Jesus the Teacher

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 29, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.
Scriptures: Mark 4:1-20 and Mark 4:21-34
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Who is Jesus to you?

If I call myself a Christian, I am saying that I am a follower of the one who is called the Christ, namely Jesus. So my answer to the question, "Who is Jesus to you?" will impact how I live my life as a Christian. If you don't mind me answering, at least to start, in the negative, I would say that I am becoming less and less convinced that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah. After his death and resurrection, the early church clearly came to see him as the Messiah, but prior to that, I'm leaning toward Jesus not thinking of himself as the Messiah. And if he didn't think of himself as the Messiah, I suspect he wasn't as eschatologically focused as the gospels make him out to be. In other words, I don't think Jesus was as concerned about death and the afterlife and the end of time and the final judgment as he is often portrayed as being. Jesus was much more concerned about this world and this life.

Jesus showed that concern in several ways. He was a *spirit person*, someone who was experientially aware of the reality and presence of God. He showed his concern for this world in his mediation of the sacred to others. He was a *healer*. I talked about this last week, and all I'll add today is that he showed his concern for this world by transforming the lives of people around him. He was a *social prophet*, "similar to the classical prophets of ancient Israel. As such, he criticized the elites (economic, political, and religious) of his time, was an advocate for an alternative social vision, and was often in conflict with authorities."[1] We will touch on this today and next week. He "was a *movement founder* who brought into being a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day, a movement that eventually became the early Christian church."[2] This also will be explored, at least a bit, this week and next. And he was a *teacher* – the primary subject of today's sermon.

I suppose that all of these descriptions of Jesus overlap or intersect. One of the ways he showed he was a spirit person was by healing people. I don't think you can separate his social prophecy from his becoming a movement founder. He taught through his healings. "By healing blindness, for example, Jesus dramatized God's desire to heal our distorted vision of life. By healing paralysis, he showed how God's reign empowers people who are weak or trapped…. And by casting out unclean spirits, he conveyed God's commitment to liberate people from occupying and

[1] Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1994). 30.
[2] *Ibid*.

oppressive forces – whether those forces were military, political, economic, social, or personal."[3]

In synagogue gatherings and on hillsides, he gave talks about things theological. At a dinner party when an uninvited guest showed up and in public places when his critiques tried to catch him with tricky questions, he found teachable moments. His guerrilla-theater demonstrations (like on Palm Sunday) and his acts of civil disobedience (like chasing money changers from the Temple), provided learning opportunities for people who were paying attention. "Once he demonstrated an alternative economy based on generosity rather than greed, inspired by a small boy's fish-sandwich donation."[4]

And then there were his parables.

Perhaps it is time for a quiz. What is greater than God and more evil than the devil, the poor have it, the rich need it, and if you eat it you'll die? (Answer: Nothing.) How about this one: You threw away the outside and cooked the inside. Then you ate the outside and threw away the inside. What did you eat? (Answer: An ear of corn.)[5]

John Dominic Crossan points out that one of the primary ways to understand or interpret some of the parables attributed to Jesus in the gospels is to see them as *riddles*. He says that when a parable is a riddle narrative, "not only the general story itself, but even its multiple parts each and all point elsewhere. Such riddle parables are also called *allegories*."[6]

That is certainly how Mark treats the parable of the sower. We heard this in our first lesson from Mark. Jesus tells the story about a farmer who goes to sow some seed and the seed falls in six different kinds of soil. We usually only notice that there are four kinds of soil – the path, the rocky, the thorny, and the good – but the good really comes in three kinds – soil that produces a thirty-fold crop, soil that produces a sixty-fold crop, and soil that produces a one-hundred-fold crop. Still, we see a silly farmer, casting seed where even the horticulturally-challenged know it won't produce anything.

But, of course, the parable isn't about horticulture and it isn't about a sower. The parable, as Mark understands it, is a riddle, an allegory.

Another way to understand and interpret some of the parables of Jesus is to see them as *example parables*. Example parables are stories that invite us to go and do (or, in some cases, don't do) likewise. Aesop's fables fall into this category.

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[3] Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking* [Kindle version], chapter 22, page 101. Retrieved from amazon.com.
[4] *Ibid*, 102.
[5] These two riddles are from Mike Page, "Classic Riddles 1-100," *Savage Legend*, https://savagelegend.com/misc-resources/classic-riddles-1-100/ (accessed 28 January 2017).
[6] John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 18.

You might remember the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel. King David spies this sexy woman taking a bath and decides he wants her for himself. To do this, he has to get rid of her husband, Uriah, one of his generals. So David sends Uriah on a suicide mission and he is killed. God is none too pleased with this and sends the prophet Nathan to David to set him straight. Would you like that job? Go and tell the king, who had one of his generals killed, that God is not pleased? Nathan does this by telling an example parable.

