

The Chain Saw and the Watering Can

January 28, 2024

Let us pray,
May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
O Holy Spirit of Wisdom. Amen.

Chainsaw words cut down, watering can words make us grow. The lesson about the chainsaw and the watering can came from a very special grade two teacher named Miss Allie. The chainsaw and the watering can challenge us to always be kind and compassionate – even when we have difficult information to share.

Like all great teachers, Miss Allie is going beyond sentence structure and two-digit subtraction. There's a spiritual dimension to her curriculum. She seeks not only to share information, but to inspire her students to use all they learn for the greater good. She is helping to raise citizens of the earth who care for one another.

Compassionate communication benefits everyone because when we strive to be more compassionate, we grow. When we are compassionate to others, it's like a watering can - they grow. It's not just a smart teaching *it's wise*.

The dictionary defines wisdom as knowledge- with good judgement or insight. Possessing knowledge is great. But today, we are going to think about how knowledge can deepen and become something more, something with a spiritual quality that benefits others. We call that *wisdom*.

In our second reading this morning, we hear a passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. He's addressing a controversy they have about what to eat. In that bustling multi-cultural city, a lot of the meat being sold in the markets for lunch has come from animals sacrificed to gods or idols as Paul describes them. The Corinthian Christians could not agree about whether it would be proper for Christians to eat this food.

Paul writes: *Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* Knowledge puffs up - But love builds up. Food sacrificed to idols does not concern us very much here in Saskatoon, but we could use another example such as alcohol. We may have the knowledge that it's fine for Christians to drink alcohol. Jesus turned water into wine- right? But if we're having a Christmas supper, and we have a guest who is struggling with alcohol and we know it's going to bother them we may choose *not* to serve wine.

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Knowledge puffs up- knowledge says – I like wine. Technically Christians are allowed wine, it's too bad if people don't like it. But Love builds up. Love might say, I *know* wine is fine, but at Christmas, it's more important that everyone is comfortable. Let's leave it off the table this time. That might be wise.

This is what Paul is trying to say about the food. Christians only believe in one God – idols have no power, so - *technically* there's nothing wrong with eating meat from other temples. But Paul balances that by saying if by chance that discourages or distresses a new Christian then he would choose not to do it. For Paul, the wellbeing of the struggling person is more important than *knowing* the theological rationale behind the meat. And that is very wise because the whole church will be strengthened more by this small act of kindness, than by creating a new law every time there's a new kind of hot dog. **In this case, wisdom is knowledge informed by love.**

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In psalm 111 today, We have the words,
Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.
Reverence for YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.

This psalm uplifts some of God's characteristics; That God is compassionate, keeps promises, cares about justice, and provides food for us. Reverence for the Lord means humility, honour, and awe for the works of God. And we read that reverence and respect for God is the *beginning* of wisdom. The psalm reminds us that wisdom does not *begin* with the accumulation of knowledge but with humility.

Reverence for something greater than ourselves. Reverence for God is the *beginning* of wisdom, because it invites us to imagine ideas and worlds and possibilities beyond ourselves. Reverence for God opens us up to respect and care for everyone and everything God made – because God cares for them.

Here, we remember that there cannot be wisdom without humility. Like Miss Allie's grade two teaching about the watering can. Wisdom is more than facts and information. It has to do with how we live with everyone else on this earth.

Now that we're on the subject of teachers, Jesus was a teacher. Today's gospel says-
Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.
They were astounded at his teaching,
For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

In this story, when Jesus is in the midst of teaching, a person with an unclean spirit comes in and Jesus deals with the Spirit setting the person free. The scripture goes on to say-
They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another,
"What is this? A new teaching - with authority!

The Oxford Bible Commentary calls this an exorcism. And there are many ways to interpret that because this is a supernatural and spiritual experience - I'd say use your imagination.

Was the man suffering something personal that was causing him pain?
Did the man hold ideas that caused others to suffer?

Is he a symbol that represents everything in the temple that wants to stay the same? The unclean spirit says - "*What have you to do with us,*" Which is an idiom that means something like *mind your own business*.

We can imagine different things that this unclean spirit might be or represent. The unclean spirit miracle is the filling in this gospel sandwich, the bread on the top is that Jesus was teaching. And the bread on the bottom is that Jesus teaching is amazing.

So even though we don't know the details of what Jesus was teaching *about* The gospel writer is trying to express how the teaching impacted everyone in the room- that it was healing and inspiring. For Mark, that is more important than the details. It says Jesus' teaching is *not* like the scribes. Scribes would have a great deal of *knowledge*, knowledge of the law. They could draft legal documents for things like marriage, divorce, loans, and land sales. Jesus also had *knowledge* of the law but brought something more. Jesus' teaching offers a compassionate interpretation of the law. Here, Jesus prioritized the person in greatest need- above the people sitting at the front of the synagogue, the one calling out to him. Jesus' teaching had authority – because it echoed what they already believed about God, That God is compassionate, keeps promises, cares about justice, and provides the things we need.

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This morning, I took an Uber to church. And it was still dark when I walked out to the car, carrying my chainsaw. And the driver looked out at me with very wide eyes. I said, "it's ok, I'm a minister". We got chatting about the chainsaw and the watering can. He said, "We are Christians. They will know us by our love."

Today, as we grow in faith and knowledge, experience and understanding, may we be "watering can people" so that our church and all our lives may reflect the deep wisdom of God's love for all.

Amen.

Rev. Emily Carr