

BEING TAUGHT BY JESUS

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis on January 29, 2017

Epiphany 4A 2017

Matthew 5: 1-12

Each week for the next 4 Sundays, our Gospel reading is from the Sermon on the Mount. So, today we are beginning a sermon series on the most famous sermon of all time.

You might know that there are 2 versions of this sermon, one in Luke and one in Matthew. Our lectionary readings this year come from Matthew. Each of the 4 Gospels tells a particular story about who Jesus is. There are many similarities but there are also some differences, and contrary to the view that these differences are a problem, I see them as something that helps us know Jesus more fully.

In the picture Matthew paints of Jesus, Jesus is the Ultimate Teacher. Jesus still heals and preaches as he does in the other Gospels, but for his disciples the most important role he plays is Teacher. I know some of us push back at the idea that we are disciples because we haven't dropped everything to follow Jesus, but the truth is that we are. So, I want to look at what it means to have Jesus as our Teacher.

We all have our own ideas, our own pictures of what a teacher is based on our experiences. So, right now I'd like to ask you to call to mind your favorite teacher—and what it was that made him or her such a good teacher. _____

For me, it's a tough call because I've had many good teachers but there was one to whom I stayed connected until his death two years ago. Coleman Brown was a religion teacher and our college chaplain. College—especially my first two years—was a rough time for me because my father had died just before my senior year of high school and I was grieving mightily, in addition to trying to figure out who I was and adapt to what seemed like a foreign culture to me. I was in the middle of upstate New York, having spent my entire life up until that point in Florida.

Academically, I did not do great during my first two years *but I learned a lot*. And my greatest teacher was Coleman Brown—in the classroom, in the pulpit and in caring conversation. When I think about what made Coleman such a great teacher, there was one essential ingredient and that was *love*. Love for his subject matter; love for the Gospel; but most of all, love for those of us who were learning from him—not just students but faculty and staff and even the president of the university.

Parker Palmer says that love is the most important element in teaching—and I'd have to agree. What opens us up the most, what allows us to learn and grow and change is love.

The second thing that comes to mind when I think about what made Coleman such a good teacher was that he taught me how to think. In the classroom—and also in sermons—there was content but just as often there were questions. I have a picture of Coleman at the chalkboard writing this question: “Audacity and Humility: How to hold them together?” Those are the kind of questions that change your life.

When we look at Jesus as a Teacher—when we look at what it means to have Jesus as *our* teacher—he embodies both of these. Jesus loves those of us who are trying to learn from him. That is the starting point. We are not students trying to get an A on living the Beatitudes—and by doing well on our Beatitudes exam succeed in getting Jesus to think well of us. The starting point for the Beatitudes is love—God’s love for us—for the world—visible in Jesus.

For many years, the standard Lutheran interpretation of the Beatitudes was that they were an impossible ideal—that we could never hope to live them and that they were basically there to show us how sinful we are and how much we need Jesus. Thankfully, in recent years, there have been some other ways of looking at these amazing words of Jesus.

The first thing to notice is that these are not imperatives. The disciples of the first century and the disciples of the twenty-first century are not being told to *be* poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness. These words of Jesus are blessings, words of promise to people who are already in these categories.

The first disciples of Jesus were living in a time when they were outside of the structures of power—both politically and religiously. They were on the margins and in the Beatitudes, Jesus is pronouncing God’s blessing on all the marginalized. These groups are valued because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted because of their beliefs.

So, in these days of making lists of who is excluded from entering our country and who can use certain bathrooms, Jesus makes a different kind of list. The people whom Jesus calls “great” are not the ones whom the Roman empire or the Jewish elite would call great.

Today is Reconciling in Christ Sunday, so I’m particularly thinking about people who are of different sexual orientations and gender identities—and how increasingly vulnerable they feel. And I also think about this congregation and our long history of standing with these people who have not always been explicitly welcome in many churches. We have list in our welcoming statement in the bulletin that tries to make explicit how wide the welcome of Jesus is.

Today, I’m feeling the gap between that list and what is going on now in our country with the ban on refugees and citizens from 7 predominantly Muslim countries. There are many reasons—both moral ones and ones in our national self-interest—to be alarmed at what is happening. But—as Christians—as people for whom the kingdom of God, the reign of God is both the future we are looking toward and breaking in now—the gap between that reign of God and what is happening now is excruciating.

That excruciating gap is the same place where the first disciples found themselves. So, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, the Ultimate Teacher teaches them what it means to live in that gap—what it means to be an alternative community who can live *right now* in light of the coming reign of God.

Jesus speaks—as great teachers do—to a deep place of truth within in us.

One of the things I did when I lived in Guatemala was work on an adult literacy program. It was based on the methods of Paolo Friere and it helped me to see teaching and education in a whole new way. Very simply, traditional education is a banking method: teachers have

information to deposit into students. Education for liberation connects with deep experiences and truths inside of the student, and links these to action. Curiosity and critical thinking rather than depositing information are the key elements of this approach.

I see Jesus as this kind of teacher—and I see the Beatitudes—and the whole Sermon on the Mount—as a teaching that speaks to a deep truth inside of us and calls out of us something that we didn't know was there. The Beatitudes are not an unattainable ideal put out there by Jesus like a demanding syllabus by a teacher whose trying to weed out the committed students from those who are not.

The Beatitudes are a blessing on all the marginalized and forgotten and despised—yes—but they are also a blessing for all of the rest of us, too. They are a picture of God's agenda—not just for the next 100 days—but forever. We are headed toward a future where those who are undervalued—of all religions and all nationalities—are at last fully valued as human beings.

This is a moment when Jesus is teaching us by speaking to deep places within in us and calling out a kind of courageous love we didn't know was there. Lutherans have a long history serving immigrants and refugees. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service is working with unaccompanied refugee minors living in refugee camps. Because of the travel ban, now they cannot fly to the U.S. to live with their foster families. These are kids who are being prevented from being part of a family—kids who have suffered tremendously from war in their home countries. *What kind of loving and courageous response does that call forth out of us?*

Jesus, the Teacher who loves us more than life itself, the Teacher who loves us to new life, is teaching us how to love. Thanks be to God. Amen.