

Instructions Without Words

I) Learning to count was important when I was young, especially in outdoor games like hide-and-seek: “One, two, three . . .” All the way to ten, and then it was; “Ready or not, here I come!” Knowing the sequence of numbers was good, but learning how to add and subtract was another thing! That came, in time, because I had good teachers at home. My mother would make me count things like bricks in the sidewalk, or cars as we drove around. My great aunt had a cylinder with a shiny silver top, filled with what looked like really long toothpicks! What they were, was a multicolored set of “pick up sticks”! Evidently, there were games you could play with these sticks. I never learned. What I did learn was simple addition. Especially counting in groups. “One + one, two + two, and so on.

Life was good as far as math learning went, until I entered second grade. After we returned from our holiday break in January that year, our teacher told us we would learn something new and fun in math class. New, definitely. Fun? I’m not sure how she defined fun, but what happened that day was not fun! Prior to the holiday break, math class always began with each student taking out their textbook, a pad of paper, and two #2 pencils. That first Monday in January, our routine was reshaped by this new, and fun learning.

When it was time for math class to begin, we started to open our desks and get the necessary materials we’d need when the teacher said, “Oh no. No need to get anything out for class. Leave your desks closed, and place your hands folded on top of the desk.” What kind of math would we learn without paper and pencils I wondered? We all sat as instructed, looking around at each other, wondering what lay ahead?

“Today we are going to learn how to do story problems in math,” the teacher said. Story problems? Hmmm . . . The teacher asked us to pay close attention. Captivated by her words, we all stared, waiting. And then she began:

“Ashley collects stamps. She has 36 stamps in her stamp collection book. Uncle Joe gives her another 8 stamps as her Christmas present. How many stamps in total does she have?”

The teacher finished the story problem. There was total silence, as we all just sat and stared towards the front of the classroom! Finally one of the students raised her hand: “She has 44 stamps!” She proceeded to speak the addition problem: (36 in her stamp book + 8 new stamps for Christmas = 44 in all!)

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I was stunned. How could she figure that out so fast? I was still struggling, trying to remember, and keep in place, the numbers of stamps Ashley had before Christmas, plus adding the new stamps she received from her uncle. My head hurt. I tried to “get it”, but just could not figure out a way to do this new math. The teacher went on with a few more story problems, before asking us to take out our math books, and turn to the chapter which introduced this new learning.

Because I walked to my grandmother’s house after school; I was one of the last students to leave the classroom that afternoon. Before heading out, my teacher called me over and said, “I saw how tough it was for you to learn these new story problems in math. Let me help you with some ideas.” She went on to suggest, that when we do story problems in math, I might try closing my eyes and seeing the numbers as they’re spoken in the story. And then, imagine myself writing these numbers down on a pad and seeing the addition problem on the paper- instead of having everything floating around in my head.

When story problems were first introduced, all I had was the sound of the story. It was all so new; could I ultimately figure out how to hear what was being said, and listen for words making the story visible, and making those numbers appear without a pencil and paper? Over time, I was able to conquer this learning block, using the techniques our teacher had suggested. Eventually, I could read a story problem in the book, or listen to it spoken out loud in class, and figure the math problem without any struggles.

Imagine . . . number words, without seeing them written down; where will this go from here?!

Fast forward thirty plus years! I’m heading out to buy a bookcase for my office. Excitedly, I head into this new warehouse store. A shopping concept from Sweden brought to the United States. Great products, great choices, and great, affordable prices. There was one condition making this purchase such a savings: All furniture in this warehouse store comes unassembled. I bought the boxed bookcase pieces whose height fit my office dimensions, loaded it into the back of my car, and brought it to the office. I unpacked everything, moved the cardboard and styrofoam pieces out of my way, and grabbed the plastic bag full of hardware . . . and the

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instructions. I opened the bag, placed the numerous hardware pieces aside, and took the instruction booklet out.

Four pages of instructions. Pictures of pieces of the bookcase, labeled by number to show the sequencing of assembly, with capital letters identifying each piece, and arrows to show the direction in which to face the materials as I'm assembling. I put this instruction booklet down, went over to the pile I'd made separate from the pieces that would become my bookcase, and searched through everything there. I was sure there must be another booklet?!

Sifting and sorting, I finally resolved myself to go back to the one instruction booklet I did have. I called the 800-number listed on the last page and waited. When I finally got someone on the phone, I told them I thought they'd forgotten an additional instruction booklet for this bookcase assembly. They assured me that the one, four-page booklet, was all I'd need. I hung up the phone, looked one more time, and sighed . . .

I was being haunted by my second-grade math nightmare. Only this time, instead of words without visuals, I had entered the world of IKEA: Instructions without words!

II) Jesus, while on earth, had many roles. One in particular was teacher. Perhaps his most familiar method of teaching was the parable. Today's gospel text begins after Jesus has told the initial story of the sower sowing the seeds. It is a familiar parable because it is told in three of the four gospels. This morning, we will focus on what Jesus does and says between telling the story, and explaining the imagery in this parable.

