

Sermon ~ October 18, 2020

The Gravely Thread

Old Testament Scripture

Psalm 99

Gospel Reading

John 9:1-41

Being from a small town, I had never heard of a gravely tractor but when I took an appointment in South Eastern Ohio the church neighbor was a gravely tractor dealer, so I learned quickly about them.

Gravely is a garden tractor, which can be used in a variety of way including mowing the lawn or pushing snow. To those who possess one, they were larger than life, back in the mid-20th century before the market became flooded with other brands. They could work all day and not tire. The Guinness Book of World Records reports that a Gravely garden tractor was once driven from Cleveland Ohio to New York City. Roy, the church neighbor, claimed to know of one which was dropped from a second-story barn roof and was still running years later.

Once upon a time, according to John Vannorsdall, in Pennsylvania a young man came into possession of a Gravely tractor – already ancient – and wanted first to sharpen the rotary blades. So, he turned up the bonnet to expose the blades on the spindle, and made his calculation: Clockwise tighten, counterclockwise to loosen. The wrench was applied but the nut would not budge. Penetrating oil, tap it with a hammer, it would not budge. So the whole bonnet was removed and taken to a mechanic, who repeated this whole process.

After some time and using all the methods they knew, the two men leaned disgusted and warily against the workbench. Finally the mechanic said, “What year is this gravely?” “About 1950” came the response. “The Gravely Thread!” the mechanic said, “For a few years, they put a reverse thread on this spindle.” And without another word he drilled the nut and slit it and threw it away. There was nothing else to do.

They had spent the whole day tightening what they had hoped to loosen. They had done the normal thing, the right thing, the accepted thing—clockwise to tighten—counterclockwise to loosen, you know “lefty loosely ---righty tightly”. But this was a gravely thread, the reverse thread, and it worked contrary to conventional wisdom.

So, I'd invite you to have some sympathy for the Pharisees in the scripture which are part of the miracle story we shared today. It's a rule of thumb to be depended upon, that nuts are loosened by turning counter clockwise, just as much as it was common knowledge that sin was the cause of blindness, that making clay and healing on the Sabbath was wrong, and that blind men and Sabbath breakers were an offence to God. These religious leaders were sincere and were trying their best to do what was right and proper. To uphold the law was their goal.

I would invite you to have some sympathy for ourselves as well, for we too are confronted with gravely threads and we know how things should go and yet there are the truths which run counter to what is our accepted common knowledge. And there is such great pain in having to be drilled and split.

At the end of the story of the blind man, Jesus concludes in this way: For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see (who make no pretense of seeing) may see, and those who see (who are so sure) may become blind." And some of the Pharisees near him heard this and they said to him. "Are we also blind?" "If you were really blind, you would have not guilt: but now that you say 'We see', Your guilt remains."

And that is the biblical teaching. There are the strong, the Pharisees who see very well, those of us who know that a nut is to be tightened clockwise, those of us who are so sure our understanding of the world and what God wants--- we are the one who fasten a pipe to the wrench to give us greater leverage --who find it difficult to imagine a gravely thread—that life or actions needed might be reversed from the way we have always imagined it. We are the sighted who are made blind in judgment, who must be drilled and split if the human family is to emerge in fullness. All of us who are so sure so confident that we lack prejudice, it is to us that there falls the judgement of the gravely thread.

The church has had to confront many gravel treads within its own history and sometimes responded with denial, sometimes it chose to lead the charge into a new day. Sometimes it had to be split and thrown away.

A poem which James Russell Lowell set to music called "Once to every man and Nation" which was written in response to the United States war with Mexico in the 1840s says it well: "New occasions, teach new duties, Time makes ancient truths seem uncouth: they must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth."

People often approach the Bible from their own cultural framework and find what they want to see ---rather than the transforming message taught by one called the Jesus.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Judge Taylor says "people generally see what they look for and hear what they listen for."

There was a time that the divine right of kings supported the rulers of Europe for many centuries. In Germany when the Holocaust was legal the people who hid Jews were criminals. In our own country there was a time when slavery was legal and people who freed slaves were criminals. Later segregation was legal and people who stood up for equality were criminals. Cultural patriarchal structures have had to be rethought and voting rights for many had to be reconsidered including rights for women.

