

THE CONFIDENCE TRAP 6 – A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF MARK
MARK 4:1-35
October 16, 2016

Instagram is one of many popular social media sites on the web today. But unlike Twitter and Facebook, where you can share your well-worded thoughts, Instagram's main feature is sharing photos of yourself. You can add a blurb, but the main point is to tell the story of your life by sharing snapshots of where you are and what you see. You can then follow people and see the story of their life unfolding. You can follow anyone around the globe and watch all of the snapshots come together.

In August, a new user named Louise Delage started on Instagram. She is a young beautiful 25-year-old French girl. Her photos showed her in exotic locales with beautiful people doing delightful things. This is a great story to tell and her snapshots were gorgeous and she had followers galore. Within weeks, 65,000 people were tuned in to her story.

How does this happen? She wasn't sharing life-changing maxims or how-to essays, just snapshots, creative little insights that shared a bigger story. It takes bloggers years to build up an audience of 65,000 readers, and that is done with painstaking investigation and endless outlines. It takes thought leaders years of presenting propositional truths to cultivate a group of devoted followers. For Louise it only took a couple weeks? Why?

Maybe because she is young and pretty. Maybe because she traveled to exotic locales and did interesting things or maybe it is something else. Maybe it's something much deeper.

We are in the middle of our series, *The Confidence Trap*. We have been exploring the intricacies of faith against the backdrop of human understanding. The Gospel of Mark is a book full of misunderstandings, people getting it wrong. The book begins by introducing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the book ends with the Roman Centurion declaring Jesus the Son of God and the majority of the middle-portion is people getting it

wrong. The one person, who gets it right, immediately gets it wrong. Smack dab in the middle of the book, Peter declares Jesus the Christ, then immediately rebukes Jesus.

We are exploring this mysterious book alongside the idea of human understanding. Our default when it comes to issues of great importance is often dogmatism. Because so much is at stake, we often ratchet up the certitude we have. We have called this a confidence trap because we draw a picture of God from the stories and end up painting ourselves into a corner. We make Jesus two-dimensional perfectly fitting into a linear and understandable trajectory. The problem is Jesus often zigs when we think he should zag. The entirety of this gospel seems to be Jesus confusing, frustrating and provoking those who think they have a complete handle on who God is.

That is strange. Wouldn't it be better if God were absolutely clear? Wouldn't it be better if Jesus came to earth on day one, did miracles and then somehow perfectly revealed himself to be God with some clear expositional teaching? With some perfect show of evidence? We all want this. In fact, if you missed it, this is the exact topic we explored at our last Village Forum. An atheist and a Christian debated about evidence for God. The atheists were perplexed, "Why doesn't God show himself? If he is not a God of confusion, if he wants to make himself known, why isn't there a perfect irrefutable piece of evidence out there?"

Jesus addresses this very topic today. Jesus knows what Louise Delage knows. Sometimes snapshots are the only way to teach. Sometimes sharing a story does far more than producing an essay. Today Jesus is going to teach about teaching. Potentially that could sound boring, but it is really about the nature of epistemology, the theory of knowledge or how we know what we know. That may also sound boring to you, so the real conundrum today is why Jesus doesn't just come right out and say it? Why the confusion? Why the word pictures? Why not just tell it like it is?

Mark 4:1-9

In Mark 4, Jesus tells a parable about sowing seeds and getting four different results. One word keeps popping up in these twenty verses. Some form of the verb to “hear” pops up 13 times in 20 verses. For some reason, Jesus is really hooked on this idea of people hearing the word of truth. The problem is people sometimes listen, but they don’t always hear. To put it another way, everyone chews, but not everyone tastes. Today we are asking why Jesus doesn’t just come out and give us his ten-point plan for Messiahship? Give us ten proofs of his divinity? Write an essay in his own hand that can be triple verified and then hand it down through the ages?

The problem is we can all listen, but we don’t always hear. We can take the information in, but we don’t always consider it. In this passage, Jesus is effectively telling a story about the trouble with teaching and the human heart. The word here for “shore” is the same word for soil. Jesus stands back and begins to live out the very parable he is teaching. He begins to cast seeds upon the soil right in front of him, and he does this with the full knowledge that teaching is fraught. People listen, but the worries of life keep them from hearing. People listen, but the enemy takes the truth from them and keeps them from hearing. People listen, but the desire for wealth chokes out the truth and keeps them from hearing.