Let's take a moment and look at what we did not hear this morning: Jesus is walking with his disciples and those others who were following. He stops along the shore of a lake. The gospel text tells us there were so many gathered that Jesus took his disciples, and together they got into a boat on the lake, "**and sat there**"! (I have this image of Jesus and his disciples pushing out, anchoring not too far off shore, and then one of his disciples hands him a megaphone!) Then Jesus starts telling this parable about the sower. That's it. No further words. No explanation.

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There's not even a mention of Jesus coming ashore, or moving beyond the crowd to the other side of the lake? All he says is, **'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'**

The way the text is written, Jesus tells the parable to the crowd gathered along the shore, and then without explaining any time lapse; it is later in the day. Jesus with his disciples are now out of the boat, and back on land. Here is where the scripture reading this morning picks up.

They ask about why he uses parables, and he tells them: **"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'**(**MK 4:11-12**)"

Scripture scholars believe these verses have a connection with the Hebrew text from the book of Isaiah. In chapter 6, Isaiah is being called as prophet, answering Yahweh's request to go forth and speak out against the injustices in the land. The Lord tells Isaiah that in his preaching he shall confound those in power with words that they will not understand, and actions they will not see firsthand. Only those who believe in Yahweh's presence will see and understand.

Jesus spent time teaching his disciples about the meanings of parables. He shares the secrets of God's kingdom with his disciples. They hold these mysteries, not as a way to wield power . . . but as a means to help others understand and believe. Parables are stories drawn from everyday life. They contain elements and images of the ordinary, but with meanings open to deeper understanding. Parables do not explain precisely, but use comparisons to point us in a direction that shows us how God works . . . with notable attention to the expression of God's Kingdom. The meanings of parables are never too obvious. They're shared, not to define, but to envision.

Here is where you hope (& believe) those disciples were paying attention when Jesus shared this insight. These were guidelines for helping Jesus' followers understand parables, and better grasp the Kingdom of God. Jesus has offered his disciples as interpreters, if you will, of each parable's true meaning. Jesus in his ministry, along with his disciples, must open the listeners' eyes to see, and unblock their ears so that they might hear!

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- III) I chose this text, for a couple reasons: 1) I wanted to use writing from this gospel, because our coming year's confirmation class was given Mark's gospel as their summer reading assignment. (A little nudge and reminder, if any of our prospective confirmation students, and/or their parents are in the congregation this morning!) And, 2); Jesus' use of parables was one of his more effective teaching tools. The parables became noteworthy in the years of his wandering ministry, and in time, they've become familiar tales of faith for those of us who've grown up hearing them again, and again.

Jesus' teaching ministry was all about offering opportunities to believe in the promise of God's Kingdom. As a former teacher, myself; I appreciate his ways to encourage learning. In the parables . . .

He was

- Straightforward – Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. (**LK 11:23**)

In his words, there was a

- Purpose – . . . To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, . . . (**MK 4:11**)

And, in his teachings, there was always (at least) an

- Illustration - The kingdom of God . . . It is like a mustard seed, . . . (**MK 4:31**)

He offered ways of

- Mindfulness - . . . keep awake-- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, . . . (**MK 13:35**)

Sometimes, his teachings brought about

- Bewilderment – . . . the last will be first, and the first will be last. (**MT 20:16**)

As was his ministry's custom, there was

- Welcoming - when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. (**LK 14:13**)

And, for when he would leave them, he spoke of

- Validation – Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. . . . (**MK 13:31**)

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Jesus may have been the originator of the phrase: “Let go, and let God?” In all his telling of parables, there is never mention of him stopping what he’s doing and saying something that sounds like this: “Sit down! Be quiet! You will listen to what I say, and believe all that you hear!!!” Was this his legacy? I don’t know. Filled with hidden learnings; parables laid out ways in which we might find our pathway to God’s Kingdom.

Jesus often had to share these parables over and over, for some who were present the first time didn’t get it. And, then some who came back a second or third time, still didn’t get it. Maybe the fourth time, they saw and heard what the message truly was? And maybe, even some, didn’t come back or came back a few times but never got it?!

Learning is the central theme in this morning’s sermon. Our teachers are the key helpers to making what we learn become part of everyday experience. Story problems could have delayed progress in learning new math skills, were it not for one person noticing my obvious frustration with that morning’s lesson. Had I not had the insight to call customer service, IKEA would have won . . . and that box of bookcase pieces would have gone back to the warehouse store! And, had the disciples not been curious around Jesus’ use of parables, they would have lost their calling to be guides for those to whom Jesus told these stories.

"He who has eyes to see, let him see, . . . even when all you see are pictures without words to tell you what to do. . . . and he who has ears to hear, let him hear." . . . and pay attention to the story, for what it adds up to is a prize of great worth!