

Sermon Reflections 14 June 2009

Look with the heart

I Samuel 16: 1-13 and Mark 4:26-34

Kirkland Congregational Church United Church of Christ

by Tod Gobledale

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

First day of school and I am anxious. No, I am not five years old, off to kindergarten, but rather I am on this side of forty-five, venturing off to my first day of teaching in an Australian seminary, my first afternoon of teaching preaching. Now I am at morning tea with my teaching colleagues.

Fiona, the seminary registrar, sits beside me. Tea in one hand and a bicky in the other. Know what a bicky is in Australia? [a cookie, short for biscuit]. Theresa grins and says, "Graham Foster is in your class."

Her tone conveys doom. I feel my colleagues eyes upon me.

Tod and I are new arrivals to the Churches of Christ Theological College. So for the life of me, I cannot connect a face to the name, "Graham Foster."

Fiona continues. "Graham comes from a broken home. He runs feral." Feral...a word common to Australians...translates as "wild" like a tasmanian devil. Fiona continues, "Graham has been the terror of the Belgrave Church Youth group."

Feral...terror...my imagination is putting horns and a tail on this guy. "So, what is this Graham like?" I ask.

"Graham, hmmm... let's start with headstrong, stubborn, argumentative. He challenges all authority. He questions everything and everybody. I reckon, given his home situation, that he has grown up trusting no one. Graham is very bright, but he lives perched on society's edge."

My nearby colleagues share looks of pity and sympathy.

My friend Anne, touches my arm and commiserates, "Graham is a live wire, dear. You need to be well prepared for That One." She promises to point him out at lunch.

OH-MY-GOSH! As if I am not anxious enough already as I prepare for this firstday of class. Now I have a devil for a student!

After tea time, I put Graham out of my mind, and review my notes for today's class. First class. -- focus on preaching basics: personal hygiene and appearance in the pulpit, appropriate dress, and other fundamentals – sharing a couple preaching bloopers to get folks laughing.

Lunch time arrives. Off to the dining room where I join my colleague, Anne, in the queue. She glances around the dining room, then says in a hushed tone, "That's him! That is Graham Foster."

I follow her gaze. "Graham is the one in the center," she says.

A munchkin of a guy, about 20 years old, holds his mates spellbound. His loud,

nasal, Aussie accent carries across the room. I take in his clothes, starting with his feet and working my way up.

Feet in battered sneakers with no socks. Khaki pants torn off *below* the knee. Long shorts, short longs? A plaid shirt transformed by ripping the sleeves off at the shoulders. On this warm day, the unbuttoned shirt falls open on his chest. His sandy-red hair hangs long and lank below his shoulders. And speaking of shoulders, starting there, rippling down the muscular length of both arms...deep blue tatoos.

Above the neck... piercings! A pencil can pass through the hole, held open by a metal tube, in Graham's right ear. And a silver ring pierces one eyebrow.

Picture him...a likely candidate for any biker's bar. What is he doing here at seminary, I wonder? And in my preaching class!

As many of you know, I run a fairly tight ship, or try to. In the seminary dining room just before my first preaching class, I am thinking... that Graham may be a loose cannon rolling across my decks. This could be a long semester.

But let's leave Australia for a moment.

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God?” asks Jesus. --- to a a mustard seed, a tiny grain. From that smallest, unconvincing of beginnings grows a large plant able to shade bird's nests with its far-reaching branches. So God's kingdom comes from surprising, seemingly insignificant sources.

The prophet Samuel, directed by God, heads to Jesse's house to name a king to succeed King Saul. Jesse's sons pass before Samuel. First the eldest, tall and handsome. And Samuel thinks... YES! Samuel thinks: “This is God's chosen one!” But God says... “No... I have rejected this one. I do not see as mortals see. People look on the outward appearance; I look on the heart,” explains God.

Each of Jesse's seven sons passes before Samuel. And of each God says.... “No.” Finally, an exasperated Samuel asks Jesse, “Is this all?” Jesse confesses: “There is one more, the youngest, out tending the sheep. What could you possibly want with the runt of the litter?”

So the youngest is sent for. And when he appears, God says to Samuel... “Yes, this is the one...this boy named....David...This is the one I choose to be King.”

We know the lesson of this familiar story: do not judge a book by its cover. Our children's message emphasized the point: things are not always what they seem. Our bulletin's reflection quotes one of Tod's favourite books, “The Little Prince,” ...*the eyes are blind. One must look with the heart.*

Back in Australia... You may have already guessed where I am going with the story of Graham Foster. But let me fill in some of the details. In appearances, Graham and I are as opposite as two people possibly can be. Graham is in-your-face-and-making-a-statement with his ragged clothes, his tattoos and his piercings. I am prim, proper and, surely in his eyes, prissy. Can you imagine me with a tattoo? What image would it be? What words would it say? Where would it be?

We head to preaching class, where I ask each student to share why she or he is taking preaching. Graham's turn comes. His thick, Australian accent rolls out, "Because I have to in order to graduate. And I have to graduate to teach. You will never see me working in a church, and for sure never preaching!"

"Great!" I think. "He does not even want to be in this class."

And we come to the other section of our Gospel reading. Mark writes that seeds are sown by the farmer. Then, day and night, in the mystery of the earth's depths, the seeds grow. How did our hymn put it, "first the blade and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear." How do the seeds grow? What unleashes the DNA in a seed to produce a mustard plant, or an ear of corn, or a giant redwood tree, or the people we love, or you, or me?

Most days, the world looks, to me, to be a pretty messed up place. The efforts to straighten the planet out seem herculean. I think, people will never do it. In this parable from Jesus, we are reassured, God's kingdom is unfolding. Whether we can see the fruits of our efforts or not, still God's kingdom is unfolding and coming. God's hand is at work in the world, too. We are not alone. Whether our efforts seem to come to fruition or not, matters not. God is still at work. God is still speaking. Have we the ears to hear? Have we the eyes to see? That is the hope of our faith as revealed through the love of Jesus.

Things are not always as they appear or seem.

Yes, Graham Foster and I are as different as chalk and cheese, as the Aussies like to say. But we both have faith. We both love the church. And we both believe God can use us.

Some mysterious force in Graham's life has lifted him from the trials, tribulations and dramas of growing up in a difficult home situation. That force has delivered him to the place where he feels called to be: studying to become a teacher. Graham sits in my preaching class, and true to Fiona's description, he questions everything. He announces he will get up and walk out of class if and when he becomes bored.

Well...Graham never walks out of my class. His incandescent interest ignites the rest of the class. He has all of us reaching beyond ourselves to produce our best. Graham's first sermon holds us spellbound.... Unlikely looking Graham Foster.. stands top of the preaching class, my finest and favourite student. So grows a mustard seed, surprising us all.

At the end of the term, Graham approaches me in a conspiratorial attitude, "Ana," he says, "My goal had been to teach at the university. Now I am thinking that I love to preach, and parish ministry is for me." I am happy to report to you that today Graham Foster, with his tattoos and piercings, is serving his church, the Churches of Christ in Australia, and serving his God.

The kingdom of God is as if a sower would scatter seed on the ground...

Let us pray.

God, your ways continue to surprise and delight us. Forgive us our prejudices. Forgive us when we judge others by their looks, their fashion, their accents. Remind us to look not with our eyes but with our heart, to see what lies beneath the outer layer. And help us ever work on our inner being, rather than spend so much time and energy on our outward appearances. Forgive us the energy and resources we expend to impress others. Strengthen all of us to continue walking with Christ into your kingdom, into your realm. Amen.