

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 2, 2018
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 23-33

1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)

5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Jesus as Teacher

Don't stop me if you've heard this one before:

"Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher)." (John 20: 11-16)

Mary wept.

She stood outside Jesus' tomb.
A stranger appeared whom she believed to be a gardener.
They spoke, and then the man said her name.
"Mary!"
She recognized that the stranger in front of her was not a stranger;
this was Jesus of Nazareth, her Jesus, risen from the dead into new life.
Mary said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Larry Todd and I were discussing this text in his home on Friday afternoon.
Larry, why do you think Mary's gut level response was to call Jesus Rabbouni?
"Because we are His pupils," he said.

We are His pupils.
Mary was His pupil,
as were the disciples and the crowds and the people He met along the way,
sojourners on the way to learning.

We are His pupils.
We are on a journey of learning, adapting, growing in grace, wisdom and stature.
To be a student is to be willing to learn, unlearn and discern.
To be a student is to practice humility,
to affirm that "to know what you know and what you do not know,
that [that] is true knowledge." (Confucius)
To be a student is to put in the work, the effort, the energy and discipline
to study and then apply the Master's teachings, lessons, wisdom.
To call a Holy Being your Rabbouni! My teacher!
is to acknowledge that you are not in control,
for you are opening your mind and your heart to change.

An overseas missionary was translating the Bible into a local dialect.
He was stuck on how to translate the word faith.
He went to the village shaman to seek guidance.
The shaman pondered the question of how to interpret faith,
and asked, *"Does it not mean to hear with the heart?"*

For the heart to hear, to listen, to receive, the heart must first be open.
That takes courage and a healthy dose of faith in Jesus the Teacher.
Acknowledging that we are students of the Prince of Peace takes a bit of courage,
a fearless willingness to be shaped and molded,
to be formed and reformed,
informed and transformed.

The Apostle Paul's encouragement to the early church holds true:
*"Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God
—what is good and acceptable and perfect."* (Romans 12: 2)

There is a long tradition of seeing and receiving **Jesus as Teacher**.

In each of the four Gospels Jesus is identified as Teacher.
For those who like numbers, try these facts and figures on for size.
There are 45 instances in the 4 Gospels when Jesus is called Teacher.
Six of those times are when Jesus self-identifies Himself as Teacher.
23 times those friendly to Jesus call Him their Teacher.

There are 18 times when He is described as teaching.
Here's an example from each of the Gospels.

*When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd,
and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd;
and He began to teach them many things. --Mark 6:34*

*This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him,
"Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher;
for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." --John 3:2*

*And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's,
and asked him to put out a little way from the land.
And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. --Luke 5:3*

*Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues
and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom,
and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. --Matthew
4:23*

Jesus as Teacher

Let us observe that his methods, style and pedagogy
were not exactly typical, orthodox, traditional.

"If a person says they want to become a teacher,
everyone has a pretty similar idea of what that means.^[1]
When we think of a teacher we think of someone who has earned a degree,
is standing in front of a classroom with a certain number of students."
Have you ever noticed that teachers tend to gravitate
toward instructing the age group or genre
where they were when they had a formative teacher?

Check it out.

Kindergarten teachers frequently had a memorable kindergarten class teacher.

College professors were often inspired by a college professor.

Check this out as well.

A teacher can be either contagious or a damper, catching or discouraging.

The young person who has a science teacher

who's fired up about the amazing actions of atoms from stardust to genomes
has a greater chance to be a scientist or engineer or bioethicist
than someone who is in a classroom
with a teacher who is malingering or doesn't like kids
or wishes she was elsewhere.

Teaching is all about love.

Love for pupils.

Love for the subject.

Love for sharing, for communicating, for inspiring and instilling and informing.

Jesus as Teacher

"If a person says they want to become a teacher,
everyone has a pretty similar idea of what that means.^[1]

"...it is increasingly difficult to imagine radically different alternatives
of what a teacher might be."

"There are many...alternative models of teaching:
Socrates in the agora; Rousseau's tutor in *Emile*;
the mother teaching her child; the wise one or shaman; the Zen master."

"...*Being* a teacher means something different in each these examples.

It's not simply a matter of different pedagogical methods,
but different relations of teacher to student,
different settings, different criteria of success."

"...Reflect on the intrinsically moral character of teaching
--not simply as a matter of professional ethics,
but as a deeper choice about a way of being in the world,
a way of being with one another in community.

To be a teacher of one kind or another
is also to inhabit a set of ethical relations to [other people]."

Just as we say that ministry is about relationships,
Teaching involves inhabiting and conveying moral character.

"The kind of teaching Jesus practiced
poses a sharp contrast to the didactic styles of most instruction,
including most moral instruction.

Jesus' use of various rhetorical forms
drew from the longstanding Jewish tradition of *meshalim*,
including proverbs, riddles, aphorisms, and allegories.

He drew upon allegories and imagery to paint pictures in minds.

*"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast
that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour
until all of it was leavened."* (Matthew 13: 33)

He told parables and stories whose conclusions demanded your participation.

*"There was a man who had two sons. (Luke 15: 11-12)
The younger of them said to his father,
'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'*

He answered questions with a question.

*"Jesus knew in his spirit
that this was what [the teachers of the Law]
were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them,
"Why are you thinking these things?
Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,'
or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk?'"* (Mark 2:1-11)

"...Through the carefully crafted questions of Jesus,
God invites the world [into Beauty, into Holiness, into a Relationship].

God poses the question of Jesus
each time the questions are asked.

Jesus is in the question and in the answer." (Robert Ismon Brown, bbrown@c1naz.org)

Jesus as Teacher encountered people
in the everyday patterns of life and community.

