

“Common Sense” --Thomas Paine

**Matthew 13:1-9**

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!’

**“Thomas Paine and His Common Sense”**

**July 10, 2011**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

It's a great time to be in the church, when we have a new staff member here for the first time. It's a great time, a time to give them advice, and the only time, probably, that they will listen. And this Friday I had a chance to do that. Sam Hastings is here. He's going to be working with our youth. He's back there making crepes and pies and I don't know what, but I had an opportunity to, I had an audience with him on Friday. Friday was his first day, and I said, "Son, come into my office. I want to talk to you. I want to impart some wisdom."

I thought about, a long time, what I ought to tell him. Should I let him know that you should never serve Communion using potato dill bread? When you put the juice in your mouth, it swells up and you can't speak. That would have been good advice. I could have mentioned, not to ask the children what they wanted to do when they grow up, as we recall one child here, probably that one, said when he grows up, he wants to chase women. Remember that? I told him to try some different things with the youth, even if they don't work. I gave him encouragement to make some mistakes, because the rest of us do, and if he's perfect it's going to make the rest of us look quite bad.

I was talking, this past week as well, a couple in my office, they're going to get married in a couple weeks, and for some reason, I felt the need to give the groom some advice. I never do this, but I said to him, "Nobody ever warns us guys, but we need to know this. If she wants you to go with her to the fabric store, don't go. It is not a place for men." Eddie, our custodian, said I ought to have also mentioned, and maybe I'll call him up and tell him, that it's not a good idea to purchase an appliance, like a vacuum cleaner, for an anniversary gift. My uncle gave my aunt a trash compactor for their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and it didn't go well.

Jesus gave that kind of advice, common sense. One place it comes to us is that famous story, the parable of the sower of the seed. It's common sense. There are three stages to that story. Every one of the stages got common sense in it. Stage 1: a farmer went out to

plant seed. Some of it fell out of the bag, and we see it, it's obvious to us. That's common sense. In life, there's going to be a bag, and there's going to be a hole in it. Always, there's a whole in your bag. That's just life. Note to self: There's a hole in your bag.

A young executive, leaving the office late one evening, president of the company, standing there in front of the shredder with a piece of paper. "Look, this is a very important and sensitive document," he said. "My secretary's gone for the night. Could you help me make this thing work?" "Certainly," he said, and turned the machine on, inserted the paper, pressed the button. "Excellent, wonderful," said the president of the company as the paper disappeared inside the machine. "I just want one copy." It's life. Note to self: a printer is not a shredder.

A farmer went out to plant some seed, and some seed fell on the ground. There's always a hole in the bag. President of Israel, Golda Meir, she knew about the hole in the bag. She said, "I've got one thing I need to tell you that I've got against Moses. He took us forty years into the desert in order to bring us to the one place in the Middle East that doesn't have oil." And Rodney Dangerfield made a living talking about the hole in his bag. He said, "I don't get any respect. My father carries around a picture of the kid that came in his wallet."

Or the woman who was mailed a picture of her car speeding through one of those police photo vans, and with it was a \$40 speeding ticket. So she sent the police department a picture of two \$20 bills. And the police department responded with a picture sent to her address of a photo of handcuffs. When you think you're on top, that's when you've got to find a way to climb. When you think you're winning, and sometimes you think you are, that's when somebody changes the rules. When you think life is easy, that's when you realize there's something major you've overlooked. About the time it looks like the pieces of the puzzle are fitting together, you realize there are some pieces of another puzzle mixed in there. It's the reason Adam and Eve ran from Paradise, when they discovered the tree and the forbidden fruit, and they couldn't leave it alone. It's the reason Sarah's joy was squelched when she realized she was going to have a baby, but was too old to enjoy him. You either laugh or you cry. She laughed.

Baxter Black, cowboy poet, in his book *Desperado Poet*, he understands about the hole in the bag. One of his poems, "All my clothes are laundry, all my socks are full of holes. I got TP in my hat band, and cardboard in my soles. I've stuffed the want ad section underneath my long john shirt, and my jacket's held together by dehorning blood and dirt. I've been unable lately to invest a pure-bred cow, since my ex-wives and their lawyers are dependents of mine now. See, my first wife took my saddle, and my second skinned my hide, and my third one got my deer head, and my last one took my pride. I've had a run of bad luck, but I think it's gonna peak, 'cause my dog that used to bite me got run over just last week. So all I want for Christmas is whatever you can leave, but I'd settle for a new wife who'd stay through New Year's Eve."

