
What is your green stick?
Mimico Presbyterian Church and Wesley Mimico United Church
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Based on Matthew 18:15-20

When Leo Tolstoy was five years old, his older brother Nikolai convinced him that Nikolai had recorded the secret of the universe - in particular the secret for universal happiness - on a green stick, and had buried that stick at the edge of a ravine on the estate where they both lived. Leo was also led to believe that when the stick - and therefore the secret - was discovered, that the world would be transformed by love, and by all the good things that love would bring to society and to individuals.

I can just picture a 5 year old boy spending all his free time in that ravine, looking vainly for the stick. Searching, hoping, yearning to find the answer that would provide enduring happiness. I wonder how often he found a stick that looked promising, only to bring it back to Nikolai and have him declare that that was not the right stick after all. Although I could not find any stories about Leo actually doing that as a child, there is little doubt that Leo Tolstoy's life was an adventure in searching for the ways and means to find the secret that would yield love and happiness for all. Leo Tolstoy's life in fact was a continuation of his quest for the green stick - he just started to look in adult ways.

Today of course, we don't expect to find secrets written on sticks buried in the ground - although as geocaching becomes more popular, who knows what might happen in future? Besides, we are more sophisticated than 5 year old Leo. We all know that if Nikolai had written the answer on a stick, then we could simply ask him what the secret was. Or - and this is certainly what I would have done - we could have decided that if our own brother wrote the message himself, it cannot be worth searching for. In any case I doubt that any of us are currently looking for the stick ourselves.

And I always wonder. If we in fact were willing to go and search for the green stick, how would we know when we had found it? I mean - would we just take the very first stick that we found that appeared to have markings on it? Or would we be more picky? Would we keep

searching for a stick that had words on it that actually made sense and had a message that was helpful to us? And how would we even know what to expect? What do you think? Do you imagine that the secrets of the universe must be very simple - or extremely complex? How would we know that we had found a valuable secret.

And even if we convinced ourselves that we had found a secret message, how would we know that we had found the secret to happiness anyway?

Today, of course, I expect we would all struggle to believe any message written on a stick in the first place. Now if we found the answer on google, that would be a different story. But a stick - really? I suspect that many of us put more trust in technology than we do in sticks.

When I was an undergraduate student in Saskatchewan in the early 1980s, I lived for two years in a basement suite owned by a mother who had a son. He was perhaps 8 years old at the time. Also at that time, I owned a very early computer - called a "Vic 20", and the woman's son was very intrigued by it. If you don't know what a Vic 20 is - that was a computer 2 or 3 generations before what most people might recognize as a "personal computer". Anyway, one day this boy came downstairs while I was reading the book entitled "Does God Exist?" by the German theologian Hans Küng. The boy read the cover of the book and without hesitation said "why don't you just ask the computer if God exists?"

I'm not sure how I responded actually. I know that I was unclear at the time as to whether the boy's grasp of theology or technology was the more disturbing. But I was amazed that the boy didn't hesitate to imagine that a computer must of course have the answers he needs.

And today, of course, if we were looking for secret answers, we might expect to find them online, either stored on a computer somewhere, or perhaps even discovered by a computer.

That idea is pushed to its limit in the story, "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy". In one part of that delightful story, a group of beings get tired of arguing about the meaning of life, so they build a large computer called "Deep Thought" to calculate - once and for all - the answer to life, the universe, and everything. Although the computation takes 7 and a half million years to complete, the answer - it turns out - is actually simple. It is simple to write down. It is simple to communicate to other people. Unfortunately since the ultimate answer is "42", it is *not* simple to understand.

The answer is not helpful because the beings never knew what the question really meant in the first place. So, the group of beings create an even larger computer to try to understand properly the question of the meaning of life. If you don't know how that story continues, it's worth reading. But without ruining the ending, I will say that the computer they built to understand the ultimate question of life was so large that it was frequently mistaken for a planet. And it was called "The Earth".

But I must confess that I am sympathetic towards these beings who struggled so hard to find the ultimate answer to life. They worked hard and got an answer that is simple to say but difficult to understand and impossible to put into practice. I think those beings might sympathize with us today too - given our biblical readings.

In our reading from Galatians, Paul says that all the rules and regulations, perhaps the entire point of religious experience, can be simply reduced to the idea that we should love each other. Really? Just that? Four little letters - l o v e? Like the answer "42", it's not that I don't believe it, it's more that I simply don't know what to do with it. It's easy enough to say "love each other", but what does that mean? What does it mean when we think of people we don't love, people we don't understand, people we don't respect? Is it possible for us to love them? And even if it is possible - how do we actually do it?

Besides, I've been to the library at Emmanuel College – the United Church seminary in Toronto - and it's actually quite large. Why would we have all those books if all universal truth could really be reduced to a single statement. Even the single volume we call the Bible is quite a bit larger than it needs to be if all of our answers can be reduced to one single idea. Perhaps it's not so simple after all.

Even within our own groups of friends and family, love can seem elusive. And the existence of love within a family group hardly guarantees harmony. Love - by itself - does not eliminate conflict. Of course - we all know that.

Conflict comes from the essential fact that we are all different. That we have different hopes, dreams, and aspirations. We have different pasts and therefore different presents. Perhaps that's why the advice in Matthew speaks to us. The key element in reducing conflict is

to talk - to understand each other. To be gracious enough to listen deeply to others while also being brave enough to speak to what is important to ourselves.

Jesus's advice as given in Matthew is to make peace individually if possible. And, to escalate issues gradually if resolution cannot be found. It's almost as if Jesus puts more emphasis on the relationship itself, and less emphasis on finding "a solution". Imagine that. That relationships are important. That working together might be more important than the actual solutions that we discover. And, the idea that resolving conflict is a gradual process that takes time and effort is hardly news.

And yet, we are drawn to simple solutions. We, like Leo Tolstoy would love to believe in a simple, clear secret to happiness and moreover, to imagine that such a secret not only exists, but that we can find it, and use it. Something we can actually grab hold of - like a green stick.

If I had to create a green stick with words on it, I would certainly go for the shortest truth I could find. The words of Jesus are among the shortest, "love others". There is a Swedish proverb which is similar but longer, "Fear less, hope more. Eat less, chew more. Whine less, breathe more. Talk less, say more. Hate less, love more, and all good things are yours." Given how bad my hand-writing is, I think I'd pick Jesus's version, although I think the swedes are onto something good too.

As we head rapidly into the summer, I wonder what green stick each of us is searching for. Are we still looking for meaning in life, or have we already found it. Have we found another alternative? Or, have we simply given up the search.

I invite each of us to share our "green stick" stories with each other after the service. Because my own green stick says that as we share our stories with each other, the truth will be found.

Amen.