

## Didache

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church  
in Fremont, California,  
on May 15, 2022, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.  
Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6 and Acts 11:1-18  
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Many of you know that my first vocation was teaching, but not all of you may know that I inherited a legacy of teaching from my parents. My mom taught first grade, and from her I learned to love reading and developed the habit of having a very full bookcase, whether it was in my classroom, or my office, or at home. My dad taught high school industrial arts—he basically taught every shop class in existence at one time or another—and from him I learned to always carry tools, how to put on the spare when I had a flat tire, and how to change my own oil. Since my first car had a carburetor, I learned that, if it felt like the engine was misfiring, I was probably due for some new spark plugs, or a new distributor cap. Which makes me think of this strip from one of my dad’s favorite Sunday comics:

Many of my teaching friends thought it was an odd vocational jump from teaching English to ministry, but it made perfect sense to me, because the founder of our faith was himself a teacher. Throughout the four gospels, his disciples address him as Teacher, and many times he is described as teaching:

“Then he went about among the villages teaching.”<sup>1</sup>

“Every day he was teaching in the temple.”<sup>2</sup>

“He said these things while he was teaching in a synagogue at Capernaum.”<sup>3</sup>

“Now when Jesus had finished saying these words, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.”<sup>4</sup>

Like many teachers, Jesus comes by his teaching vocation as a legacy from his forbears. Teaching and study were foundational practices in ancient Israel, in the time of Jesus, and continue to be important in Judaism today. Jesus embodied the declaration of God in the book of Deuteronomy: “These words, which I am ordering you today, are to be on your heart; and you are to teach them carefully to your children. You are to talk about them when you sit at home, when you are traveling on the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”<sup>5</sup>

In the gospels we see Jesus pass that legacy on to his disciples, giving them authority to teach and heal in his name, which is exactly what the apostles continue to do in the early years of the fledgling church.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 6:6 (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> Luke 19:47 (NRSVUE)

<sup>3</sup> John 6:59 (NRSVUE)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:28 (NRSVUE)

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (Complete Jewish Bible)

Immediately after the Pentecost event, the new converts “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”<sup>6</sup>

Even prison couldn’t keep the apostles from teaching. When the high priest arrested the apostles and put them in prison, “during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, ‘Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.’ When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching.”<sup>7</sup>

In today’s text from the book of Acts, we see Peter teaching at a critical turning point in the new faith. Up until this time, the ministry of Jesus and his disciples was primarily offered to the people of Israel. There were a few notable examples of healings of gentiles, or of gentiles who believed in Jesus, but they are the exception. In this story, Peter expands what it means to belong to the faith and family of Jesus. Peter’s vision confers on him the spiritual authority to welcome non-Jewish believers, and to draw the lines of belonging differently. From this point on in the story, the teaching about Jesus and the Kin-dom of God is offered not just to the children of Israel, but to those outside the Jewish faith as well.

The Greek word used for all these instances of teaching is derived from *didaskein*, meaning “to teach,” and is root of the English word “didactic,” which means “intended for teaching.” The noun form of *didaskein* is *didache*, which is one of the five original vocations of the church that we’re exploring this month. *Didache* was of primary importance in the early church, not only because it was a vocation of Jesus, but because it was the primary way that people learned about Jesus and “the Way,” as the new faith was called in the first century.

As early as the year 50—decades before the gospels started circulating—there began to circulate written texts instructing new converts and new communities following the Jesus Way. The most well known of these is called “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” more commonly known as simply “The Didache,” or “The Teaching.” This teaching text was so vital in some early communities that it was considered of equal importance with the other apostolic writings that eventually coalesced to form the New Testament.

Among other information, “The Didache” gives basic instruction on the heart of Jesus’s teaching, including the great commandment to love God and neighbor as self, on the golden rule to “do unto others,” and to love your enemies. It also gives instructions for baptism—both what to say and how much water to use—and a basic outline for a communion liturgy. And it includes the Lord’s Prayer, almost identical to the way we continue to say the prayer today. According to “The Didache,” we are to recite the prayer three times daily.

For Jesus and the Apostles—and for us today, I would suggest—teaching was not merely about communicating information; it was also a prophetic act. Jesus didn’t just spoon-feed data into people’s minds. The revolutionary Brazilian educator Paulo Freire would call this the “banking model” of education—you make a deposit of information, and then at some future date you make

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:42 (NRSVUE)

<sup>7</sup> Acts 5:19-21 (NRSVUE)

a withdrawal of that information. Instead, Jesus was encouraging people to make his teaching a part of their lives. He was calling them to a new vision of how the world should work. He urged them to co-create that new vision—the Kin-dom of God—by radically changing their hearts, their lives, and their behavior. His teaching called people to build a society that was not about power over or power against, but that was about power used with and in favor of and for one another and greater good. It was about a building a community of mutuality where all can claim their best possibilities, not only for themselves, but for the whole world.

And because this vision of a new world was in direct opposition to the empire of Rome, Jesus’s teaching was also a political act. The Christian vocation of *didache*, so long as it continues to push against the boundaries, to challenge racism, sexism, classism, and all forms of oppression in the world, will always be in opposition to those in power, and will always be a political act.

The way I think of it, Jesus was the originator of the teach-in. He gathered people around him wherever he found himself—in the temple, in a village synagogue, on the shore of the lake, on a hillside—and he told stories and interpreted scripture, and he asked probing questions, all related to the most pertinent issues of people’s lives. The apostles continued this practice, gathering folks around them wherever they went—in the temple, on the road, and even in prison. They continued Jesus’s legacy of pushing against the power of the authorities and the Empire.

Those of you of a certain age will remember teach-ins from the Vietnam War era. The concept of the teach-in was developed by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and the first teach-in was organized by faculty and Students for a Democratic Society at the university on March 24–25, 1965. The event, which included debates, lectures, movies, and musical events, got national press coverage, and by the following week, anti-war teach-ins were popping up on campuses everywhere. By the end of 1965, there had been teach-ins on 120 college campuses across the nation. Teach-ins continued to be used by the anti-war movement throughout the duration of the war.<sup>8</sup>

And teach-ins continue to be used by protest movements today. The Occupy Wallstreet movement—remember that, from a decade ago?—used teach-ins to educate people about income inequality and the inherent problems of capitalism. In 2015 and 2016, the Black Lives Matter movement held teach-ins to educate about racial inequality—well before the protests in 2020 in the wake of the George Floyd murder. At the first Earth Day in 1970, concerned citizens from all walks of life organized environmental teach-ins. And just this year, climate activists held a Worldwide Teach-in for Climate Justice, which was held on college campuses all over the world on March 30.

Like the disciples, we are inheritors of this legacy of teaching, this vocation of *didache*. The teaching of Jesus—the message of God’s love and the hopeful vision of a new world—is ours to make part of our lives, and ours to teach now, not just to our young people but to anyone who will listen and learn. We need to have our own teach-ins, in the church and the street and the town square and the hillside, to teach that message of love to a world that is still desperate to hear it. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, “Teach-in.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teach-in>. Accessed May 14, 2022