I'll get letters, I know. Elizabeth Cady Stanton next week. In a more serious mood, but not a lot, Baxter Black said, "If the buck stops somewhere else, sooner or later it's gonna

come around to you, so get ready." And you've got to be able to recognize a dead horse when you see one, and put down the reins. And he said, "Most of the people who are behind the ticket counter at the airport are not frequent flyers." That's significant but I'm not sure how. I just threw that in.

Our bag has a hole in it. It's life. Thomas Paine knew it. Born in England, no formal education, he lost the first two jobs he had, got fired. Got married, his first wife died, his second wife divorced him. He didn't like what the French were doing with the revolution, though he thought the revolution was good, he didn't think they ought to kill the king. So they put him in prison. Thomas Paine was a pain. To the British, he was too French. To the French, he was too British. Too weird for the Americans. Too Deist for conventional Christians who prayed for him, and some of them on him. It's life. It's the way it is. Common sense. Note to self: Your bag has a hole in it. Life isn't perfect.

But there's more. Second stage: Jesus said, a farmer went out to sow seed, and some of the seed fell out of the bag. The bag's got a hole in it. But, Note from Self, message from self, common sense, Jesus said it, some of the seed is bound to fall on good soil. Use your mind. You've got a hole in your bag, you've got a brain in your head. Look what you can see. So there's a hole in your bag, now what? Karen Armstrong in her book *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life*, says, "Don't be overwhelmed by the immensity of the task ahead, simply because it's there, but change attitudes, because that's possible. Because in the Sixties, for example, civil rights activists and feminists transformed the way we speak of race and gender." She goes on to say, "Every man and woman in the street can become a force for good in the world." Use your mind. Common sense.

One mother said, "I have three children. When my first child was born, every time she coughed, I took her to Urgent Care. When my third child was six, he swallowed a dime. I told him it was coming out of his allowance." Thomas Paine was arrested in France and put in prison, and while he was in prison he became ill. Worst day of his life, you'd think He knew he was subject to execution, that was his sentence, because he had stood up against the revolutionary leaders, Robespierre and some of them, they wanted to assassinate, to kill the king, which they also had in prison. The prison doctor came to see him because he was sick, and the prison door was open, and the executioner came by and marked all the prison cells where there was a prisoner at the beginning of the week that they would execute that prisoner at the end of the week. The prison door for Thomas Paine was open, so the executioner marked the door, and then when the doctor left, the door was closed, and you couldn't see the mark, because it was on the inside. Worst day of his life, saved his life. Something good.

These are the times that try our souls. Use your mind. See what's good, because it's there. Thomas Paine, the life he lived, he had common sense. He used his mind. He was optimistic and hopeful, and he wrote to the colonists, "Your strength is not in your numbers, but it's in your unity." Where did he learn to be so positive, in the midst of the life that he lived, which was a dreadful, tortured life? How do you see the good soil when seed falls from the bag, and the bag's got a hole in it? Common sense.

Do you know what? John Wesley preached a sermon and Thomas Paine heard the sermon and attracted to the message. Who wouldn't be? John Wesley's message, "We think and let think," "We're moving on to perfection," "We are not destined, we are not pre-destined, because we are recipients of grace." John Wesley influenced Thomas Paine! Practical religion, common sense. It's taking the worst and finding the best. It's knowing the bad news is not the last news, and the good news is. The bad news is not the final word. It's Betty Ford, addicted to pain drugs and alcohol, who will be remembered for the Betty Ford clinic, where people go and face their demons.

Tony Blair, once prime minister of Britain, said this of faith. A maxim of what he calls illusionary faith reads, "Fear not, trust in God, and God will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you." The maxim of real religion says, "There are things you fear, you're afraid of, and sometimes those things you fear will happen to you. But they are nothing to be afraid of." Common sense. When you come to a dead end in your life, and what you see in front of you is a wall, look for a door. When a doctor gives you a grim diagnosis and a dour prognosis, find a way to make the time you have left the best days of your life. Don't die before you're dead. When some boss tells you you're fired, take that as a time to learn what got you fired, so the next job won't end like the last one did. You can lose, but never become a loser. You can be put down, but never fail to stand up again. You can know adversity, but let it not drift into perversity. Always look for the promotion in every demotion, the new appointment in every disappointment. Some place, some way. Self, to us, a message: Common sense, use your mind, your soul, your heart. Some of the seed will find good soil. Common sense.

Stage three: I think, most important of all, the point of the parable. A farmer going out to plant seed. Seed falls on the path, there's a hole in the bag, and there is seed on the ground, and there's good soil somewhere. Common sense. If there's a God, and there is, there's a way. Note to self, message from self, word from God: Jesus said, "Seeds on good soil brought forth grain a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold." A word from God: "Let anyone with ears listen." Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, Jefferson listened. "These are the times that try men's souls," he wrote, "and if a nail is put to the point of a tree, a tender young oak, you may not even see the line, but as that oak grows, that mark will expand, and that message will become clear to future generations. Just a little bit can do a lot.

