

August 19, 2018

I Samuel 15: 34-16: 1; Mark 4: 26-29

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your Word. Help us see it fresh and alive. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

One Red Paper Clip

Everything old is new again.

A few years back, a young Canadian named Kyle MacDonald sat at his desk one day, pondering a bent red paper clip. He wanted to do something radical, something crazy, something awe-inspiring.

He set an audacious goal – to trade that paper clip ... for a house. He created a web site and offered to bring the clip to whoever offered him an enticing upgrade.

Two women in Vancouver offered a wooden fish pen. So he traveled to Vancouver and traded his paper clip for their pen. Then he posted the fish pen for a trade.

The taker was a ceramic sculptor in Seattle, Washington, who offered a ceramic doorknob that looked like a scrunched up E.T. face. Kyle loaded his extended family into a van and traveled to Seattle to make the trade.

It was at this early point on his website trail – thinking about how much that drive to Seattle must have cost – that I realized Kyle's One Red Paperclip Project was not about money. It was about a dream.

Kyle took the ugly doorknob home, used it on a cabinet awhile, and posted it for trade. His next taker was a man in Massachusetts who offered to trade it for a Coleman stove. So off to Massachusetts Kyle went.

The trades continued, with Kyle blogging all the way: He traded the Coleman stove for a red generator. He traded the red generator for an instant party, complete with neon Budweiser sign and a keg of beer. He traded the instant party for a snowmobile.

The snowmobile came from a man in Canada who had his own radio show. So radio and TV crews began showing up. Kyle went on a national Canadian TV show, and the host asked if there was anywhere he wouldn't go for a trade.

“Yes,” Kyle replied. “Yahk (yock) in British Columbia.”

So naturally the next trade became an all-expenses-paid trip to Yahk, British Columbia. Which Kyle traded for a moving van, which he traded for a recording contract.

The young lady who wanted the recording contract traded away her duplex in Phoenix, Arizona, with rent paid up for an entire year.

That was a house, sort of. Temporarily. But Kyle's goal was a permanent house.

Well, it just so happened that the tenant on the other side of the duplex decided she'd love a year's free rent in the place she was already living. This young lady worked at the restaurant, Alice Cooperstown, which meant her boss was rock star Alice Cooper – he of the stringy black hair and ghoulish makeup.

Alice Cooper agreed to spend an afternoon with a fan in exchange for the rent for his employee. Kyle joined Alice Cooper on stage at a concert in Fargo, North Dakota, to present him with a gigantic red paper clip as a thank you. In return, Alice Cooper drenched him in blood. That's just what Alice Cooper does. No extra charge.

But Kyle, of course, didn't get the entire afternoon with Alice Cooper. He traded that for a snow globe. Not just any snow globe. A motorized, lighted snow globe with the band KISS on it.

Now that might not sound like much of a trade. Kyle's comment section lit up: "What kind of idiot are you?"

But fortunately, actor Corbin Bernsen – whom you may remember from "LA Law" -- is an avid snow globe collector. He wanted the KISS globe and was willing to trade for a paid part in his next movie, "Donna on Demand." I know that sounds like porn, but it wasn't.

Well, it seems as if the good folks of Kipling, Saskatchewan, had always wanted to be in a movie. So they offered Kyle a house on Main Street Kipling in return for the movie role. They held auditions and sent one of their own to be in the movie.

So Kyle and his wife moved into the house on Main Street Kipling. The Kipling residents held a huge welcome party and made him honorary mayor for a day.

He had quite literally traded a red paper clip up and down and occasionally sideways – for a house.

Everything old is new again. I suppose bartering has been around since the first cave man traded a mastodon skin for flint. But Kyle's experiment translates the ancient practice in a way made possible only by 21st century Internet technology.

Kyle's story has stayed alive through an international TED talk. I've mulled over it for years because I've always thought it was one of the most innovative things I've ever heard.

But Kyle is young and obviously "out there." I didn't really think it had a lot to do with Triune.

But then I read a story I found even more astounding. St. Mary's Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, cancelled all its adult education classes and midweek services. Pastor Lee Anne Watkins said they just weren't working. People weren't coming.

She told about how they had tried for years, switching classes from morning to afternoon to evening, offering Bible studies and theme studies and book studies, offering seminary-trained teachers and lay teachers, offering videos and multimedia presentations, switching locations from the church to homes to coffee shops to bars.

They tried quiet mid-week services and loud contemporary ones. They changed days, they changed times, they had varying lengths, they had varying topics.

And all she felt the church accomplished was to build her resentment toward people who didn't come. So she cancelled them.

The thing was: The church was growing. Parishioners were active in sharing dinners and social events. Even better, they were active in social issues – volunteering at the local elementary school, working for gay civil rights, serving meals at their local Triune.

What this Minnesota church finally concluded was that the old way of doing church wasn't working for it anymore.

I was mesmerized by St. Mary's experiment because it's the same thing I struggled with for years. Shouldn't we have more Sunday school classes, Bible studies, children's nursery, children's Sunday school, Wednesday night church? Shouldn't we have what other churches have? Shouldn't we do what other churches do?

In the past few weeks we have looked at some Old Testament stories from the time of Israel's first kings. Today's reading is a little transitional segment in which it was time for a change. The old way wasn't working. It was time to try something new.

