

“Living your life as a parable”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
on June 17, 2018 (Fourth Sunday of Pentecost)

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:26-34
(by Rev. Catherine Somerville)

“Jesus told so many parables that he became one.” I do not know who authored that sentence, but it seems to be such a good summation of the ministry of Jesus Christ. He was the consummate story teller, and the magic of his stories is that they did not point to him. Instead, they pointed beyond him, to God, to the one he called Abba-Daddy.

He told a story about two sons, one of whom took everything, even what wasn't his to take in the first place, and he squandered away all those opportunities; but there was also an older son, who stayed home and rather than growing crops, he grew a hardened heart against his family. The story is really about God being like the father, sitting day after day on the porch in his rocking chair, scanning the horizon, waiting for his boys. God is like a father, waiting to welcome us home.

He told another story about a traveler being accosted on the road, beaten and left for dead. An outsider came upon the scene and opened his heart and his wallet. In the kin-dom, God's care is big enough for all people.

Jesus told stories about the small things in life, like narrow doors, and tiny, flickering candles, and seeds planted in the soil, and he said that God even notices our smallest actions. God's vision is way beyond our imagining.

This parable in particular is a case in point. It's not about “us”, but rather the grace of God; and yet we overhear in these compacted stories so much about what pertains to how we receive the good news. There are clues in the plant that grows so large from so small a seed. We marvel that birds come to nest in the shade of this spacious dwelling. So shall the reign of God be. We, like the farmer, do not understand how the sprouting and the growth of such a reality take place. Yet it becomes a harvest of life, and the tree from the seed spreads out branches to be the place of rest and song and abundance.

Because my thoughts this week were taken up with that notion that Jesus' life was its own parable, I paid attention to all the parables I was hearing. And I realized, that if we are truly invited to be Christ followers, then we also are invited to receive an invitation to make our living into a parable too.

Let me tell you a few parables I heard this week, and what I learned in the telling, not just about the people who told the stories, but about what it means in the bigger, kin-dom of God sense.

I was asked to wait in a room at the hospital this week, before I could go in to see someone from our church. The few minutes I had been told to wait turned into almost twenty, and because I am not always a patient waiter, I looked for something to do. I picked up a

magazine, and the page I opened offered such a beautiful story, that I ended up stealing the magazine. (Relax, I returned it the next day. This is not a parable about a penitent criminal minister. And by the way, as with most waiting room reading material, this magazine was 13 years old!) An author interviewed six people that he knew to be happy. Because happiness has such a subjective quality to it... what makes you happy, like watching sports on TV, may not make me happy at all, scientists have coined the term "subjective well-being" to try and define happiness in more scientific terms. The author asked his subjects for their secrets. Jeannette from Hamilton told him the secret was praying with gratitude every day. "Just saying thank you for what I have, it has magnified. I feel spiritually connected and everything I do now emanates from my commitment to God." Her practice of gratitude has taught her that God is very much in charge. Jeannette shared one of the jottings from her diary: "Look straight ahead, one step at a time. Never stop dreaming, never stop believing that God has plans for you."

Another person in this small study spoke of having purpose in life and choosing to see life as a process of learning; another noted that happiness is seeking to understand and embrace the reality that life is more about chaos than order, and that it's the way you react to or interpret the chaos that makes all the difference in the world.

Research studies are beginning to take note of the connection between happiness and longevity. (Maybe that is why we have so many people of a good age in this congregation. You are a happy group of people!) There is also research being done around the fact that people who would describe themselves as happy, pleased and relaxed carry a greater resistance to cold symptoms.

One of the scientists noted, "If we can understand happiness, we can better understand prevention of illnesses such as depression. We can give people tools or advice on how to increase their own."

The research is even spinning out into architecture and municipal planning policy, for we are learning that communities which have more multi-generational gathering spaces, tend to have citizens who would say that they are happy. All forms of social contact boost people's feelings of happiness and life satisfaction.

These scientists have even created a list of personality traits and life situations that seem to predict happiness, and meaningful religious faith is right up there at the top.

From those parables, I am learning that happiness is a choice. In the Good News Version of the Bible, the word "blessed" is translated as "happy". "Happy are those who know they are beloved of God. Happy are those who find comfort in their days of sorrow. Happy are those who don't need to take front and centre, or be loud and aggressive in their living, for it is those who decide to live with humility, patience and with grace who will inherit the world. Happy are those who offer mercy, the ones who carry good intention in their hearts; happy are those who build up rather than tear down."

Another parable, this time from a wise woman in a support group: She is the mother of three small children. She was on her way last Tuesday afternoon, to pick up the children at daycare, and she was broadsided by a driver who was texting. Her new Jeep is a write off, she is bruised and very sore, but she said something incredible to her friends. Usually when bad things happen to this woman, she tends to respond with anger. This time though, she thought about how things could have been so much worse. Her children might have been in the car. The other driver was a mother going to pick up her own children. They could have been hurt. She was planning to drive the family to Toronto on the weekend to visit relatives. What if the accident had happened on a busy highway? Would this have meant that more people would have been hurt? She has decided to see goodness. Her words were so incredible that I wrote them down: "There are far better things ahead than any we can leave behind."

And to this, I heard Jesus adding, "Do not worry about your life, what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Your Heavenly Father knows you need all these things. Do not worry about tomorrow or about what happened yesterday."

One more parable: In my meetings and conversations with others, I often refer them to a favourite book. It's called "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" and the premise of the book is that bad things are going to happen to us all, but it's how we choose to live that makes the difference. There is always a deeper meaning and we have the choice to make sense of suffering and find peace in the midst of the chaos. The question we can ask when bad things happen is to consider what our response will be. You ask yourself, "How am I going to continue to shine light in the world? Now that this bad thing has happened to me, how will I live? Will it become the story that consumes and defines me, or will my faith and hope and trust be the story that others see?"

The author of that book sums it up this way: "Are you capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed you by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease and crime, earthquake and accident? Can you forgive its imperfections and love it because it is capable of containing great beauty and goodness? Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you, even if they have hurt you and let you down and not be perfect, because the penalty for not being able to love imperfect people is condemning oneself to loneliness? Are you capable of forgiving and loving God, even when he let you down by permitting bad luck and sickness and cruelty in His world? If you can do that, then you will be able to recognize that the ability to forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given you to live fully, bravely and meaningfully in this less than perfect world."

I told this parable to someone I met with this week, and they told me a parable in return. "Cancer is not going to be my story. Laughing with my friends, being with my family in good ways, accepting the help I need right now, those pieces will be my story."

I think that is the clue to how we might live this life as a parable. What is the story you choose to tell? What is the message you need the world to hear?

For us who follow the way of Jesus Christ, the pieces are about seeking and planting, praying and opening, growing, forgiving, making decisions that bring life and hope, sharing abundantly but mostly, it's about reminding ourselves and telling the world that none of us are on this journey alone. Thanks be to God, for planting good seeds in us, and inviting all people to enjoy the harvest.

Sources used:

When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Harold S. Kushner, Avon Books, 1980
"What Happy People Know", Ylva Van Buuren, Canadian Living, March 2005, pages 66-76
Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, pages 140-145.