

June 13, 2021

Matthew 5:13-16

Freeing Jesus: Jesus as a Teacher

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Most of you know, I spent this last week at church camp. I enjoyed a week with about 50 junior high campers and some really incredible adults who loved them well. If you are or were a camper, you may recognize some of the songs we are singing today in worship from your camping days. When I was a youth minister, I spent a good part of my summers at church camp, running Vacation Bible School, and going on mission trips with youth. In that season of my life, I loved it. I loved being outside. And I loved having time to play and laugh and just hang out. But what I loved the most about summer programming was that it was and still is the closest thing we, the church, has to teaching the way Jesus taught.

Jesus was a teacher, but he didn't have a classroom or a pulpit. He had gatherings by lakes, meals around tables, and road trips. He taught the people he met by telling them stories, using ordinary things as object lessons, and by hanging out with people who were not accustomed to anyone making time for them. That's exactly what we do at camp. We teach campers about God and God's over the top love for them by telling stories, making friendship bracelets and God's eyes out of ordinary stuff, and prioritizing fun and relationships over curriculum, by creating intentional Christian community. We teach like Jesus taught.

Today's text is part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, his longest teaching sermon in the Gospel of Matthew. He used this opportunity to talk to his followers about everything from divorce to how to pray and what it means to love your neighbor. This is Matthew 5: 13-16:

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Jesus used ordinary things, salt and light, to give his followers an identity: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Identity, who we are, only matters, though, if it affects how we act in the world. What is it to be salt and light in the world? Salt and light were both precious commodities in Jesus’ time. There were no saltshakers on tables or Amazon from which to order, there were no switches on the walls of homes that instantly produced light. But both are necessary to sustain life, and neither can be produced easily on our own. They are gifts of creation that require careful ingenuity to access and conserve. And having them makes a big difference. Without salt, there is no bacon. Without light, not much gets done. Jesus used these metaphors to make this point: just as the world needs salt and light, it needs the people of God to be at work preserving life and lighting up the world with hope. We cannot keep what we have to ourselves, we have to share it with the world. In other words, knowing about God is not enough. We have to share what we know. Jesus spent his entire ministry teaching his followers how to do that. Through his teaching he introduced them to the kin-dom of God and to a way of being in the world that was very different than what they were experiencing under the oppression of Rome.

Today’s sermon is the second in our series that follows Diana Butler Bass’s book, *Freeing Jesus*. The book looks at the ways in which Bass has experienced Jesus throughout her life. Last week, we talked about

when she was first introduced to Jesus, and she learned about Jesus as a friend. This morning, we are looking at the chapter that talks about Jesus as a teacher. She explains in the book that her image of Jesus as a friend changed about the time her Sunday School class changed from sitting in a circle, singing songs and hearing stories to sitting at tables and desks with a pencil and a worksheet. Jesus was now a teacher. If we spend much time reading about Jesus's ministry, we see that everywhere he went, he was teaching somebody something. Did you know that of all the names for Jesus available to them, the people who knew him best most often called him teacher?

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. I would spend hours in my room playing school. More than anything, I loved to pretend I was the teacher, and it was the first day of school. "Why the first day?" you ask. The first day of school is the day the students learn the rules. At that point in my life, I was a huge fan of rules. I wanted to know what was expected so I could do exactly that. So, my challenge as an 8-year-old teacher to my imaginary students, was to dream up creative ways to present the classroom rules. My class played matching games and I passed out fill-in-the-blank puzzles that reinforced our classroom rules. I invited my students to come up to the front and act out skits that depicted people following the rules and people not following the rules. I encouraged them and applauded their efforts. It was a very good day when my own experience at school gave me ideas for how I could teach my at-home students who were, by the way, riveted. My black and white world of rules made me feel safe and, most importantly, they made me feel right.

