

“We Should Always Fear Those with a Little Bit of Knowledge”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

for The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 28, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 111 (VU #833); Mark 1:21-28

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Two weeks ago I invited those who were here to think about the greatest moment in their life. Many did, and some shared those moments. Several said it was impossible to limit a life to one great moment, and so offered three or four special moments that remain as “highlights” in a life that has been blessed and encouraging.

We are fortunate when we can have a multiple of moments that we would label “great” or “inspiring” or at least “memorable” in a positive way.

Today I want to look at the other end of the spectrum of life. What is a pet peeve that you have, and how do you live with it?

Now I am not sure what it says about me, but while I had no difficulty coming up with one greatest moment in my life, thinking about pet peeves and irksome experiences I find myself with a significant list. In short, they all can be reduced to one basic insight: not respecting others with whom I share space on this planet.

The irksome experiences can be labelled in a variety of ways: not signalling when driving, parking in disabled parking spots (or often worse, next to the store exit) while waiting for someone and not qualified to park there; standing at a grocery line for 8 items while you have 19, or standing in front of the bank teller and sorting your purse contents or arranging your money in a wallet while the line gets longer behind you.

So let me tell you some stories that will be an attempt to relate what life should be all about, and how Jesus spoke to people in his day in his first sermon. He offered hope and encouragement, not judgment and despair, and that should be the message we hear, every Sunday, as we open ourselves to his teachings.

But first I need to dress the part.

The secret of the preaching tradition of the Rev. Dr. Malcolm Sinclair was revealed on one Sunday morning at Metropolitan United Church in downtown Toronto. Malcolm, who is a graduate of Huntington University and has led workshops, sung concerts, and been in worship within this sanctuary many times, has been the lead preaching minister at Metropolitan United since 1988 – finishing 30 years of ministry there, but not finishing ministry (if you know what I mean). One Sunday a visitor was sitting near the front and was making quite a racket during the sermon. Malcolm was not sure if he was in pain, facing a medical emergency, or like Legion in the Bible, being controlled by all kinds of evil spirits. He knew he could not continue without addressing this fellow, so he dismounted from the raised pulpit, and came and sat with the fellow and chatted with him until he felt heard and accepted. Not unlike the experience of Jesus with a person before him in today’s reading.

Malcolm then returned to the pulpit, but people then noted an interesting reality – Malcolm returned to the pulpit without his shoes. An audible hush fell over the congregation, and

recognizing that reality he began by acknowledging: “Yes, you now know, I always preach in my sock feet.”

In honour of that tradition, I have brought a new pair of moccasins that will be my footwear for today’s message – their importance will become clear, I hope, later in the sermon.

I hope these moccasins will help me be open to other views, as the painting dedication today reminds us of the need for reconciliation. But the one thing that we all must be sensitive to, I would argue, is people who act on the basis of a little bit of knowledge or insight and think they are qualified to do anything. They can be the most dangerous people we ever meet.

I am not talking about encouraging people to be more than they have ever dreamed. That is a good thing. Encouraging youth from La Loche, Saskatchewan as Marci Ien of CTV and Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri have done by bringing students to Toronto for a jam-packed weekend of learning about personal opportunities and gaining a new vision about what is possible for them. That is worthwhile and exciting.

But we need to be careful about those who have half an idea and think they have the whole answer to life.

Jesus in his first sermon was straight talking and confident. It was more than an attitude of personal commitment and assertion; it was a call to all of us to make sure we have the skills, gifts, and opportunities clear in our lives and know how much is possible when we allow God to be in charge of what we seek. It is easy to be duped by people who present as knowledgeable and capable, but who lack the skills and authority that we seek.

Jesus taught in simple, basic ways that impacted the lives of his listeners. Each gospel writer has preserved something different from that first sermon – the point is: it was memorable.

One of my favourite authors is Robert Fulghum, author of the famous book *All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. That book is funny, insightful, helpful, and of course completely dated in today’s society.

Written so long ago the 25th anniversary edition has been printed, the insights gleaned from that book hardly apply to our increasingly digitalized world. Yet it is still worth the pleasure for anyone who remembers life before computers, cell phones, and debit cards.