Legality was a matter of power but government laws, social customs and even religious norms are not always a guide to human decency or morals. Yet in everyone of these instances people looked to scripture to support their point of view or enforce their beliefs on others. It is in the teachings of Jesus that they were challenged and found to be apart from God's kingdom.

Only later do we recognize that what they saw was not there, or that when the lessons take seriously the culture of that day, it was not the same as what Jesus the Christ was calling us to do in our day.

Within Biblical history and the culture of Jesus day slavery was accepted. It is only in the teachings of Jesus that it is to be challenged and found to be apart from God's Kingdom. Loving became the new truth but it was and is a struggle.

The role of women in leadership had to be reexamined in light of the teachings of Jesus even though the scriptures were set in a culture where men had control. It was only in the 1950s that any serious progress was made so that women would have roles in the church which had been denied for so long based on some questionable brief passages from a new Testament letter.

Or consider marriage— We often turn in the Hebrew scripture one statement from an early creation story to bless our marriages, and yet the Hebrew scriptures were laden with eight forms of marriage, none of which relied on mutual choice or feelings, but all of them rested on ownership. And what do we do with all those concubines? Oops! - Descriptions of love are to be found in Paul but where is marriage defined? We Pharisees know how to define marriage but the uncertainty of the thread is among us. Yet, often we live among those who know the absolute will of God on these matters.

But what about us personally. Don't we do the same as the Pharisees in the story. Remember their words and actions...

Some thought he must not have been born blind.

Then they questioned his parents who said: "Yes, he is our son and he was born blind, but we do not know how he sees or who healed him. Ask him he is an adult."

The religious authorities in asking him and hearing the events that had taken place, say: “This man is not from God for he does not observe the sabbath.”

Then they were confounded, because if blindness is caused by sin, then he must be a sinner so they then drove him out. Then they were left to wonder why or how this man Jesus would heal a sinner.

The story goes on to affirm a conversation/conversion between Jesus and the healed man who is jubilant. But the authorities who were near said to him, “Surely, we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin, but now that you say, “We see, your sin remains.”

What do we do when confronted with a new truth? Sometimes we deny the truth, or find it hard to engage a new way of thinking?

I remember believing if you fulfill all the educational requirements one could function well in a parish as a pastor. That is why the Pharisees set the requirements. Not long after working in parishes I realized I had been given what others people had thought were the right tools to care for people, but it is an illusion that a good education guarantees a good ministry. Training does not equate with being a loving compassionate and kind care giver or leader.

