

## “KNOWING JESUS: IV - TEACHER”

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Mark 4:1-20

A number of years ago, a great movie came out which was entitled “To Sir, With Love.” It starred Sidney Poitier, as an American teacher teaching in a public school in inner-city London. As the movie opens, Poitier has just started his teaching career there, and he meets his students for the first time, and to say they were a rough lot, would be putting it mildly. They challenged him at every turn. He was having absolutely no success teaching them anything, and in the teachers’ lounge he would commiserate with his fellow educators, many of whom had been there for years and were equally frustrated, and had settled into a sort of malaise about it all.

Poitier’s character wasn’t about to settle in or give in to them, for that matter. Instead, he changed his tactics. He changed his teaching style. He, in fact, changed what he was teaching them. He didn’t just concentrate on teaching them facts, he began to teach them about life. He taught them about respect, and dignity; he took them on field trips and opened up their horizons, introducing to worlds about which they knew nothing. By the end of the movie, they were calling him “sir” and when he had the opportunity to leave the school for a more lucrative job in engineering, they pled with him to stay.

Did you ever have a teacher like that? A teacher that you remember to this day? A teacher who did more than teach you facts, but taught you about life? A teacher who made you want to learn more and do more? Maybe some of you have one like that even now.

A pastor whose sermon I read this week told about an English teacher he had, a man named Mr. Mate. Mr. Mate, he said, “had a gift for appealing to his students and facilitating interaction among all the students in the classroom.” Listen to what he did! “Mr. Mate especially caught our attention (he continued) when he had the class work on trying to understand the poetic lyrics of a popular rock song of that time (the late 70’s). The questions and class discussion dealt with many issues that were relevant for teens, from racial issues to addictions to religious issues to the occult. As the class worked together on this project, barriers seemed to fall away. Mr. Mate allowed each student to share their own understanding of the good or the bad message that was contained in the song - there was an atmosphere of mutual respect in that classroom.” (Elias Lutheran

Church, Pastor Jon, on-line)

Sidney Poitier's character and Mr. Mate were really good teachers because they went beyond pushing the facts to touching the soul.

Which brings us to this morning's Gospel lesson - and the person at the center of it - Jesus our Lord and Savior - and today, master teacher. In this fourth and final sermon in the "Knowing Jesus" series, we'll look at Jesus the teacher. If Sidney Poitier's character and Mr. Mate were really good teachers, Jesus is off the chart good!

Before we look at Jesus' teaching, however, we need to look a little further back - at the teaching that came before Him. The teaching before Jesus largely came by way of the Scribes and Pharisees. And if you remember them, you'll remember they were men of the Book, of the Law, of all the laws. They were learned, and studious, and focused on keeping the letter of the law. So their job, as they saw it, was to make their students memorize the laws and then live by them. Period.

A writer by the name of Angela Askew has written that, "The rabbis of this period in history routinely referred to the responsibilities of living by God's law as a 'yoke' - as something people took on themselves to steer and guide them down God's path in life. And it seems to have been a common complaint, addressed above all to the scribes and Pharisees as interpreters of God's law, that their teachings had become complicated and difficult to follow, a burden rather than a guide to holy living." (Angela Askew, online)

In other words, she says, the scribes and Pharisees was that "with their complicated interpretations of the Law they had managed to make some basic guidelines very complex and intimidating. Of course (she adds), by doing this they retained their professional authority and power, but they also managed to turn people away from holiness of life with God."

It was rough going to be a student of theirs. Jesus saw that. And granted, Jesus did his share of teaching in the synagogue, albeit not using their dry, dreary methods, but he had taught in the synagogue.

Now, He decides to do something different. In today's lesson, Jesus does something radical. He leaves the synagogue and begins to teach right among the people. It was, in some ways, scandalous.

And not only did he leave the synagogue, he left behind the Pharisaic method. He began to teach in a whole new way - and the whole new way was telling

parables - stories. And oh, was He a storyteller!

The great commentator Barclay calls a parable “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Something on earth is compared with something in heaven, that the heavenly truth may be better grasped in light of the earthly illustration.” (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 85)

And when Jesus taught in parables, people listened - because they connected with Him. When He wanted them to know about God’s grace for us sinners, He told them about a father dealing with a prodigal son. When He wanted them to know about facing huge problems or fulfilling their potential, He pointed to a tiny, little mustard seed. When He wanted them to know about God’s seeking love for them, He told them about lost sheep.

