

March 24, 2019

National Presbyterian Church

Jesus the Teacher: When Words Are Powerful

Matthew 16:13-20; Matthew 16:21-26, 17:1-8, 19:16-30

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In our sermons through the Spring we're looking at the 2nd half of the Bible, at what we call the New Testament, and at the moment (in the weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter) we're focusing on the story of Jesus.

We began a couple of weeks ago by thinking of the birth of Jesus as God's decision to come and live among us; to make his home among us and to change us with his presence.

Just as in the movies Mary Poppins and The Sound of Music, Mary and Sister Maria changed lives and brought healing to the houses and homes they came to live in.

Then, last Sunday, Dr. Phil Ryken took us to the beginning of Jesus' ministry and to what we call "Jesus' temptations" (in Luke 4). He addressed two issues that the story points to:

1. The first was that Jesus faced life as we do. He was not above us. He did not get a free pass to escape suffering and problems and difficulties simply because he was divine, or even "really spiritual." BUT life was hard for him – as it can be for us. And this is something we see clearly in the story of his fasting, testing and temptation. He's been wherever we have been, which is always good to know and remember.

The apostle Paul, for example, speaks from time to time about "rejoicing in times of suffering." I've often thought that these comments would have been "pretty cheap" – if we didn't also know that he was writing these words from prison: and not a minimum security cushy prison at that! He's "been there," done that! He has the right to speak.

And so, too, Jesus: because he's been there too we know that he has the right, he's won the right to speak to us, to comfort us, in time of trouble. That's the first issue.

2. The second issue Dr. Ryken added had to do not just with Jesus' fitness to be our comforter, but to be our Savior.

At the heart of Christian faith is the belief that Jesus died for our sins. But someone can only die for someone else's sins if they themselves are sinless; if they don't have to die for their own sins. In fighting off the devil in this moment of mortal spiritual combat in the wilderness– and winning --Jesus was demonstrating that he and he alone can be and is the perfect savior we human beings all need. He doesn't have to die for his own sins – indeed the only reason for his death is to bear the punishment for OUR sins.

So Jesus' ministry begins with this mighty spiritual battle between Jesus and the devil, between good and evil. **And then moves on to stories about Jesus' miracles, and Jesus' teaching.**

With regard to Jesus' miracles – there are about 40 recorded in the gospels.

So when Thomas Jefferson (who was a skeptic with respect to many stories about the supernatural) tried to cut them out, in what we now call "The Jefferson Bible," there wasn't much left!

Among the miracles, there are miracles of healing -- from fever, blindness, deafness, skin diseases, and paralysis. There are miracles involving men and women, as well as children. There are miracles of power and provision: provision, especially when Jesus fed a crowd of over 5000; and then many incident of power over evil, death, and nature.

The miracles over nature include the story we read a few moments ago in Mark 4, let me read it again:

³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat,
so that the boat was already being swamped.
³⁸ But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion;
and his disciples woke him up and said to him,
“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”
³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea,
“Peace! Be still!”
Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.
⁴⁰ He said to them,
“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”
⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another,
“Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Isn't this beautiful? Just as Jesus is with us in times of testing and temptation, so Jesus, here, is with his followers in the middle of the storm: he's in the boat with them (and in our boat, with US). And though it appears that he's oblivious to their fear, he's not! He speaks: -- “PEACE! BE STILL”; and “the wind ceased, and there was a dead – a great – calm.

To which his followers respond – not by saying, “*Wow, what a coincidence! That was a close shave! We just dodged a bullet!*” – But by looking at Jesus in astonishment, and saying “**Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?**” Perhaps better stated: “*My word! Who in the world are you? We thought you were just a preacher – a great one – from Nazareth, just up the road! But who ARE you?*”

The conclusion they reached to that question, they came to (most of them at least) not all at once; and for some, not until after the final miracle: Jesus' resurrection. And their answer, their conclusion was -- that there in the boat with them (who spoke to the winds and waves, and they actually seemed to listen) was none other than “The One” who made them: winds, waves, sea, and everything else! God himself, clothed in human flesh.