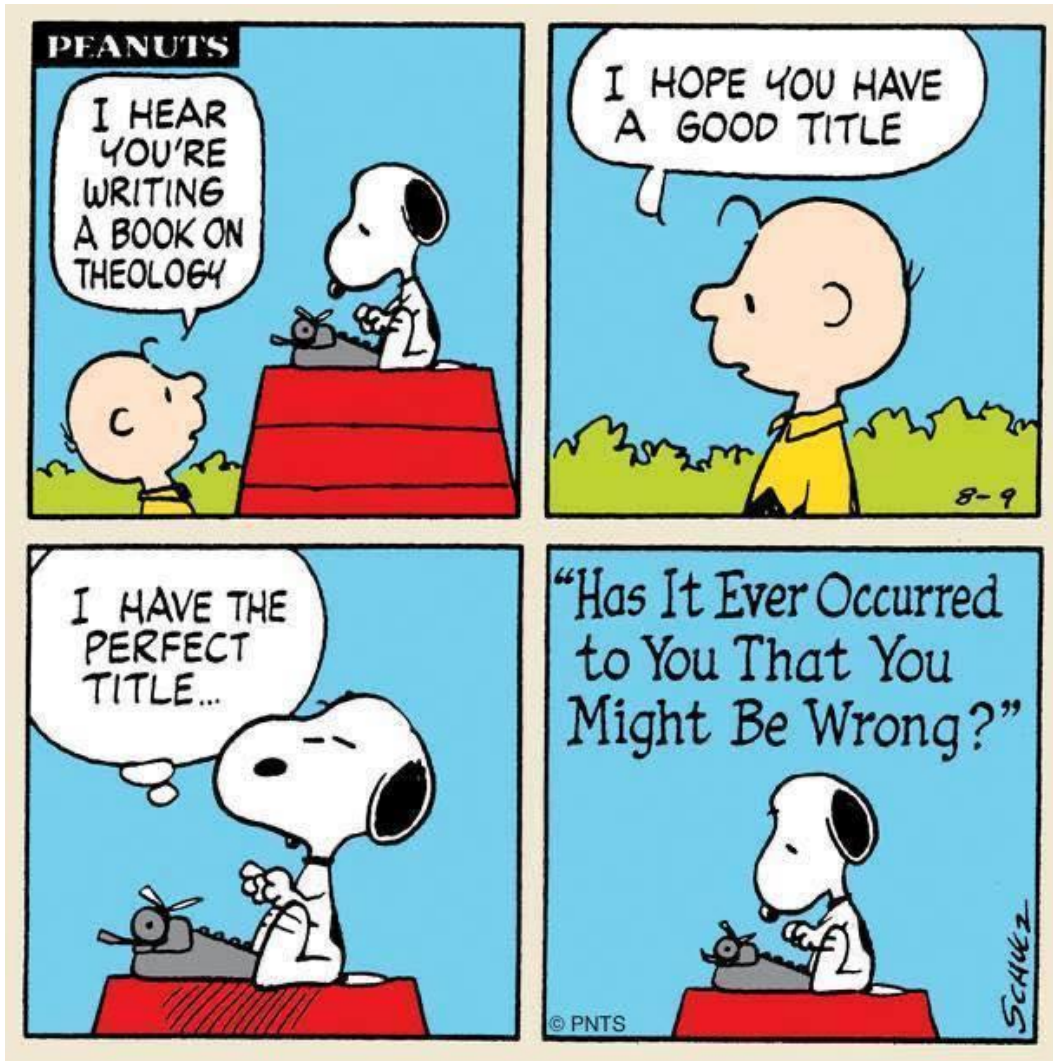
It had been assumed – in my mind and was a dependable fact that hard study, proper credentials, a couple of degrees were what was needed. But some of life’s spindles are gravely treaded. Sometimes we are fortunate and we are blessed, and others our blessed when we see the truth behind our incorrect common assumption and grow accordingly. There are times in our lives when we realize we need to move in a different direction, to accept a new way of doing things, or a new way of thinking.

It can be difficult.

It is difficult to admit to my friends, family or peers when I am wrong. It might be easier to continue in my old patterns and in my old ways, expressing my old prejudices. Sometimes we would rather remain blind. It takes courage to claim the new self and yet that is what the presence of the spirit calls us to do. On the other hand, sometimes we can see the truth but cannot change our original thinking.

I saw a cartoon recently with a horse chewing straw over a barnyard fence. The caption had the horse saying, “You can lead a human to knowledge but you cannot make him think.”

Actually, my favorite Charlie Brown cartoon is



A final story:

Roger Briggs a parishioner who I used to go round and round with, was infuriated with me when it suggested that the American history class that we had in high school might have gotten a few things wrong. Today I would say rather we left a few things out.

Anyway, Roger would say, "I learned history from my teacher in the 1940s and all you want to do is go change it."

At the end of a Disciple Bible Study which had taken place over two years, Roger came to my office and said he would not be coming to the closing session in which we would be using a worship contained in our reference workbooks. I asked gently, "O, Why not?" Roger said, "I just cannot honestly say some of those prayers or creeds, and particularly John Wesley's covenant prayer." You know the one that reads:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

In other words, even after all our studies, in his mind he had to accept everything that had come down and could not reimage or reinterpret it for today. His choice, as he saw it, was to accepted literally everything or reject the whole thing. I did not press him very hard for fear he would feel his whole faith would need to be split and thrown away.

It takes great courage to face our own gravely threads when they run deep and are connected to who we are in the very fabric of our being. But let us not be like the Pharisees of another time. May the spirit of truth the lesson today promises abides in us, not leave us orphaned, rather may it enliven us to admit when we have been wrong, when we encounter the gravely threads of our lives. May the spirit empowering us to forgive ourselves and others, to accept God's forgiveness, to act to make things right -- so the world we share can be made whole.

Amen.