

"TO TEACH AS JESUS DID"
service of thanksgiving and approbation
First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa
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[texts: I Cor. 12: 12-13,27-31/Mark 4:1-9]

"Again he began to teach."

Let's imagine ourselves with Jesus as he teaches his disciples. Jesus tells a parable; the response: "Is this going to be on the test?" Jesus instructs on the relationship between God and humanity; the response: "Do we have to know this?" or "Should we take notes on this?" Jesus teaches the Beatitudes; the response: "Uh, slow down -- I can't get all this in my notes!"

I'm not sure that Jesus encountered those responses, at least Scripture doesn't record them in so many words. Teachers these days, however, hear these and their variants all the time, including the infamous homework-eating dog! Although now the "computer ate my homework" probably gets more currency! As one who has labored in the field of education at various levels most of my professional life I am quite sympathetic. Those of us who are teachers know how frustrating -- as well as rewarding -- teaching can be. I sometimes wonder how Jesus, the Master Teacher, would teach in our present day? How would he deal with those typical contemporary student responses? In turn, how do we come to teach as Jesus did?

Well, we do know that while Jesus may not have had students asking those "questions," he dealt with the attitudes behind them. In fact, scholars tell us that the parable of the sower is probably autobiographical. The figure of the sower is used in ancient literature as a metaphor for the teacher. Some students are going to receive the seed and bring forth a harvest. Others are going to have the seed fall into their lives, but for one reason or another it won't have an effect. Here, then, Jesus recounts the results of his own experience as he preached and taught. He had encountered the hard-packed ground of the Pharisees' minds, the stony ground of the crowds with their shallow enthusiasm, the thorny ground of the Scribes, and the fertile ground of those who heard and followed.

Thus, this parable doesn't tell us so much what Jesus taught, as how he taught. While we hear about the poor ground that doesn't bear, we have to remember that there was also good ground that bore "thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." So, Jesus is not pessimistic as he recounts his teaching. He is realistic. There are those who will "have ears to hear" and those who will close them. Does it mean that we cease teaching? No.

The first teaching method of Jesus is to keep teaching -- regardless of the situation. Sow the seed, over and over again. There is no such thing as "wasting it" -- who knows where there's a small patch of good ground where it may take root and grow? On the humorous side, I am reminded of the college professor's line from Thurber's play, "The Male Animal," "I believe that college should be concerned with ideas. Not just your ideas. . . or my ideas, but all ideas. . . I have been putting ideas into young people's heads for forty-two years with no -- visible -- results whatever." We may not see immediate, visible results, but the seed has been planted. Jesus reminds us that we're not after a "high crop yield." We're happy if a seed brings forth a plant.

There is a reason the people commented, "We've never heard anyone speak like this before," and we hear that "the common people heard him gladly." He adapted to the needs and situations of his hearers, this was his second teaching method. Augustine commented on this teaching approach in the fourth book of On Christian Doctrine, written in 426. He reminded his brethren in the ministry that all of the tools at the rhetorician's command should be used -- whether originated by a pagan or not -- if it got people to hear the Gospel. He wondered if those who teach falsehood are "to tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly, and plausibly, while the latter [the Christian teacher] shall tell the truth in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and, in conclusion, not easy to believe it?" And answered, "Who is such a fool to think this wisdom?" This same ability to adapt was what led Patrick of Armagh to explain the mystery of the Trinity using the shamrock -- showing that three can indeed still be one. If we are to teach as Jesus did, we must seek to move, teach, and delight people in a way they are able to understand.

The third method of Jesus's teaching is that he practiced what he taught. Of all the 'proofs' or evidence that one can give, Aristotle tells us in his Rhetoric, the strongest is that of a life in harmony with the message. Modern language would put it this way: "if you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk." Jesus certainly demonstrated this in spades. He taught a way of hearing, and he listened to his Heavenly Father. He taught a way of service and he served. He taught a way of self-giving and he went to the cross. To teach as Jesus did means to live as he did.

If Jesus were to teach today he would have the same impact as he did in the age when he lived. Why? Because he was genuine. He had something he wanted to give and he lived a life that reflected the desire. His fourth teaching method, then, was that he knew his subject -- not from secondary sources, but first-hand. He was intimate with his Father and from that community he experienced in the Blessed Trinity he taught of the reconciliation of humanity to God. Those of us who seek to teach as Jesus did must

come to know him, not just "know about" him. The experience of life in God is what makes the difference between theology, properly defined, and mere phenomenology. It's like the story told by the old monks about how hedgehogs got grapes. They'd roll over the fallen ones and whatever stuck to their spines, they'd eat. Some people approach the faith that way -- they roll over and get a bit of the fruit and think they have something. Truth is, they get mostly skins, if one wants the juice you have to squeeze the grapes in clusters -- you have to enter into the experience. That's how Jesus taught.

At the outset I asked the question, what would it be like were Jesus to teach today? One of the wonders of our faith is that Jesus **does** teach today. He continues in the midst of his gathered Church, which Paul tells us is Christ's body, and animates and guides us as we continue to share his message. The message of a people once alienated and scattered -- like a headless body -- brought back together and made whole in the love of the risen Christ.

We are Christ's body and the analogy holds true, since each of us serves a unique purpose in the function of that body. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians gives us some indication of the organization of the early Church. Reading Paul, no doubt, inspired the desire of the early Congregationalists to restore this New Testament structure. They wanted to teach as Jesus did and live as had those first Christians. Thus, the Massachusetts Bay folk would frame the Cambridge Platform back in 1648 to speak of the Church's officers.

The Pastors special work is, to attend to exhortation: and therein to administer a word of wisdom: the Teacher is to attend to doctrine and therein to administer a word of knowledge: and either of them to administer the seals of the Covenant, unto the dispensation whereof they are alike called. . . . And as much as both Pastors and Teachers are given by Christ for the perfecting of the Saints, and edification of his body which Saints and body is his church; therefore we account Pastors and Teachers to be both of them church officers. . .[c. vi, sec. 5/6]

Over the years these offices became merged, often into the office of 'minister.' Lonnie and I, however, hope to revive the special emphases of these approaches to ministry which together perfect and edify the body of Christ's church.

The message of the Congregational way, sometimes referred to as the 'Puritan middle-way,' is at once ancient and contemporary. Its roots are deep in the Scripture and the experience of the early Church. It is at once grounded in the historical teaching of the Christian faith and open to dictates of an informed and seeking conscience. I believe that it is a message which carries in it the seeds for a renewal of the Church in

America, since it is not so much a belief system or institution, but a way of relating to Christ and to his people.

I have come to "own the covenant" after years of spiritual search and study. I have experienced first-hand what it means to go through the 'hoops' of the institutional Church. While grateful for the experience and the knowledge, I am overjoyed to fully embrace the way of faith, freedom and fellowship. I am happy to be a part of a people who believe because they have freely chosen to and in response to Christ's gracious invitation. For me the Congregational way is to seek to live as Jesus did and to teach as Jesus did.

And, yes, this will be on the test!