We Christians like to say that our faith is not about rules, but passages like the Sermon on the Mount, make that statement hard to support: "be reconciled to your brother or sister, do not look at a woman with lust, do not get divorced, do not swear, if someone wants your coat, give them your cloak too, give to anyone who begs, pray in secret, do

not worry about tomorrow, do not judge, ask and it will be given to you...there are more. And as if that were not enough, churches add their own rules to the ones they often misinterpret in the Bible. "During Advent, you have to put purple cloths on the communion table. During Advent you have to put blue cloths on the communion table. Baptism can only be by immersion. Babies must be baptized and only by sprinkling them with water. Communion should be observed once a month. Communion should be observed once a quarter. Communion should be observed every week. Women shouldn't preach. Lesbians can't teach Sunday School..." there are more. We like our rules. Rules help us know what is expected of us. They draw lines between we, who are right, and all the ones who are wrong. Because of that, rules in the church have a way of keeping people out.

I was in 4th grade when I realized the rules I was teaching my imaginary students didn't work for everyone. I mean...they worked for me. I was a rule follower. Why couldn't everyone follow the rules? Eventually, though, I began to make some exceptions for my students. I would tell them that if they didn't get their homework done, to bring it to me and I would help them. Mrs. Baird was my 4th grade teacher and I watched her everyday bend the rules for students whose parents hadn't been available to help them or who had forgotten their homework at home. It was the first time I ever considered the idea that there was more to being a good teacher than monitoring who was following the rules and who wasn't.

Jesus knew there was more to faith than that too. It wasn't that rules were bad; it was that lists of rules do not tell us much about what God is like, they don't do much to change hearts. Jesus knew that if he really wanted his followers to see a glimpse of the kin-dom of God and to want to be part of it, talking about rules all the time was not the way to do it, even if he did use nifty metaphors to make his point. So, he told stories. Bass writes, Jesus's parables were "open-ended tales that invite

us to struggle with their meaning, to wonder, to see the world from unexpected angles.” Good teachers don’t give us the answers, they teach us to think. They encourage questions and curiosity. Jesus’s parables tell us just enough to make us wonder. They invite us into a world that is both ordinary and extraordinary. “...parables are Jesus coming alongside us and ripping off our cozy theological comforters, Bass writes, “Parables should leave us gasping, out in the doctrinal cold, and shaking with anger, awe, or surprise.” Jesus, or any good teacher, leaves us a little bit disturbed, wondering if what we think is true, really is the truth or a truth. And, my friends, the only way to figure out what really is true is to dive in and live what we suspect Jesus is trying to teach us.

If you were here last week, you may remember I said that if I asked everyone in this room and watching online to fill in the blank in the following statement, “Jesus is a _____,” there would be many different answers. “Jesus is a friend” may resonate with you. I bet a good number of us would fill in the blank and say, “Jesus is a teacher.” Bass tells a story in her book of a friend who was straight up mad when she filled in the blank that way. “No,” her friend said, “Jesus is Lord.” Another friend later told her, “The problem with ‘Jesus as teacher’ is not that it’s wrong, but that it’s shallow.” As I considered that, it occurred to me that “Jesus is a teacher” might sound shallow if teachers really are just rule givers and enforcers, but my experience with Mrs. Baird in 4th grade taught me otherwise. And my experience in seminary did too. There, I was taught by scholars who were, as you might guess, very interested in asking and answering the question, “Who is Jesus?” but they were also entrusted with teaching students a way of being in the world that is not about rules, but about love, compassion, and justice. They helped me find my own voice and my own way, which, in the end, was Jesus’s way.

It's easy for me to see Jesus as a teacher because what he taught has consistently helped me experience and understand God more completely. Our job as followers of Jesus is to, by being salt and light in this world, teach other people what God is like. That's what we try to do at camp. And we don't do it with curriculum, polished worship, or by having a lot of rules. We do it by singing silly songs, having messy, sweaty, fun together, and encouraging campers to share who they really are with each other in their small groups.

And just like Jesus, we tell the campers parts of God's story and we remind them that they are part of that story still be written today. But mostly, we tell them the most important thing any of us will ever hear...God loves you. We tell them over and over, in a hundred different ways because we know that each one of us has our way of learning. And we hope that just one of the ways sticks and they believe it. And we tell them to go from camp and tell other people, we tell them to go into the world and share their light. God loves you....more than you know. Go and tell the others. Amen.