

Being Brought Back Series - "What Did You Say?"

Text(s): Mark 4:1-34

- Pastor Ken Nelson

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 had left you and your golf buddies rolling in laughter practically wiping your eyes leave today's prayer breakfast yawning as they methodically sip 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.*" Now 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 you get a phone call.

Storytelling whether amusing or heartrending, is not an easy thing. It may bring a tear or a smile to one group and another group experiences the same words in a completely different way. Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus chose to speak in parables. Some people find that annoying or unnecessarily confusing, and moreover either 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. Or they become out of date. How many times you been to a website that invited you to some upcoming event that had already happened? You see that and start to 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 it 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, Catherine of Sienna, or John Wesley. Other gospels may not be quite so well-known, but they work just as persuasively in our lives. How many of you know a personal parable story? In your family, there might be one called "*The Gospel According to Grandma who lost two babies during the Great Flu of 1917.*" 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 are in the process of writing a gospel, an account of what you did and what you said, because of what Jesus Christ did and said. You have a story, a parable, whose foundation and inspiration is your personal experience 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, Mark notes that when Jesus spoke to the crowds around him, he "spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables." A parable has the ability to make the Good News of the kingdom a reality for every listening ear and searching heart.

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 the Flat Tire and the New Coat Received For Christmas"*. *"The Parable of the School That Does Nothing About Bullying"*. *"The Parable of the Week the First of 360 SBA Loan Payments Came."* *"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 this week 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. 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, I did my level best to "tell" kids what the famous saying attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, "preach the gospel at all times...if necessary use words" meant. Not even the kids who happened to be listening got it. I took some suckers from my pocket, ones I normally reserve for kids who give correct answers to my questions, and silently handed one to a random 4 or 5. I asked them..."did I just "say" anything"? Most said "no, you were just being kind I guess". As I proceeded with my lesson, I could see a few faces light up, winsome expressions that said "ohhhh...I get it". Not many....just a few.

Because we know the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and the parables of grandma and camp counselor, it may not be so hard to understand stand the ones we tell, or are in. Your final duty, then? Go and live the gospel, whether you fully understand it or not. Listen to Jesus, wrestle 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