

SERMON

STARTERS

Harriette Cross

June 18, 2006

Mark 4:26-34

Chia pets demonstrate the mystery of the kingdom of God in a great way. You rub a seed mixture onto the head of the pet and you water it. In a few days, you get a growing plant that looks like hair. You don't know why. You never even see when it happens. In life, we have the ability to plant seeds. But growth is God's secret. Jesus tells us the kingdom of God is like . . . planting seeds. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God, he is not talking of a place, but a mindset. The kingdom of God is total trust in the mystery of God. It is being faithful—to something that you will never see and never understand. The kingdom of God is present in a life where we plant the seeds of hope, love, and peace everywhere.

God's dream is not something that can be seen today. That hope is something that we can never completely understand. Yet when it is truly present in the world—everyone will realize it.

Jesus explains that he uses parables in order to help us understand the mystery of God. Ironically he says that not everyone will understand, but he will make it plain to his disciples in private. The good news of the gospel is that what is explained in private becomes common knowledge. The ultimate parable of God is the life of Jesus Christ. This is the parable that we are called to interpret in every language, in every way—so we all can experience the love of God.

June 25, 2006

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

A hero is a man of great courage; a hero is also the central male character in a story. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, it is unlikely that he had either of these definitions of the word in mind. Paul would never have cast himself as the central character of his message. Jesus Christ is always the central character of the good news.

Yet as Paul spoke of his ministry, he may have been thinking of the example of the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah. The suffering servant is the one who endures pain and suffering on behalf of the community. Paul did indeed become a hero of the church. In ministry, Paul endured afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonment, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, and, ultimately, death. Paul defines his life as an example of Christian endurance. Endurance is the ability to bear adversity in such a triumphant way that it transfigures a situation. For Paul, endurance takes the pain of life and turns it into strength and glory. Glory to the power we have available when Jesus is the central character in our lives.

In a world where suffering is seen as something to be avoided, the virtue of suffering is not popular. Yet Paul says that this is an urgent message. In order for us to pass it on, we have to open our hearts, to expand our understanding to not only hear the message but also to live it out.

July 2, 2006

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Can you figure out this riddle? What is bigger than God; the mission of the devil; the rich need it desperately; and the poor have plenty of it? Key question—what is bigger than God? Nothing is bigger than God. The poor may have plenty of nothing, but sometimes they know how to make the best use of it. That was the message that Paul was trying to get across to the Corinthians. His mission was to ask the Gentile churches to raise money for the poor of Jerusalem. Only one church, the Macedonians, gave to meet the need. This church understood poverty well. They gave out of abundance of concern and love.

The underlying message to all churches is that sometimes those who might be rich in resources are sometimes spiritually poor. And those who are poor in resources are sometimes rich in generosity. Paul

tells the Corinthians that they indeed excel in every other way. They should also excel in generosity.

Christ is our ultimate example of generosity. Before he came to earth and went to the cross, he gave of himself. He loved us enough to bring his presence to earth to make a difference in our lives. Christians are called to do the same.

Generosity is not just about giving of your resources—it is about giving of yourself. It is about giving willingly from your heart. Generosity is where resources meet the needs of the receiver.

Paul's final word for us is a reminder that generosity is the great equalizer of life. Paul quotes Exodus 16:18—the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.

July 9, 2006

Mark 6:1-13

When Jesus sends the disciples out, he gives them three words of advice: travel together, trust God, and travel light.

Jesus wanted the disciples to understand that to enter into the life of a community was to enter into sacred space. Just as one would purify himself or herself when entering into the presence of God, we enter into the lives of God's people open and vulnerable. Faith is a journey that is never really complete. We are never comfortable; we are never totally reliant on ourselves.

In those days when one traveled it was the sole responsibility of the host to give hospitality. Jesus gives his disciples another interesting piece of advice. He tells them that if they don't get that hospitality, they should shake the dust from their feet. For a Jew that was the ultimate insult. It meant that when you left that place, you forgot all about those people. Would God really do that to us? Would God really exclude us from the promise of salvation? We are the modern-day disciples bringing God's message of love and mercy to the



Graduate Theological Foundation

...fostering a personally tailored course of study at the institutions of your choice...

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)
in Theological Studies

Specialization in Methodist Studies at Oxford

Options for study
Course-based Program
Research-based doctorates
at Oxford

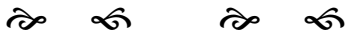
Short-term residencies in Oxford
are available to Foundation
students

*The Foundation maintains affiliation
with the Oxford University Summer
Programme in Theology.*

Available scholarships include

John and Charles Wesley
Scholarship in Methodist Studies

Friedrich Schleiermacher Scholarship
in Protestant Theology



A full 2006 Program Bulletin may
be viewed on the web site at
www.gtfeducation.org

*For further information,
please contact*

Graduate Theological Foundation
The Tower Building, Ste. 300
218 West Washington Street
South Bend, Indiana 46601
1-800-423-5983
information@gtfeducation.org

*The GTF maintains affiliation
with the Wesley Centre, Oxford.*

world. When a traveler, weary from the troubles of life, enters our church looking for hope, how do we extend hospitality? When we don't go out of our way to make a traveler feel welcome, have we not indeed excluded them—and shaken the dust from our feet?

July 16, 2006

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19

David seemed to have an interesting relationship with God. No matter what was happening in his life, he always acknowledged the presence of God. Bringing the ark of covenant to the city of Jerusalem was a very big milestone for him. This now meant that Jerusalem is not only the center of David's rule but also is the center of God's rule. The ark was believed to contain an actual presence—God resided in the ark.

