

Sermon –6th Pentecost
Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23
July 12, 2020

“What Did You Say?”

Have you ever tried to retell a funny story or joke that split your sides only to see it fall flat as a pancake the second time around? The same circumstances or punch line that left you and your golf buddies rolling in laughter practically wiping your eyes left last week’s prayer breakfast yawning as they methodically sipped their coffee. You know right away by the uncomfortable grins or the clearing of someone's throat that nobody got it. So, you try to recover with some line like "*I guess you just had to be there.*" You can try to explain a joke, but if it needs explanation, chances are it won't be funny then either. Best usually to change the subject, hope the waitress comes or better yet grab your phone and pretend it's your spouse.

Storytelling whether amusing or heartrending, is not an easy thing. It may bring a tear or a smile to one group and other experiences the same words in a completely different way. Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus chose to speak in parables. Some people find that annoying or unnecessarily confusing, and some even think it dishonest or ineffective. Why didn't Jesus come right out and say what he meant? Why did he use all these cryptic sayings loaded with innuendo, instead of a nice clean handbook or catechism or series of religious tracts with titles like "*The Ten Commandments for Modern 1st Century Ears*", or "*A Brief Definition of the Kingdom of God*" or "*Seven Key Features of the End Times, and How to Identify Them.*" But no. Instead we have these odd, out of the blue stories and sayings known as parables.

But then, a list of rules never changes, never adapts and they can easily become out of date. How many times have you been to a website that invited you to some upcoming event that had already happened? You see that and you doubt the reliability of the whole site. Or have you ever got a catalog that said; "*prices effective till*"...and it's the day after? Set that in the trash. Manuals are time bound. Write one and you feel pretty good for a while. Till somebody's "unique" situation arises and you find you got to go back and update it.

If you think Jesus would have gotten his points across better with a handbook, when was the last time you sat down and really enjoyed reading an owner's manual, much less Deuteronomy? Even God's Word can be a hard read. The parables were told to make the truth of God's word or the life altering experience of knowing Jesus Christ enticing, timeless, and real.

The Christian faith is founded upon a tradition - four versions of the life and sayings of Jesus of Nazareth, officially called the "canonical gospels". Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But that tradition is also sustained by other lives and words...Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Catherine of Sienna, William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, Fredrick Douglas, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Other gospels may not be quite so well-known, but they work just as persuasively in our lives. How many of you know, whether you thought of it this way or not, a personal parable story? In your family, there might be one called "*The Gospel According my Grandma who lost two babies during the Great Flu of 1918.*"

You might be here today because of the "*The Gospel According to That Counselor at Bible Camp Whose Name I Can't Even Remember.*" Wittingly or unwittingly you too are in the process of writing a story, and like a parable yours is plain as day one minute and elusive or paradoxical as the wind the next. But it *is* an account of what you did and what you said, because of what you believe Jesus Christ did and said. You have a story, a parable, whose foundation and inspiration is your confession of Jesus Christ. Storytelling is one of the most basic practices common to all cultures. Stories connect us to one another, to our ancestors, to our world and to our God. In this week's gospel text, Matthew notes that when Jesus spoke to crowds around him, "*he told them many things in parables.*"

Think of the way you express what you believe. We live in a world today that is almost tone-deaf to doctrines and creeds – but only too willing to have a relationship with someone who, they may be surprised to discover, is a living creed. What chapter are you composing in your gospel this week? "*The Parable of the Kids Who Didn't Clean Up Their Rooms and the Mother Who Kept Her Tongue Anyway*"? "*The Parable of Setting up a Home Office and a Homeschool on 72 hours' notice*"? "*The Parable of the School That Does Nothing About Bullying – When I'm Not Even in School*". "*The Parable of Dealing with Dad*". "*The Parable of Giving When the Need Seemed Too Great.*"

Don't worry if these, or the particular parable stories you experienced of late didn't seem to have any grand significance, any easily recognizable "gospel" quality as you lived through them. The power of a parable is partly if not primarily in their second and third telling. We don't always get them the first time – just ask Jesus. No...ask Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds. By way of either urgency or expediency he explained to his own disciples the kingdom truths that lived within his stories.

This past week in my personal devotions, I came upon a biographical piece about the great 13th century Christian Francis of Assisi. It reminded me of the time in a confirmation class a few years ago when I did my level best to “tell” my middle school friends what the famous saying attributed to Saint Francis - “*preach the gospel at all times...if necessary, use words*” meant. Not even the kids who happened to be listening got it. So I grabbed some suckers from my pocket, ones I normally reserved for kids who give correct answers to my pop quiz questions, and silently handed one to a random 4 or 5. Then I asked them...”*did I just “say” anything*”? Most said “*no, you were just being nice I guess*” (I don’t recall if they added “for a change”)

So I pretended like I’d leave it at that, proceeded with my lesson, till I could see a few faces light up, a few telling glances shot across the table, a few expressions that said “*ohhhh...I get it*”. Not many...just a few. I winked at those faces...and left it at that. Not everyone gets it, which is another lesson for us from parables – you have to keep at it.

We know the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and maybe the parables of grandma and the camp counselor but often only long after first hearing them. We all know life is not a bowl of cherries – more like a handful of cherry pits that have to be planted before reemerging. Your final duty, then? Go and live the gospel, what you’ve heard say to you, whether you fully understand it or not. Listen, grapple and tussle with what he says. Then by innocuous actions and words, give your kids and co-workers something to ponder. They may not get it...but they might be curious. It’s a start. AMEN