He used common examples to teach about the uncommon,
the ordinary in the everyday
to point to the extraordinary love of God...in the everyday.

In the Gospel of John,
He spoke of Living Water when He stood beside a well.
He spoke of sheep and shepherds
when near fields and flocks.
To teach on the connectedness of God,
He pointed to vines and good fruit.
To instruct on the nature and nurture of God,
He said I will be your Friend.
To show how to lead a life of service above self,
He washed followers' feet.
To help us to remember God daily,
He used a loaf of bread and a common cup.
To point people toward life everlasting,
He raised Lazarus from the dead.
To assure us of the forgiving, redeeming love of God,
He said we must be born again, from above.
He pointed us to a God who loves us so much
that God came unto the world in human form, as a Teacher and Healer,
an ordinary person who wills for us to be extraordinary.

As extraordinary as He willed for us to become,
Jesus as Teacher did not feel a need to act higher or better than anyone.

"...Jesus was a Jew who always regarded himself as part of the Jewish tradition,
though certainly as a critic, even a revolutionary, from within."

When Jesus was confronted by Pharisees and Scribes
over whether his followers were following Jewish traditions, He taught:
*"Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."
"Listen to me, all of you, and understand:
there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile,
but the things that come out are what defile."*

It wasn't that Jesus sought to defy or deny or not dignify the Law of Moses;
rather He sought to fulfill the Law, to enhance it,
to show that the Law of Moses
is to be practiced in a context of love and grace.
The main point of the Law of Moses was not the Law in and of itself;
the crux of God's Law is to build community and civility
where love and grace flourish.
The scholar in the midst of crowds and disciples and Pharisees made them think:
What is the value of words if one's heart is far from the ways of God?
What is the point of worship
if we teach human precepts instead of deep spirituality?

Jesus was up to the challenge laid down by the Pharisees.
He used this teachable moment to boldly raise questions in their minds:
What are religious rules and traditions aiming to produce, to process?
What's the most important thing?

Jesus as Teacher

God takes advantage of teachable moments.

A teacher of teachers explains "a teachable moment [as]
an unplanned opportunity that arises

...where a teacher has a chance to offer insight to his or her students.

A teachable moment is not something that you can plan for;

rather, it is a fleeting opportunity

that must be sensed and seized by the teacher.

Often it will require a brief digression

that temporarily sidetracks the original lesson...

so that the teacher can explain a concept

that has captured the students' attention.

Taking the time to explore this tangent is almost always worthwhile."

(Beth Lewis, ThoughtCo., June 2018.)

Carpe Diem

Seize the Day

Seize the Moment

The teacher in Jesus comes to the forefront.

Teachers teach to inspire, to interpret, and to instill wonder.

Teachers teach to inform and form, to initiate inquisitiveness and a questioning spirit.

You've seen the sweatshirt: *"I touch the future. I am a Teacher."*

My father was a middle school history teacher.

He also pastored at Church of the Living Hope.

During the week, for 15 years George Calvert taught American history and civics
in a crowded Harlem classroom on 109th Street and Second Avenue.

He led class trips around the city to historical sites

and formed an afterschool history club called the Muscote Yorkers.

He loved to tell about the boy who walked into his classroom

and exclaimed, *"Yeah Mr. Calvert, with his Friday pants!"*

Or the youth who never raised his hand the whole year; then one day he did.

George called on him immediately.

"Mr. Calvert," he said, and pointed at my father's suit. *"Do you have a white dog?"*

Dad was proud of the insightful questions his students asked

the Borough President of Manhattan when they met him,

and told his family at dinner about his student's wonder

when they learned that their votes in the ballot box

would count the same as everyone else in America.

Today, many of his students are civic leaders & educators, good parents & good folks.

He touched the future. He taught.

He loved the young people just as they were.

Dad remembered well the teachers who shaped him,

like his high school history teacher

who demanded much and shared much,

who instilled in George a burning love

for the stories, facts and figures of our collective past,

what they meant to us,

and what we carry forward as we go and grow into a new world.

I have a list in my mind of teachers who shaped and inspired me, as well.

Ms. Visco. Mrs. Blumenthal. Professor Aaron Berman. Dr. Roger Shinn.

How about you?

Let their names and faces float to the forefront of your mind.
Remember, honor and give thanks for the teachers who cared for you,
 who instructed as well as maybe comforted you,
 who looked you in the eye, recognized you, listened to you.
Remember, honor, give thanks those who were conduits of God's grace,
 who taught you and are teaching you to love,
 to live with integrity and compassion,
 to fight for justice and act with mercy.
And while we're at it,
 whom is God calling you to inspire, inform,
 and help transform by the renewing of a mind and a soul?

Don't stop me if you've heard this one before:

A family were out for a walk when their son asked how electricity worked.
"I don't know," said Dad. "I never knew much about electricity."
A few blocks farther on, the daughter asked what caused lightning and thunder.
"That has always puzzled me," said Mom.
The children continued to inquire about many things, none of which were explained.
Finally, as they were nearing home, they said,
 "Are you sure you didn't mind all those questions?"
"Not at all," replied Mom. "How else are you going to learn!"

Jesus the Rabbi has many voices of hope, prophets in our midst, teachers of love.
Love is the lesson.
God is the answer.
Jesus is the Teacher
We are His pupils.
Open your heart so you can see with the faith God has planted within you.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[i] Quotes and Paraphrases from Nicholas C. Burbules, "Jesus as a Teacher." University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign. *Spirituality and Ethics in Education: Philosophical, Theological, and Cultural Perspectives*, Hanan Alexander, ed. (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press): forthcoming.

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