
What is your green stick?
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
August 1, 2021
by Rev. Dr Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 12:28-34

[image: green stick]

When Leo Tolstoy was five years old, his older brother Nikolai convinced him that Nikolai knew the secret of the universe. In particular the secret for universal happiness. And that Nikolai had written the secret on a green stick. And had buried that stick at the edge of a ravine on the estate where they 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 hope we can all picture a 5 year old boy spending 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 Leo found a stick that looked promising, only to bring it back to Nikolai and have Nikolai declare that that was not the right stick. I could not find any stories about Leo actually doing that. But there is no doubt that Leo Tolstoy's life was an adventure in searching for the ways and means to find the secret that would bring love and happiness to all. Leo Tolstoy's life was in fact a continuation of his search for the green stick - he just started looking in adult ways.

[image: resurrection]

Tolstoy's search for meaning in life is - I think - well-encapsulated in his 1899 novel, "Resurrection". I'm sure it is completely insane to try to summarize a work by Tolstoy in a sermon, but here goes. The main character in the novel is Dmitri Ivanovich Nekhlyudov, who - like Tolstoy - is a Russian nobleman. When he was young, Dmitri had an affair with a young girl, Katusha which led to a pregnancy. Dmitri sees Katusha years later in court where she is on trial for murder. During the trial, Katusha tells much of her own story, and Dmitri comes to realize that their affair years earlier (and the pregnancy)

had forced the girl onto the path of becoming a prostitute. And that is also what led to the murder. So Dmitri realizes that he needs to carry some of the blame for the situation that Katusha was in. Dmitri ends up following Katusha around the country, visiting her in various prisons, and trying to relieve her struggles as much as he can.

Dmitri - being a nobleman - knew nothing about how the vast majority of Russians actually lived. But visiting in prisons he met a wide variety of people, and got a real education in how society works. Or I should say how society does not work, for the majority of people.

Dmitri - as he is travelling - also visits his own estates, and attempts to give control of the estates to the local workers. That turns out to be harder than he expected. The workers do not trust Dmitri. And his attempts to decentralize control of his estates largely fail.

[image: tolstoy quote 1]

I remember reading the book for the first time, and not really understanding if there was supposed to be any point to it until I got to page 561 out of 568. At the end, Dmitri is frustrated with the inhumanity of life. Having seen the inhumanity in prisons and the lack of willingness for his estate workers to work together for a common cause. And in frustration ... he casually picks up a copy of the New Testament and randomly starts reading at Matthew 18.

In verse 4 he reads, "Whosoever therefore shall humble [him-] themselves as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Dmitri then reflects, "Yes, yes, that is true", he thought. Remembering how he himself had experienced peace and joy in life only to the extent to which he had humbled himself." Then starting again at verse 21, "Then came Peter to Jesus, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but until seventy times seven." After which Dmitri reflected, "And can that be the whole answer? And the inner voice of his whole being said, 'yes, that is all'. ... Now Dmitri knew the cause of all the horrors he had seen, and what ought to be done to put an end to them. The answer he had been unable to find was the same that Christ gave to Peter: to forgive everyone always, forgive an endless number of times, because there

was no man living who was guiltless and therefore able to punish or reform another.”

Whether we agree with the conclusion that Dmitri - and Tolstoy - came too. We cannot doubt that Tolstoy’s life work was to search for the answer to the meaning of life. And Tolstoy in the end sees humility and forgiveness as the key ingredients to living a good life, affirming the teachings of Jesus.

[image: tolstoy]

Incidentally, you may be wondering why I care about Leo Tolstoy. It’s not because he looks like he belongs in a heavy metal band. It’s because he ranks among my favourite theologians. You might be surprised that I call him a theologian at all. But some of his works are directly theological.

[image: gib and tkogiw]

He also wrote “The Gospel in Brief” which was his attempt to create a unified gospel from the four biblical ones, with his own theology embedded of course. And the better known “The Kingdom of God Is within You”. And I have been inspired by his continuous search for meaning in life myself.

Are any of us looking for meaning in life? Good! And yet, I’m sure that we don’t expect to find secrets written on sticks. 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 anyone is currently looking for the stick.

[image: green stick]

And yet I 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 secret of universal happiness must be very simple - or very complicated? 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?

Today we would all struggle to believe any message written on a stick in the first place. Now if we found the answer online, that would be a different story. I suspect that many of us put more faith in technology than we do in sticks.

[image: vic20]

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 young son. He was perhaps 10 years old at the time. Also at that time, I owned an 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".

[image: vic20 and does god exist]

One day this boy came downstairs while I was reading the book entitled "Does God Exist?" by another favourite theologian, the German theologian Hans Küng. The boy read the cover of the book and without hesitation pointed to my computer and 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 I was more disturbed by the boy's grasp of theology or technology. But I was amazed that the boy didn't hesitate to imagine that a computer must of have the answers he needs. And today, of course, if we were looking for answers, we might expect to find them online. Either stored on a computer somewhere, or perhaps discovered by a computer. Perhaps that will be the ultimate goal of artificial intelligence. To discover the meaning of life.

[image: hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy]

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.

[image: deep thought]

So they build a large computer called "Deep Thought" to calculate - once and for all - the answer to life, the universe, and everything. 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. But the answer is not easy to put into practice.

[image: 42]

Because the answer - it turns out - is 42.

The answer was not helpful because the beings never really knew what the question 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 confess that I am sympathetic towards these beings who struggled so hard to find the ultimate answer to the meaning of 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 gospel reading.

[image: cats hugging]

In our reading from Mark, Jesus says that the entire purpose of life can be simply reduced to the idea that we should love God and love each other. We just need to love. 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 everyone", but what does that mean? What does it mean when we think of people we do not love, people we do not understand, people we do not respect? Is it possible for us to love them? And even if it is possible - how do we actually do it?

[image: Emmanuel library]

Besides, I've been to the library at the Emmanuel College Seminary. Not only does it look like a set from Harry Potter, but it's also quite large. Why do we have all those books if all universal truth can 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.

Moreover, 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 or

universal happiness. Love - by itself - does not eliminate conflict. Of course - we all know that.

[image: brantford]

Love God. Love each other. Easy to say. Not always so easy to live. So perhaps the real question - and in many ways the question that inspired me into entering into ministry with you is this. “What does love look like here: in our individual lives, as a congregation, and as a wider community?” What does “love God and love each other” really mean here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church? What does “love God and love each other” mean here in Brantford? And what could it mean?

[image: building the kin-dom of god]

Our slogan at this church is “building the kin-dom of God”. Great. But what does that actually look like lived out? What does it mean to say that we see each other as “kin”? Do we dare to imagine that loving God is a meaningful step that helps us also love each other? Even the unlovely? Even the unlovable? If so, then I have come to the right place. And if we are all still actively exploring how to “love God and love others” more deeply, then I’ve probably come to the right place anyway.

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”.

[image: fear less, hope more ...]

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.

[image: tolstoy quote 1]

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? Or, have we simply given up the search. What is your green stick? I invite all 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 and our lives with each other - both inside and outside these walls of this building - we will find truth and meaning in life.

Amen.