

## SERMON- Proper 6 (B)

Charles R. Cowherd

~~Ezekiel 17:22-24~~

~~Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14~~

Good Shepherd

June 13, 2021

Mark 4:26-34

### OPENING:

You might have seen that, last month, the popular children's book author, Eric Carle, best-selling author of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Lonely Firefly*, and *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, died at the age of 91.

If you have read any of these, and he wrote 70 odd books that sold almost 150 million copies around the world so you probably have, then you know that they are very simple on one level, but also subtle, complex and profound on another.

Now what does that sound like?

Jesus' parables are everyday/ down to earth stories that *anyone* can understand, but that no one *does*, including the disciples that knew him. Preachers have been trying to explain them for centuries, but Jesus even admits that maybe they are not supposed to be understood.

That's Good News because it means there is no such thing as the perfect parable.

### PARABLES

Jesus tends to offer a parable, then checks himself, scratch the record, and next offers a different one. Then he will try to explain the first, then says that you just won't get it.

The Kingdom of God, Jesus says, is like a mustard seed..... OR.... the Kingdom of God is like a seed that grows by itself.

The Kingdom of God is like a sower who.....

(Scratch that) Once upon a time, there was a shepherd who had 99 sheep and one was missing.

(Or maybe) there once was a man who had two sons.....

Jesus can't help himself, continually telling these stories that enlighten and mystify us.

The Greek word for "parable" means, literally, "thrown on the ground"—parables are words tossed into the soil of our imaginations, thrown into our lives to help us understand this one and then to contemplate another world that's right here but we don't realize it.

The famous line is “Jesus told so many parables that he became one himself.” So, consider this: “Once upon a time, a baby boy was born to an unwed mother in Bethlehem, his father was a carpenter and he grew up in nowhere-ville, the armpit soil in an armpit province of the Roman Empire. He liked to read the Torah and hide from his parents, when he came to adulthood he got a funny idea to go off and get baptized by his cousin John and then.....”

You might tell that story differently from me but the important thing is not to hear about Israelite botany or horticulture, but to hear the parable fresh. So the parable again is on the path of your life, it’s thrown down as something for you to consider and hear and grow from.

## **CARLE**

So here goes: ‘The kingdom of God is like this’:

*In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf.  
One Sunday morning the warm sun came up...  
and POP, out of the egg came a tiny, very hungry caterpillar.*

Eric Carle wrote that story in the late 1960’s but he originally had the caterpillar as a “bookworm” or an earthworm. That’s how he got the idea of the hole punches in the pages.

Carle’s editor though, convinced him to make the bookworm into a caterpillar, and Carle thought: that’s a good idea because “What do caterpillars turn into?” and the rest is literary gold!<sup>1</sup>

My sense is that Eric Carle kept the obvious/ ‘in your face’ Christian interpretations of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* at arm’s lengths because, God knows, heavy-handed moralizing ruins everything.

But I will give it to you anyway:

The story starts on a Sunday, then it goes through every day of the week, on Monday, Tuesday, the caterpillar eats: mirroring the creation story in Genesis with all the delicious fruits.

Then comes Saturday and our wonderfully-made, very hungry, very human, (and dare I say sinful!) caterpillar, eats out on that Saturday with the unforgettable decadent images of the salami and the chocolate cake and the lollipop.

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<sup>1</sup> Carle, Eric. 1969. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. New York, NY: Philomel.

The next day, Sunday again, the caterpillar eats that nice green leaf (goes to church?).

And God takes that (now, big and fat) caterpillar and, how we don't know, buries him alive inside that cocoon, where a glorious transformation takes place, echoes of the Easter journey. Reborn and transformed into a BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLY.

## **INTERPRETATION**

Now the way that I just told that story, retelling it through a heavy Christian lens, maybe it amplified it for you, maybe that's how you read it already, consciously or subconsciously.

OR, Maybe, and this is okay, that ruined it for you, "Ugg, why would you put this interpretation on top of it."

Carle knew that, Jesus knew that parables are always 'live wires', always a little dangerous because they are open to the reader.

But that's okay because the point is not their literal meaning, but what they are pointing to.

## **LIFE**

So again: "Jesus told so many parables that he became one himself."

Consider the rest of the story that I started earlier:

"Jesus was a nice Jewish boy,

loved his mother,

decent Carpenter,

but a 2<sup>nd</sup>-rate Community organizer,

and a colossal disappointment as a revolutionary.

He was a good story-teller and Jesus had a way about enough that it got him arrested and nailed to a tree.

They put him in the ground, dead as can be. As useless as a tiny mustard seed.

There in the cocoon of the Easter grave, something happened, and he came back 3 days later and the world has never been the same."

Now THAT'S quite a story.

The most profound parable of all is not the Mustard Seed,

or the Seed that Grows by Itself,

or even the Good Samaritan

or the Prodigal Son or whatever is your favorite.

The most profound parable is the whole life and death of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Final story:

Eric Carle grew up in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and he was conscripted to dig trenches at the age of 15.

His father was drafted and became a POW in the Soviet Union.

Carle did not talk about that time very often but he did say that his memory was dominated by the “grays, browns and dirty greens used by the Nazis to camouflage the buildings” and that why’s he used the beautiful, radiant, vibrant colors in his books, as a way of overcoming the memory of his childhood.<sup>3</sup>

In his story-telling, Carle said that he was never trying to preach to children, just to hold their hand.

His father eventually came home from war, a broken man, only 85 pounds and he would die shortly thereafter from his POW experience.

Carle would later say: “To this day, I can barely enjoy a good meal because of thinking about my father. I am left with a sadness. It might be psychobabble, but I rehash that period of my life through my books. The child I am helping," he says, "might just be me."<sup>4</sup>

Eric Carle told so many stories that his life became one, became a parable, teaching us a lesson about life and death and transformation and resurrection and what the Kingdom of God is like.....

**AMEN**

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<sup>2</sup> Saliers, Don. “Pastoral Perspective” (Mark 4:26-34) *Feasting on the Word* (Year B, Vol. 3) Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 140.

<sup>3</sup> Gershon, Livia. “Eric Carle, Author and Illustrator of ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar,’ Dies at 91” *SmithsonianMag.com* (Accessed 6/12/2021); <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/remembering-childrens-book-artist-and-author-eric-carle-180977845/>

<sup>4</sup> Williams, Sally (May 27, 2021). “Eric Carle: The Very Busy Illustrator. *The Independent* (Accessed June 12, 2021). <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/eric-carle-books-caterpillar-interview-b1854661.html>