When David sees that Uzzah is killed for touching the ark, he is hesitant and afraid. But then he sees the house of Obed-edom prosper he is encouraged to bring the ark to the city of his rule. The presence of God is always the source of both promise and danger.

David marks the celebration through a very exuberant dance. His wife complains and says it is not appropriate. But this is more than joyous celebration. This is a special honor to God. How do you acknowledge the presence of God in your life? When you know God is with you, what do you do? When you hear the Word of God in your life, and everyone else is telling you that there is absolutely nothing to celebrate, how do you respond? God loves to see us dance with our lives.

If our hearts are truly moved by the presence of God, then our bodies, lips, and lives should move also. Some of us dance, some of us speak, and others act. Whatever we do, it is always a response to God.

July 23, 2006

Ephesians 2:11-22

If the world ever needed to have a sense of peace, we need it more than ever today. The news is full of stories of our struggles to understand one another. There is always tension. In Ephesians, this tension existed between Jewish Christians, who

felt that it was necessary to be circumcised, and Gentile Christians, who were told that was not necessary. It seems that every society builds walls to protect our selves, our beliefs, and our ways of life. But who do we include inside that wall, and who do we consider outsiders?

How far do we take peace? Does Christ call us to be in unity with those outside of the church? Does Christ call us to be in unity with those of other faiths and beliefs?

Paul reminds us that before Christ, we were all aliens and strangers. But through Christ we are all citizens, saints, members of the household of God. Through Christ we were called to break down those old walls and to come together. Paul says that unity is not in our ability to agree, but in Christ's love for us. It is Christ who gives us peace. In Christ there is not either/or, there is always both /and.

When God builds a structure, the foundation is Scripture, Christ is the cornerstone, Christians are the building blocks, and the Holy Spirit is the mortar to hold it all together. The church is intended to be God's model of unity. Christ becomes the meeting place for a divided humanity.

July 30, 2006

John 6:1-21

When I was a child, one of my biggest fears was that someone would steal my lunch money. With no money for lunch, I would have to go hungry all day. In this story, Jesus takes a little boy's lunch and uses it to feed a whole crowd. For John, Jesus is the bread of life. As the crowd gathered to hear his words, Jesus feels responsible not only for the hunger in their souls but also in their physical bodies. Many of these people were living at the point of basic survival. Many of them sacrificed a whole day's pay just to come and listen. The disciples ponder the situation. Philip, a penny-pincher says that there is no way to afford to help them. Andrew scours the crowd in search of an answer. He finds a little boy who obviously had been fed spiritually from the experience. He was willing to share the lunch that had been provided for him in order to help others.

Jesus uses this small gift to feed the people far beyond anything that they ever

expected. When they have their fill, there are twelve baskets of leftovers. What happened to that food? Was it redistributed to others in need? There was such a need for people to be fed, that is probably why the food was collected in baskets. When God provides for us in abundance, what do we do with the leftovers? How do we make use of the things that we are given?

August 6, 2006

Psalm 51:1-12; 2 Samuel 11:26—12:13a

Politics is full of scandal. There is always some story of misconduct from leaders in the news. We love to look at the personal shortcomings of our leaders and hold it against them; many of these public figures never overcome these stories. Life has not changed much—2 Samuel contains the story of scandal of David as a political figure. In many ways, neither David nor his descendants were able to live down those scandals.

And yet, David's response to his shortcomings was different than the leaders of today. Psalm 51 is thought of as David's request to God for forgiveness. Today, a

politician might hire a "spin doctor" to soften the story. Today's leaders, as a rule, don't admit guilt

In Psalm 51, the writer admits guilt and acknowledges the consequences of his actions. He realizes that the road ahead to repentance will not be easy. Yet his request is for God to walk with him. He wants to be cleansed and renewed so that he can return to a relationship with God. He acknowledges that through forgiveness God maintains that relationship and restores joy.

If God's grace was enough to cleanse David of his sin, will it be the same for us and our sins? If we are willing and able to admit our misgivings and ask for forgiveness, God's grace is always present. □



Harriette Cross is associate pastor of Our Saviour's United Methodist Church in Schaumburg, Illinois.

Sunday School



it's for life!

Want to show support for your Sunday School program?

Need ideas and suggestions?

Want short articles for your church newsletter?

Help is just a website away at www.sundayschool.cokesbury.com

CORRECTION

On page 30 in Sermon Starters (March/April), the first word should be Philip (not Peter). *Circuit Rider* regrets the error.

**E P W O R T H
I N S T I T U T E**

To be held at:

Oakwood Retreat and Conference Center in Indiana

July 9-14, 2006

- † Study
- † Worship
- † Fellowship
- † Recreation



Bouknight



Colyer



Maddox



Swanson

The Epworth Institute is a unique opportunity for study for United Methodist clergy. Our emphasis is on young clergy under age 45 with two years full-time ministry under appointment, but all clergy are welcomed to the Institute. Classes are conducted by three highly acclaimed leaders in the United Methodist Church: **Dr. William R. Bouknight, Dr. Elmer M. Colyer and Dr. Randy L. Maddox.** **Bishop James E. Swanson, Sr.** will be preaching at the worship services. Participants receive three Continuing Education Units.

For more information or to register: call (317) 356-9729, visit our website, www.confessingumc.org, or write to: The Confessing Movement, 7995 East 21st Street, Indianapolis, IN 46219.