables are like that. Like any solid teaching method; take what you know and use it to explore what we don't know.

Scholar CS Lewis believed that reason is not the only way of understanding; imagination equally helps us understand. Reason and imagination work together in the mind of the believer through the Spirit of Christ, to balance our perception of truth.

Jesus cleverly wove in scripture references to steer his audience toward deeper reflection beyond the surface meaning of His parables. Jesus peaked his listener's interest with a measure of cryptic or coded language that he would later explain to his disciples.

Why? Why didn't Jesus just tell it plainly?

Three reasons: first, while Jesus indicates that He taught in parables to obscure truths to certain people, it is also obvious that many of the listeners clearly understood what He was teaching (Matthew 13:10-17, 21:45).

The second reason for teaching in parables may have been so that the religious leaders could not charge Him with any crimes such as treason or blasphemy, since He was merely "telling stories" (Luke 11:53-54).

Thirdly, parables are also a powerful tool in communicating a message to a person who may be opposed to the lesson if stated bluntly, but it allows the lesson to be taught free of prejudice due to the teaching technique; truth that sneaks around by the back door. Better to let someone discover for themselves.

The first parable Jesus tells in Mark 4:26 is so simple it seems innocuous. The seed grows secretly, doing its own thing unobserved in the earth and eventually there appear the stalk, the ear of corn, the swelling corn inside the ear. Then comes the harvest. Straight forward enough. How does this teach about the kingdom? The farmer, Jesus says, goes to bed, gets up, goes to bed, gets up, night and day...but still doesn't know how the seed sprouts and grows. The answer, of course, is that the seed is doing what the man or woman farmer is doing. The seed is sleeping in the soil and then getting up. This is how God's present creation works: night and day, seedtime and harvest, the cycle of the day and the year mirroring one another within God's promised stable order (Gen 1:4-13, 8:22). In terms of what one can imagine is the significance of the kingdom, the seed is laid in the earth and then rises. The word for 'get up' is one of the regular words used for 'resurrection.' Whether his audience had an understanding of resurrection as life after death or restoration of the glory of the kingdom of Israel, there was an implication that the harvest time, judgement, would come. That can be unsettling. You mean, there's more to this life than just the four seasons and pandemics and sorrow over genocide and racist attacks? There will be a reckoning. Jesus provides the way through that reckoning. He is the way, the resurrected One.

Unsettling, yet still connected.

The second parable comes in answer to the same question: what will God's kingdom be like? The story of small seed growing to a large bush that the birds of the air find shelter in, echoes the great prophets Ezekiel and Daniel in the OT who both use an image of a great kingdom, growing like a tree until those around can shelter in it (Ez 17:23:31;6, Dan 4:12, 21). "Don't worry," Jesus is saying. Remember who your God is and what He's promised. Realize that this small beginning is the start of God's intended kingdom, the kingdom that will eventually offer shade to the whole world.

The story is a warning against looking down on small beginnings in Jesus' smalltown start to his ministry. It's also a warning against looking down on small beginnings today. A few people got together to think, and pray about a growing area of Oshawa and this church got planted in 1928, thanks be to God, or our Worship Band, Live Nativity, Thrift Shop or our Live Streaming. Don't despise the small start of some great new initiative that God has in mind.

How can we drive home Jesus' teaching from the parables of the seeds?

Two things: Ask a question: Taking verse Mark 4:31 personally, the smallest of all the seeds on earth, how is your seed of faith in God's kingdom? Sprouting? Outgrowing the weeds, feeling a little trampled? producing a harvest? Ask a question, with you in the parable, you sitting in the truck.

Second application: Act as if. There have been unsettling things happen in the world, from the many unmarked graves of First Nations boys and girls at Residential Schools, not just 215 children but according the TRC findings from six years ago they suspect as many as 4000 children's unmarked graves at the 139 IRS across Canada, or the unsettling truth of systemic racism in Canadian society such as the hate-motivated killing of a family of people crossing the street in London Ontario last week – as unsettling as the pandemic has been to community life, work, school, church, our physical and mental health, life and death of so many, if Jesus' little parables teach us anything, it is to act as if it were all true. It IS true but we need to act like it is. Like the TED talk, viewed over 67 million times, Social psychologist Amy Cuddy, called Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are. It's the Fake it til you Make it kind of thinking it can have an affect. Body language affects how others see us, but it may also change how we see ourselves. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy argues that "power posing" -- standing in a posture of confidence, even when we don't feel confident -- can boost feelings of confidence, and might have an impact on our chances for success. We could argue that kneeling can help us reflect and repent and pray in humility. We could argue raising our arms in praise acting as if a heavenly Father is about to lift us up, can raise our spirits as we praise.

It's no good having a Chevy Sierra pick up gas, diesel, or coming soon, electric truck with lots of horsepower, if there's no way to steer it or stop it. Holy Spirit horsepower is alive in us by faith, but without the tools to harness that power it's a dangerous or destructive. We sharpen our tools

of reason and engage our imagination, even our woundedness and suffering, and let the Holy Spirit help make good things happen.

There's order and there's the wild, unpredictable side to faith. Settled, unsettled, closed, open, re-opening; what's constant is that truth Jesus conveyed using parables, is alive and active; it's a question of how we respond.

Borrow a parable of Jesus just like you'd borrow a truck from a friend. Let Jesus' haul the truth, in you, through you.

Ask: how is your seed of faith growing in God's kingdom.

Act as if it's true and you might be surprised how things open up.

Unsettled, yet still connected: you and I, we belong.

BONUS: To pray Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, we are saying as Martin Luther said in the Small Catechism, we are also acknowledging that we have no control over it. The next petition/request of the Lord's Prayer also acknowledges that God provides daily bread, reminding us that our control of things is not necessary for God's kingdom and providence and provision.

Did you see the recent Globe and Mail report that the first trucks in the reborn General Motors plant will roll off the re-tooled Oshawa assembly line sooner than expected, later this year instead of January 2022, to meet demand for pick-ups? 1,700 workers are being hired; production workers, electricians and other tradespeople to assemble trucks.

CHURCH TRIVIA QUESTION

What is the name of the window with the truck in it?

Mr. Arthur W. Barton, a former GM employee and a long-time parishioner of Christ Church Oshawa, was a quiet faithful man using some of the same skills from work at GM to maintain our church for years. A window his memory was dedicated after our fire of 1976 and is given to the glory of God. The window is called the "Joseph" window. If you "got it" congratulations!