So Jesus tells them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Sensory malfunction and failure are used regularly in the Old Testament to point towards the presence of idolatry in the covenant community.

Psalm 115:1-8 says their idols are deaf, dumb and lame and all those who trust in them will be like them. I think this is important background in understanding Jesus’ explanation. This idea of deafness, spiritual deafness is rooted in idolatry. People’s context and culture are preventing them from hearing the message. The idolatry of their culture and their own hearts are making this good news sound like foolishness. It is making the good news smell like the stench of death.

So consider all of this, Jesus is freely admitting that teaching has scattered results. That some people hear while many people just listen, and countless outside conditions allow people to listen, but keep them from hearing. His teaching is a message about teaching, but it's really about the human experience.

Think about how often we are misunderstood or how often we miss the point. Sometimes the speaker isn't clear. Sometimes the message is unclear. Sometimes the listener is preoccupied. It's a miracle we ever communicate anything to anyone. One of my favorite goof-ups as a pastor here at SFC was when I was doing announcements before a sermon. In my mind, I was thinking about how a large group of our women were over the hill for a women's retreat at Mount Hermon. I started off by saying, "I think we should pray for a lot our women who are over the hill." This happens often. Even when we are clear with one another, people often don't understand what we truly mean.

That happens here in the passage today. Jesus' parable about the nature of teaching, and in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the disciples are confused.

Mark 4:10-12

Jesus tells them he will preach in parables for a reason. He quotes from Isaiah 6. This is the beginning of God's call to Isaiah to preach to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. God says, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah says, "Here am I, send me." Then this:

Isaiah 6:9-10

They will listen but not hear. See but not perceive. Isaiah will preach bluntly to them. He will give them word pictures, but he is very straightforward with his message. God says, "They will not truly hear the message." Like any of us would, Isaiah responds a bit flabbergasted.

Isaiah 6:11

“How long do I have to teach like this, if they aren’t going to listen? If they aren’t going to hear?” God responds, with, “They will hear it only in hindsight. After they are conquered by the Assyrians and even later when the Southern Kingdom is decimated by the Babylonians and the temple is destroyed. When they see the things you preached, in hindsight, they will begin to hear.” But sometimes it takes something big like the loss of their city or the destruction of the temple to make all of the puzzle pieces fit.

Jesus knows that hearing doesn’t always happen. He knows confusion often reigns, so instead of didactic proofs and elegant prophecy fulfillment triple-verified essays, he gives them snapshots, pictures that will add up to one big story, so they can see it in hindsight.

Mark 4:1-34 is actually one big complete section. Jesus tells them the parable of the seeds. That teaching often doesn’t land. He then tells them teaching often only gets illuminated and verified in hindsight. Then he says this:

Mark 4:21-23

Things are hidden, but will be revealed. He did not come to be the light of the world to be perpetually hidden. He did not come to keep a secret forever, but to wait till the perfect time for it all to be revealed.

Jesus spoke in parables and ambiguous language for a couple of reasons. 1) It inflames the imagination and forces us to wrestle with the meaning. As many of you who are educators know, rote memorization helps pass tests but rarely helps mold true students. Rote memorization cultivates students who consume the message but rarely digest it. So while Jesus does offer some straightforward teaching, he often gives snapshots, pictures and parables to force us to consider God. Not just theology to be memorized but concepts to consider when it comes to a divine being that cannot be boxed in or forced to fit a template. 2) He does it because he knows there is a future event that will verify his message. There

will be a passion event that will give credence to his life and teachings and allow all the puzzle pieces to come together.

Four years ago, I preached through Mark and we highlighted another common thread of this book, which is sometimes referred to as the Messianic secret. Jesus often tells people not to tell others that he is the Messiah. That's weird right? He seems to shun the spotlight. He often retreats. People come to him and when they proclaim he is the Christ, he tells them not to tell anyone. Why?