In one of his follow up books, *Maybe (or Maybe Not)*, Fulghum offers some insight into how life can be both confusing and helpful. But we are only half a person if we think we can have the answers to life if we do not go through the process of dealing with that which is confusing and helpful.

He begins the book with a discussion of the Hebrew word *timshel*. It is used in the story of Cain before God after the time of the Garden of Eden. It is part of the line that Cain may triumph over evil and have abundant life. Often it is translated “shall” or “will triumph,” but Fulghum quotes a rabbi friend who suggests that the translation is better to be “may,” for the word “may” implies personal decision, pondering and undertaking an action and a way forward. The human reality is defined by “may,” for if we do not have the ability to choose, we are not really human.

Jesus spoke with confidence because he came from a system where the communication was to put people down, and not give them the tools and affirmations to find a way forward. They heard of and experienced a God of judgment and wrath, not hope and goodwill.

In his book *Candles in the Dark*, Todd Outcalt offers a story that becomes the title story for a book of parables and stories from around the world and a variety of religious traditions: (p. 7)

“Some people came to the rabbi, complaining about the presence of evil in the world. They asked the rabbi how they might drive out the darkness. The rabbi gave them brooms, and asked them to sweep out the darkness from the cellar. The pupils tried this, but they were not successful.

So the rabbi gave them sticks, and told them to beat the darkness until it had gone away. Again they tried, and when they failed, the rabbi asked them to try shouting at the darkness. The pupils did this also, but the darkness remained. “Then let us try this,” the rabbi said. “Let each person challenge the darkness by lighting a candle.” The pupils descended into the cellar. Each one lit a candle. When they looked about, they discovered that the darkness had disappeared.”

The parable is a powerful way to put into images the truth of much of our religious challenge in the world. We can seek to destroy other religions, or fight against others’ views. But ultimately we will not destroy those ideas or end those viewpoints, any more than brooms and sticks and loud shouts will change the darkness.

Or, we can offer a light to understand and be open to others’ views, and we all gain in the process. Point taken.

In the traditional adage we have all heard, “Do not judge another person until you have walked a day in his moccasins.”

And so you know why I have these moccasins on for today’s message. Or so you may assume, but that is only half the story.

These moccasins were purchased in Boxing Day sales in Sarnia while I was visiting my younger daughter. She wanted to go to her favourite store in that city: “Cowboys and Indians.” I cringed at the name, but was delighted to enter and see there a variety of wonderful indigenous art and jewellery and crafts, including moccasins. She insisted I needed to get these moccasins. We both picked up items for others, including her sister, but the moccasins remained. When taking her home she said I should have bought those moccasins, they were great and were well made.

So I dropped her off and hurried back to the store to see if the moccasins were there, and if the store was open after 5:00 p.m. Both realities were the case, so I bought them. So I have these moccasins – a way to walk in the realities of indigenous people—and I have helped an indigenous business grow.

But they are more than that. You see, these size 10 moccasins are women’s moccasins. I am not sure my daughter Katharine heard the salesperson when she told us that fact. But I do not mind. No one needs to know they are women’s moccasins. And besides, if we are to walk a mile in another’s shoes, or moccasins, we need to hear their stories and their pain with open hearts.

I learned this week that if I can wear women’s moccasins because they are beautiful, and comfortable, and warm, and useful, then maybe I can stretch even further and hear the pains and concerns of the indigenous people who made these moccasins, and maybe I can stretch even further still to listen to women who express horror at the abuse and heartache and dismissal in their lives in a variety of experiences, amidst numerous cultural and societal experiences.

Jesus could have begun his first sermon speaking of the trauma of life, and the devastation of the world. He had time to engage a person who was struggling in life, because preaching is not just words, but sharing and living meaning and truth.

But Jesus began his ministry, according to Luke's gospel, speaking about the spirit of the Lord being upon him, and by implication being upon us all, and invited us to celebrate that reality, and move forward to a new age where maybe or maybe not we will live lives of healing and hope, but be clear – it is a choice we are invited, yes even urged, to make.