If you'd like to read along, turn in your Bibles to **I Samuel 15: 34 - 16: 1**.

34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. 35 Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

16The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.'

King Saul started out as a mighty warrior king, eager to follow the Lord. But then Saul rejected the prophet Samuel because he wasn't saying what the king wished to hear.

Saul began to hoard the spoils of war in ways the Lord had expressly forbid. His disobedience had repercussions in his personal life. He grew depressed and fearful.

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: **“And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.”**

Samuel mourned Saul's downfall. He remembered what a great man Saul had been. He remembered when the kingdom was working. But now, according to God himself, it was not.

And so God told Samuel it was time to put aside his mourning for the old ways. God was ready to do a new thing.

Where God is concerned, there is always a new thing. St. Mary's realized that. Clinging to old educational programs that no one was attending was a needless waste of energy. They had the courage to look at new ways of imagining church.

Clinging to old ways can be true of churches. And it can be true of individuals. How many of us cling to a job that has turned toxic or a relationship that has turned abusive?

We can mourn the past and fear the future. Churches do that every day and die slow, painful, lingering deaths.

People do that every day and suffer slow, painful, lingering lives.

We can do that. Or we can listen for a new direction from our God.

Because there just might be something better than we could possibly imagine.

Kyle MacDonald performed a TED talk years after his paper clip experiment. And he admitted there really wasn't much on his mind besides sitting at his desk one day and pondering a bent red paper clip. He could never have envisioned the experiences he would have on his journey.

For instance, at the point he was seeking to trade the red generator, he stored it in the basement of his hotel in New York City. A hotel employee smelled gas. He called firefighters, who confiscated the generator.

Kyle didn't find out until days later and hunted all over the city to reclaim it. When he found it, he spent time with the firemen of Ladder 20 – and their Dalmatian.

In North Dakota, he sure didn't plan to appear on stage with Alice Cooper. Now he doesn't plan to wash the shirt that is smeared with blood or paint or whatever it was the singer doused him with.

And he wasn't expecting the world's largest housewarming party from the people of Kipling, Saskatchewan. But that's what he got when he and his wife moved into their house.

How could one ever plan for such things? How could we ever imagine what God can imagine?

It's kind of like imagining the kingdom of God. When the gospel writer Mark began his story of Jesus, he was straightforward about its content: **“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near....’ ”** (1: 14-15)

So people asked Jesus all the time, *What is the kingdom of God? What is it like?* And he answered with ordinary stories about things they knew. He answered with parables.

A parable made a good teaching tool. It took something the hearer knew – like seeds growing – and compared it to something he didn't know – like the kingdom of God. The listener could then imagine something of the kingdom because of something he already understood – the mysterious nature of agriculture.

And so we have this brief little parable in Mark's gospel. If you'd like to read along, it's from **Mark 4: 26-29**:

26 (Jesus) also said, ²⁸'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and 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. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

Besides being familiar to its hearers, a parable was often about ordinary things. Thus, it allowed listeners to realize that the kingdom of God sometimes comes in ordinary ways.

For people in the first century, that looked like agriculture. For people in the 21st century, that may look quite different. It may look like ... a red paper clip.

“The kingdom of God,” said Jesus, **“is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.”**

This parable deals with the all-powerful nature of God to bring in his kingdom. No adult education program, no mid-week service, no action on our part is going to bring it in.

The farmer in the parable sleeps and rises while the seed mysteriously sprouts and grows. And the farmer sleeps, and the farmer rises.

And yet the kingdom doesn't come completely without the efforts of the farmer, does it? He scatters the seed. **And “when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”**

The farmer participates. We participate. We scatter that seed in a hundred ways, maybe through JustFaith or Triune Circles or sitting at worship beside someone we'd never have an opportunity to meet otherwise.

But only God controls when and where and if and how the kingdom arrives.

I find this wonderfully liberating. Because I've never been sure if I didn't insist on Wednesday night services because no one would come, or because I'd rather go to the Reedy River Concert Series on Wednesday nights.

Because were I to write a parable, it would be: “The kingdom of God is as if someone built a stage beside a river and played reggae music and invited everyone to come for free.”

In my defense, we are not responsible for bringing in the kingdom of God. We are told to be witnesses to Jesus Christ – to scatter the seed – but it will grow and sprout, we know not how.

That gives us tremendous liberation, tremendous freedom. Freedom to be as daring and different as we want. Freedom to jettison things that not working. Freedom to try wild and crazy things that may speak to people in ways standard church doesn't.

We've tried many things that failed – a Saturday morning Bible study, a book club, a children's ministry using building blocks, storytelling, children's drama.

But many things have worked – the art room, varied musical styles, Playback Café, drama for sexual trauma victims, JustFaith, NA and AA, healthcare, vision care, legal aid.

Whether certain things work or don't isn't really the point. The point is to not allow ourselves to get stuck in outdated, outmoded, boring models of ministry that aren't working.

The point is to not allow ourselves to get stuck in outdated, outmoded, boring models of life that aren't working.

For the God we serve is a creator God, endlessly creating, endlessly re-creating. Let us embrace the energy and excitement.

Amen.