

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

13.06.2021
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Introduction

In this passage, Jesus teaches the disciples the importance of understanding an audience and its context when communicating a message. When speaking about the Kingdom of God, Jesus used stories to which the crowds could easily relate. When it came to the disciples however, Jesus communicated differently. Having travelled with him and listened to the parables he told to others, they had a different base of experience and knowledge. Jesus wanted them to learn how to interpret the concept of the Kingdom of God for others, in stories and language appropriate to their own contexts.

In this reflection, we'll explore how storytelling can enrich communication; how it can contribute to restorative justice practices; and how it has the potential to create equity among people by giving voice to their experience.

Text

Mark 4:26-34

The Parable of the Growing Seed

He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

The Use of Parables

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Comment

Jesus was a master storyteller. No matter where he was, people gathered to listen to him and I imagine they had some fascinating discussions amongst themselves afterwards. He showed great awareness of his audience and understanding of their cultural context. The crowds recognised the references in the parables from their own lived experience, so they were drawn into his teaching about the Kingdom of God without feeling inadequate or unable to engage. Jesus used broad brush strokes in the way he told the parables, which allowed each individual to contribute to the narrative they heard by filling in the details from their own unique perspective.

Stories can be incredibly powerful. They can make us feel seen. They can restore relationships. They can change the world. Stories allow us to suspend our disbelief and indulge in fantasy and trips of the imagination. I rediscovered *Aesop's Fables* recently- a book which I loved as a child. The moral of each story provided a life lesson which I have relied upon ever since. Reading these tales did not feel like learning, yet I was aware that I thought about them long after I closed the pages. The skill was in the storytelling.

From the moment we begin to speak, we are encouraged to expand our vocabularies and learn to grasp complex grammatical rules (and their exceptions). However, the emphasis is often on how we construct what we want to say rather than how to communicate effectively with others. In these parables, Jesus demonstrates the importance of trying to understand the impact of our words, and how they might be heard and understood by the listener.

In reconciliation work, such understanding is crucial. Restorative justice practices facilitate all parties to a conflict or crime telling their story and listening to that of the other. Restorative justice can help individuals provide a wider context to their words and actions, and better understand the full impact of their behaviour on others. The Restorative Justice Council states that this practice can enable 'individuals and groups to work together to improve their mutual understanding of an issue and jointly reach the best available solution'. Being empowered to both speak and listen creates equality between the parties, providing the opportunity for truth to be spoken in challenging circumstances.

The way in which we tell stories, both individual and collective, can be transformative. Within our storytelling, we can acknowledge difference or we can deny it. By adapting the parables to their audience, Jesus draws attention to the fact that, although the central message remains the same, the delivery and the context will influence its impact. During the COVID-19 pandemic, daily life has been almost unrecognisable for most of us. The words 'we're all in the same boat' are often passed around. The phrase may well have offered you comfort, but I felt that it denied my difficult experience. An expression which did resonate with me was: 'We're not in the same boat, but we're all in the same storm'. Whilst we have all been navigating these strange times, their impact on each of us has differed enormously depending on our wealth, employment, access to technology; the state of our mental health; and whether or not our homes are a place of safety. The reframing of the phrase allowed collective solidarity to be expressed, whilst still acknowledging the uniqueness of individual experiences. We understand and react to storytelling from a foundation of experience and this is just as true of the parables.

Stories can be powerful; a skilled storyteller even more so. Jesus used stories to make his message accessible to the crowds and he formulated them with great care and attention, taking into account the cultural and social context. Stories have the potential to reconcile the broken, recognise those who feel alone and remind us of our interconnectedness. What will your story be today?

Response

If you are feeling creative, rewrite the parable of the mustard seed in a contemporary manner.

Think about a story which has had a particular impact on your life. What made the story meaningful to you?

Imagine you are telling your life story to a) your partner and b) someone you've just met at a seminar. How would your editing and communication differ?

Prayer

Lord, you are the supreme storyteller.
You spoke the world into existence.
You spoke to the prophets and judges and kings
so that your word could be shared throughout the earth.
You spoke to the crowds and the lonely and the forgotten.
You spoke the words, "It is finished"..
You spoke peace to disciples in a locked room.
You spoke in the tongues of many on the day of Pentecost.

Speak to me now, O Lord.
Comfort me with a story,
my favourite story in familiar words,
our story,
the greatest story of belonging, acceptance and eternal love.

Amen.

Further Reading

[Restorative Justice Council](#)