It is because they have not seen the full picture yet. Like the story with Isaiah, God says when they see this event, your teaching will be given credence and become verified. Jesus cryptically told his disciples that one day the temple would be destroyed and be put back together in three days. They are flabbergasted because the temple took years to construct, but Jesus is referring to his body, his death and his resurrection. Until they can see that, nothing else matters. Until they see that death, nothing else will make sense.

Think of it like this, who here saw the movie, the *Sixth Sense*? It came out in 1999 and was a massive success and made \$672 million dollars. It was so successful because of the twist ending. As it turns out (spoiler alert) the main character had actually died. The twist ending of the death of the main character made the whole story make sense. All of the details finally came together. All of the plot points that were murky or ambiguous finally made sense. In a similar fashion, we have heard and read the story of Jesus so often that we forget what a twist ending it has. Mark touts this man as the Messiah and the Son of God, and he gets killed at the end. You have to imagine the shock of people reading this for the first time. Wait, the main character dies? The story doesn't end there, we find out he raises from the dead. But the story of Mark now takes on a whole new meaning, the details are drawn together, the murky and ambiguous moments now make sense.

Jesus was keeping his Messiahship a secret because he wanted people to get the whole story, and he didn't want people trying to piece together via word of mouth. He wanted that twist ending to bring it all together.

This is Jesus' teaching about teaching. He prefers parables because the story wasn't over yet. He told parables because he wanted people to lean in instead of watching their eyes glaze over. What does this mean for us when it comes to teaching and talking about Jesus? This isn't about right-brain or left-brain, this is about telling stories that matter. Jesus seemed to do stories far more than essays. He chose snapshots of God over bullet points.

We talked about this in week one of this series, but I think talking about God in anything other than snapshots or stories will confine him. As soon as God becomes manageable and scaled down enough to fill in your blanks, he is no longer God. But for some of us that bothers us, because it includes mystery and ambiguity. It includes occasionally blurry moments where we're not quite sure what to think. But for anything that isn't an appliance, a technical manual really doesn't work. They don't hand out instruction manuals for grooms because women don't work that way and you'll need constant addendums because these beautiful creatures change over time.

Jesus offers stories and snapshots to make us lean in. The regular reminder for you from the life of Jesus is that his snapshots and stories almost always land in one place, "Follow me. Go where I go. Love who I love. Speak how I speak." Not pray a prayer or walk an aisle. Not ask me into your heart. Not go to church. Not agree to these beliefs. First and foremost follow me. You do that by loving God and loving others. My encouragement today would be if you want to be a follower, then hear. Which means more than listen. It means taste. Don't just chew. It means soak it in. Don't just be present. The parables were not offered so cryptographers and puzzle masters alone could follow Jesus. The parables were invitations into the story. The Kingdom of God looks like this. The Love of God looks like this. Following Jesus looks like this. It's never a closed-ended bullet-pointed essay, it's the beginning of a story. He says find me here and follow me here. Be willing to see what you have previously missed.

Here's the amazing thing about Louise Delage. She had a secret hidden in plain sight and 65,000 followers missed it over a span of two months and 149 photos. Here is her secret:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecRheslTlwE>

In every single snapshot, she had an alcoholic beverage in her hand. No one thought about it for one snapshot or even ten. But with hindsight of 149 photos, you can see it. This was actually an extended teaching communicated through dozens of snapshots. When you see the whole thing and get the punch line at the end, you can't miss it. I think this is far more potent than an essay or bullet points around the ills of over-drinking. The way you tell the story matters.

After telling the story of the seeds and the hidden lamp, Jesus gives two more parables. In one, he said, "Cast the seed and then growth happens. Apart from the sower, the seed has life on it's own." Then he says, "A small seed like the mustard seed far outgrows what we think it could do." The bottom line is he says sharing the Word will yield results you did not cause and will outgrow your expectations. I think so often we want to take control and be in charge of every step along the way. Jesus says, "Tell stories about me. Tell stories about me in your life, and watch to see what God does with it." He brings the growth.

It takes faith to share snapshots instead of bullet points, but that is the nature of sharing Jesus and the Kingdom of God. Be faithful and prodigious in the spreading of Jesus' stories. Share them with snapshots spoken and lived. Let you and your family exist as snapshots of grace. God will do something with it. God will bring the growth. All that's left for you is to follow and find Jesus in the story and meet him there. Find Jesus in the story and invite others in.