A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives the superficial appearance that it's right. And it isn't. And in contrast, a quick look at what could be right, enables you to see it and begin to make it so. A work from God, if there's a God, and there is, there's a way, There is a way, there is a God, we'll find the way. There will be a crop and a harvest. One writer put it this way "If everything in life is easy, if everything comes your way, you're in the wrong lane. And if nothing is coming your way, look around for what has, for the only limitations to your happiness are those you invent or accept. And if it's the past, it's never too late to have a happy childhood. Lee Jampolsky said this, it's in his book *Smile for No Good Reason*, "If you feel life tightening around you, pause, direct your mind and actions in the direction you choose." Jesus told that parable of the sower and the seed so his hearers would know their faith can be deeply rooted and life can be courageously

overcome. We can do something. And we all know people who have heard God's word, and in the words of *Jurassic Park*, "Life finds a way."

Shortly after she was born, she got double pneumonia and scarlet fever that left her legs paralyzed. Her doctors put her in steel leg braces and said she would never walk. She did learn to walk. She did learn to run. And it was a rhythmic stride, same stride, one after the other, but in a rhythm that she ran, and she ran. At age 13 she got into a footrace and she came in last, and I don't mean last, I mean dead last. People were going home, she was still running. She entered every race in high school. Came in last. They begged her to quit. One day, next to last. One day, she won. She never lost again. Tennessee State University, she ran track. She never lost again. The 1960 Olympics, she won two races, gold medal. Third race, a relay race, she got the baton and dropped it. Fastest woman runner in the world was ahead of her. No way she could catch her, but she did. Three gold medals in one single Olympics. No one had done that. Someone asked Wilma Rudolph how she did it. This is what she said. "My doctor told me I would never walk. My mother told me I would. I believed my mother." Was it her mother? Was it God through her mother?

Whatever happens to us, we happen to it. Albert Schweitzer said, "Every patient carries his or her own doctor inside. They come to us not knowing that truth. We as doctors are at our best when we give the doctor which resides within each patient a chance to go to work. The doctor inside us. The voice that speaks to us. The word that we hear about seeds that drop, and crops that grow. About a nation that knows you cannot tax us without giving us a chance to represent ourselves, because taxation without representation is tyranny. And if you think you can give us power, you are wrong. For power is given a government, but it is given by consent of the governed. A word from God, as Jesus spoke it. It's about seeds. It's about harvest. It's about how seeds fall and crops grow, and we do something. It's common sense.

Max Lucado wrote something after 9/11, 2001 and that bombing. You know, we're coming up ten years anniversary of that awful day, and that happens on Sunday.

"4,000 people gathered for a mid-day prayer in a downtown cathedral, and a New York church filled and emptied six times that Tuesday, and the owner of a Manhattan tennis shoe store threw open his doors and gave running shoes to those fleeing from the towers, and people stood in line to give blood in hospitals, and to treat the sick, in sanctuaries to pray for the wounded. We wept for people we did not know. We sent money to families we had never seen. Talk show hosts read Scriptures. Journalists prayed prayers. Our focus shifted from fashion hemlines and box scores to orphans and widows and the future of the world. Republicans stood next to Democrats. Catholics prayed with Jews. Skin color was covered by the ash of the burning towers, and Tom Burnett, a passenger on Flight 93, you know what he said. Minutes before the plane crashed into the field in Pennsylvania, he reached his wife by cell phone, and he said, "We're all going to die, but there are three of us who are going to do something about it.""

And the word from God to us - When there's a hole in your bag, when there is a thought in your mind, do something about it. Note to self - Message from self - Word from God. It's common sense.

James Moore tells about a wedding that happened in Arkansas, maybe his. The minister asked the groom, "Will you have this woman to be your wedded wife? To live together in the holy state of matrimony? Will you love her and comfort her and honor and keep her in sickness in health, and forsaking all others, keep you only unto her, so long as you both shall live?" and the groom answered, "Would you repeat that question?" and everybody laughed. Matthew reminds us how Jesus told the parable about the sower and the seed and how the seed fell on the path, and how the seed fell on the rocks, and how the seed fell on the weeds, and how the seed fell on the path and the birds came, and how some of the seed fell on fertile soil and a crop grew, and the disciples said, "Why do you speak in parables?" And it isn't in the Bible, it isn't in a written text. But I know it, and you know it. When the disciples looked at him and said, "Why do you speak in parables," he thought to himself, and said it, "Do you have any common sense?" And God said, "Jesus, you picked them."