I love, and have often quoted Sir John Betjeman's Christmas poem that goes like this

And is it true, and is it true
The most amazing tale of all
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue
A baby in an ox's stall?
The maker of the stars and sea
Became a child on earth – FOR ME.?

This is what those disciples in the boat were grappling with: WHO WAS THIS MAN? And this is what we must grapple with today.

Scholars call this understanding of Jesus: “the scandal of particularity.” That is, while Christian faith has much in common with other religions (a passion for life and love, truth and integrity, and so on) – and I have no problems affirming our connections where we can – Yet, for all that, as Boston University scholar, Stephen Prothero, shows clearly in his book “God is Not One,” we are not all the same: On this

matter *of Jesus and who he is*, we Christians stand alone: we claim that Jesus is THE CREATOR GOD INCARNATE, and that this incarnation is unique (unlike Hindus who might believe in the incarnation, but say that it was one of many): He is *the*, not just one, Son of God.

And the reason we listen to him and his teaching is, therefore, NOT just because on an experiential level his teaching is wise (though it is), like the teaching of other religious leaders (like Buddha or Mohammed or Confucius). But we listen to him above every other voice

- because his are the words that matter most; the words that are filled with divine power;
- because his voice is the voice of the man in the boat; the words of the one who made the winds and waves; the voice of God.

And this is important because sometimes what Jesus teaches – is really hard. Sometimes what Jesus says does not sound wise, or reasonable, or in our best interest at all. Sometimes what Jesus says requires us to think, and will cause us pain to readjust our mindset and our actions. And *unless* we really believe who he is, and that his words are powerful above all others, then it can become all too easy when the going gets tough, to decide NOT to listen! Or NOT to listen that hard.

Think for, example, of the story I read a few moments ago in Luke 10: one of Jesus most famous parables or teaching stories that we call “The Good Samaritan.”

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. (*The Priest and Levite, by the way are like professional “church people” – like the Pastor and the Director of Music*)

³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him, and when he saw him,

1. he was moved with pity.
2. ³⁴He went to him
3. And having poured oil and wine on his wounds
4. He bandaged them
5. Then he put him on his own animal,
6. brought him to an inn,
7. and took care of him.
8. ³⁵The next day -- he took two denarii (about \$500; two days wages) and gave them to the innkeeper,
9. and said, ‘Take care of him;
10. and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ”

This is clearly a story which contains good, solid, spiritual advice: about love and caring! And that’s great: we all need that! I need that – a vital reminder from time to time in the busyness of life to stop and notice those in need. This is “good spiritual advice” from Jesus the religious teacher

But it’s not just that – not just great advice about “love and caring.” It’s also a story about “pride” – about the love and welcoming character that God admires even in a person who to us is an outsider, a deplorable, a heretic, a “them.”

To put it another way, it’s no accident that the anti-heroes in the story are the officials of the “correct” religion (Judaism), and that the hero of Jesus’ story, is a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews in Jesus’ day were theological and political enemies who differed mainly on their view of Jerusalem.

This may seem trivial, but think of Jerusalem in terms of Palestinians and Jews and Muslims today!

Or, in general, think Christian and Muslim
Or believer and strident secular humanist.

Jesus is saying that sometimes the love of “insiders” – believers, Christians, Jews, westerners, “us” whoever “we” may be – doesn’t match the love shown by “unexpected outsiders.” And that’s hard to take. I’m not sure I like it. It strikes at my pride!

But – if I believe that Jesus is the Unique Son of God, and his words are THE words I need to listen to, then, the thing is this: I am not free to turn away from his word just because I don’t like it, or it pushes my buttons and makes me uncomfortable.

And the same is true when Jesus asks us to do something that we think is “way over the top” . . . which is what he does when he describes the love shown by the Samaritan (this “deplorable infidel,” this unlikely person, this enemy). The love the Samaritan shows, is in fact – stunning -- in at least ten remarkable ways. Let me read from Luke 10 again.

1. The Samaritan was moved with pity.

He allowed his emotions to be stirred up by what he saw

2. He went to him

He changed his plans because of what he saw

3. He poured oil and wine on his wounds

This was quick thinking: using what he had as a disinfectant and anesthetic—probably using olive oil and wine that he was carrying to a party or sales event of some kind.