And every time He did it that way, Jesus connected with people. They listened and they learned. It was so different from the way they had been learning, that they were excited by it, they connected with it, and they grew through it.

As I said in an earlier sermon in this series, actually, just last week when I preached about Jesus the healer - in every encounter with persons, Jesus sought health and wholeness for that person. So too, in His teaching. That was the point of His teaching. He wanted persons to learn and grow, and most of all, to grow into the persons God created them to be, and grow in their relationship with Him.

Jesus didn’t just want them to hear the stories for the sake of the stories. Jesus wanted them to take the stories in, and make them their own, and apply them to their own lives. That’s why He would tailor His teaching to specific situations. If He was talking to farmers, He would use farming images. If He was talking to fishermen, He would use fishing images. If He was talking to shepherds, He would use images of sheep. Jesus knew His audience, and He spoke in a way that they would connect immediately.

It was a totally new way for the people of God to learn. In some ways, friends, we are here because someone else was willing to do things in a new way - and his name was John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. John Wesley was reared in an Anglican home in England, the son of an Anglican priest. He grew up, was educated at Oxford University, became an Anglican priest himself, and fell into the traditional ways of the Anglican church.

Along the way, a friend of his, a man by the name of George Whitefield, began to do something quite radical. He also was a pastor, and he went outside of the church and began to preach to coal miners near their mines. It was scandalous - for in those days in the Anglican church, services never took place outside of the

church. Never. Wesley himself was offended by it. He said, "I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way - having been all my life so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church." (Barclay, p. 84)

But the Lord touched his heart, and soon enough, Wesley himself went outside and began to preach in fields and in prisons and wherever people were hungry for the Word. The fire that was started on those occasions eventually led to the formation of the Methodist church. We came out of a movement to do something in a new way - a way that will go anywhere, and do whatever it takes to reach people with the saving love of Jesus Christ.

And we continue that way today - willing to go wherever, and do whatever it takes to reach people with the saving love of Jesus Christ - and we do it especially through our Christian education ministries. Today is Christian Education Sunday, and on this day, we stand in the shadow of the Master Teacher and say that we, too, are committed to all of God's children being healthy and whole, and being in right relationship with their God. We too, seek to reach people in a way that stirs their souls, and creates a thirst within them to see Jesus more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly.

I'm so happy to say that were you to wander through this building on any given Sunday or many night during the week for that matter, you would find a variety of teachers using a variety of methods to reach and teach their students. In one room, you might see a video playing, in another a group of students poring over their Bibles doing verse by verse study. In still another place, you would see a group animatedly discussing current events by way of a curriculum that was faxed to the church that very week, and in another, you might see students acting out a Biblical lesson in a drama, or writing a poem or a journal entry. You might even see a class taking a field trip to discover God's truth in another location.

Whatever it takes to draw people closer to Jesus - that's what our Christian Education ministry is all about - because that's what Jesus' education ministry was all about. That's why He told the parable He did in this morning's lesson. He wanted people to think about the state of their souls. He wanted them to think about their lives, and how they received the life-giving Word of God. He wanted them to be intentional about the growth in grace.

So He told them in a way that would grab their attention. Did it grab your's? When you heard that parable, did you ask yourself, 'Where am I in it? Who am I in it? Is my life a field of fertile soil that will receive the love of God and grow in it and through it, or is my life a shallow field that pays scarce attention to the One who gave me life?' That's what Jesus wanted those people to think on, and that's what

He wants us to think on this day.

It is His desire that all of us be healthy and whole, not just physically, but healthy and whole in our minds and hearts, as well. To do that, requires a lifelong commitment to our own Christian education - a lifelong commitment to learning more and growing more - a lifelong commitment to intentionally growing in our love for and commitment to Him.

Today, on this Christian Education Sunday, we take the time to lift up those whose only desire to help all of us do those things - our Christian education and youth teachers and leaders. Week after week after week, they work hard at finding ways to excite us about growing in grace. Week after week after week, they give of their time and talents that we might grow closer to Christ. Week after week after week, they, indeed, like Jesus, do all that they can to help us be healthy and whole in the best ways possible.

So today, let us first help them by praying for them, and dedicating them for the task that lays before them in the weeks and months ahead. I invite you to take out the pink insert in your bulletin for the service of dedication, and I invite Melinda Grablis, our director of children's and educational ministries to come forward, and with the help of some friends, introduce our teachers and leaders.