> "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." (2 Samuel 12:1-4)

Crossan says, "Although a ruler should always be apprehensive at the approach of a prophet, David walks right into Nathan's parabolic trap:"[7]

> Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."
> Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:5-7a)

Yes, it's sad that Nathan completely misses how the system promotes the objectification and possession of women, but his story is still a great example of an example *parable*.

Crossan has also identified a third way to understand and interpret Jesus' parables. He says that Jesus' parables were *challenge parables*, at least originally, though they were changed into example parables and riddle parables by the gospel authors. Challenge parables challenge "us to think, to discuss, to argue, and to decide about meaning."[8] They challenge us, the hearers, "to step back and reflect on the world and on God in new, counter-intuitive ways. They invite [us] their hearers to ponder 'whatever is taken totally for granted in our world'."[9]

While I haven't delved very deeply into Crossan's work on parables (yet), I think he is on to something. I imagine that maybe half of Jesus' parables include the phrase "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven" – and this kingdom totally challenges what is taken for granted in our world. We heard this today in our second reading. "The Kingdom, something great, is compared to something very

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[7] *Ibid*, 35.
[8] *Ibid*, 47.
[9] Greg Carey, "Crossan on Parables and Gospels," *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-carey/dont-fear-this-book-cross_b_1417435.html (posted 16 April 2012; accessed 28 January 2017).

tiny: it is like 'a grain of mustard seed.' Moreover, mustard was a weed, thus, the Kingdom is like a weed. [In another parable,] The Kingdom is compared to something impure: it is like a woman (associated with impurity) putting leaven (which was impure) into flour."[10] And on they go, overturning conventional wisdom.

"[F]or Jesus, the kingdom of heaven wasn't a place we *go up to someday*; it was a reality we pray to *come down here now*. It was *at hand*, or within reach, today. To better understand this pregnant term, we have to realized that kingdoms were the dominant social, political, and economic reality of Jesus' day. Contemporary concepts like *nation*, *state*, *government*, *society*, *economic system*, and *civilization* all resonate in that one word: *kingdom*."[11]

Brian McLaren writes, "The kingdom, or empire, of Rome in which Jesus lived and died was a top-down power structure in which the few on top maintained order and control over the many at the bottom. They did so with a mix of rewards and punishments. The punishments included imprisonment, banishment, torture, and execution. And the ultimate form of torture and execution, reserved for rebels who dared to challenge the authority of the regime, was crucifixion. It was through his crucifixion at the hands of the Roman empire that Jesus did his most radical teaching of all.

"Yes, he taught great truths through signs and wonders, public lectures, impromptu teachings, special retreats and field trips, public demonstrations, and parables. But when he mounted Rome's most powerful weapon, he taught his most powerful lesson.

"By being crucified, Jesus exposed the heartless violence and illegitimacy of the whole top-down, fear-based dictatorship that nearly everyone assumed was humanity's best and only option. He demonstrated the revolutionary truth that God's kingdom wins, not through shedding the blood of its enemies, but through gracious self-giving on behalf of its enemies. He taught that God's kingdom grows through apparent weakness rather than conquest. It expands through reconciliation rather than humiliation and intimidation. It triumphs through a willingness to suffer rather than a readiness to inflict suffering. In short, on the cross Jesus demonstrated God's nonviolent noncompliance with the world's brutal powers-that-be. He showed God to be a different kind of king, and God's kingdom to be a different kind of kingdom."[12]

When Martin Luther King, Jr., talked about the "Beloved Community," I think he was talking about the kingdom of God. The King Center explains it this way: "Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be

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[10] Borg, *op. cit.*, 80.
[11] McLaren, *op. cit.*, page 103.
[12] *Ibid*, 103-104.

replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict."[13]

As lofty and utopian as this may sound, when King talked about the Beloved Community, he wasn't talking about something found only in the great beyond. He was talking about something attainable, something that is at hand. "The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence."[14]

We have seen in the past few weeks how our nation has moved away from the Beloved Community. Most recently, the ban on refugees and immigrants and visitors from a handful of nations that are Muslim-majority is an example. People with valid visas and green-cards are being detained at the border. This is empire action that is completely contrary to the values of the Beloved Community, contrary to the values of the kingdom of God. And that is why people have taken to the sidewalks and airport terminals – to help our country move in the direction of the Beloved Community, not away.

We still need Jesus the teacher. We need to pay attention to his actions and his words. We need to follow him toward the kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, the way of living and being in community that challenges the most basic values of the powers that be.

As we move into our time of quiet, I invite you to reflect …
… on anything from the scripture readings or sermon that caught your attention; or
… on the memory of one of the most important teachers in your life and what made him or her so significant; or
… how you might translate or reinterpret the term "kingdom of God;" or
… how the "kingdom of God" is coming in your life, your family, your community.

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[13] "The King Philosophy," *The King Center*, http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4 (accessed 28 January 2017).
[14] *Ibid*.