4. He bandaged the wounds

It is highly unlikely that the Samaritan was carrying bandages. So this meant he ripped some garment or blanket of his to help the wounded person.

5. He put him on his own animal,

Temperature-wise, this Jericho Road was a really hot spot (I’ve been there!); it was definitely not the place for a casual walk or for sharing transportation if you had it. Giving up transportation was not insignificant.

6. He brought him to an inn,

7. and took care of him.

This is clearly another action that involves self-giving from the Samaritan, and messes up his schedule and plans even more! We learn next that he even spends the night with the man!

8. The next day he took out two denarii (hundreds of dollars), gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him;

This is interesting because it indicates that the Samaritan still had other plans to fulfil and tasks to complete: he knew the limits of his own involvement, and so left the inn. BUT, he didn’t leave before planning ahead! He used his own money to buy the man the care he needed, and then enlisted the innkeeper to help in his absence..

9. and (finally, the Samaritan says): when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

The Samaritan was thoughtful, not only about the wounded man, but about the innkeeper. He assured the innkeeper that he would not end up “out of pocket,” and gave his word to follow up, at great – in fact limitless – expense.

This is quite a list!

Involving, emotions, plans, quick thinking, losing time, and using energy, finances, the present and the future all given over to this stranger (and the innkeeper!) in need!!

So this love that Jesus speaks about is way more than being “nice.” It’s costly, inconvenient, and *seems a little overboard*. But that’s the point (or at least, part of the point). When Jesus calls us to love, he calls us to give ourselves to a love that never stops asking:

1. “What more can I do?”
2. “Where am I being selfish?”
3. “What abundant resources have been given to me by God, that I am supposed to use for God and others?”
4. “Where have I put limits on my love that God wants me to remove?”

And this is the voice I need to listen to, even when I want to quit. Because *this* is the voice of “the man in the boat”: the One whose words are filled with power; who knows far better than I do what is best for my life especially when it’s hard, and when I think I’ve had enough, and want to quit.

SO -- as we read the stories of Jesus this is what we need to remember: his miracles and his teaching go hand in hand.

SURE -- WE’VE BEEN CALLED TO LISTEN TO HIM

- Because he’s a great spiritual teacher (like many others)
- He gives us good spiritual advice: when it comes to loving others, for goodness sake, just stop, and notice the needs! We all need to hear this!

BUT THEN -- WE’VE BEEN CALLED TO LISTEN TO HIM

- Not just for good spiritual advice, that is clearly “good.”
- But for insight about ourselves and others that may at first challenge our pride and make us feel uncomfortable.
- Jesus, “the man in the boat,” makes us ask, “what’s going on in ‘unexpected others’ that pleases God? Especially when my own life may be falling short? Maybe more than we know! Ouch!

AND THEN -- WE’VE BEEN CALLED TO LISTEN TO JESUS

- Even when his Words stretch us beyond the limit; when we think “I’ve done enough: haven’t I?”
- “Maybe not!” says Jesus. “Have you stretched in love as much as the Samaritan? Or even stretched at all?”

Uncomfortable stuff, but all linked to who we believe Jesus is. And – one final word – not just to *who he is* – but to *what he himself does*.

Have you ever noticed how similar the Samaritan in the story is to Jesus himself? Remember, Jesus, never asks us to do what he was unwilling to do himself.

1. Jesus was – and is – moved with pity. For us
2. He came to us (as a baby, and still comes to us by his Spirit)
3. And seeks to heal us (spiritually, and ultimately, physical in the resurrection) by his love. By his wounds, says Isaiah 53:5, we are healed.
4. Carrying us and our sins in his own body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24)
5. Bringing us to a safe place: giving us an eternal home in the family of God (John 14:1-6)
6. and not holding on to his own life – but giving it away generously to pay for our sins even with his death (2 Corinthians 8:9)

7. Promising to come again when the time is right (John 14:3)

The ONE in the boat who has power over the wind and waves is the one who loves us this much . . . so that both because of his power AND his love, his are the words that matter most: LISTEN TO HIM!!

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