

“JESUS: II – THE TEACHER”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
March 16, 2015

Second Sunday of Lent

John 3:1-17

One day, probably during a winter much like the one we’ve been going through, a kindergarten teacher knelt down to help one of her students put on his boots. She pulled while he pushed and the boots just didn’t seem to want to go on. After they finally got them on, the little boy looked up at her and said, “Teacher, they’re on the wrong feet.” She looked and sure enough, they were.

So, she struggled to get them off, and then struggled again to get them on the right feet. Once they were finally on a second time, the little boy looked up at her and said, “Teacher, these aren’t my boots.” Silently exasperated, the teacher bit her tongue and took them off a second time.

Once they were off the little boy said to her, “The boots are my brother’s boots. My Mom made me wear them.” Well, the poor teacher didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but with a deep breath (or more like a deep sigh), once again, for the third time, she pulled and he pushed and they were back on his feet again.

When she was finished, the teacher stood up and looked down on him and said, “Okay, now, where are your mittens?” To which he replied, “I stuffed them in the toes of my boots!” (on-line, sermoncentral.com)

Oh man! Anyone in this room who is or has been a teacher can probably identify with that, huh? Teachers are amazing people – they do amazing things, and they have to have an amazing amount of patience!

Today, in this second sermon in my Lenten series on ways that Jesus was revealed to us, we’re going to look at Jesus as one of those amazing people – Jesus as Teacher.

This week, in our staff meeting, as we were having devotions, I read the Gospel lesson that you just heard, and then I asked the staff to tell me about their favorite teacher, and why they were their favorite. It was great to hear their stories. It’s been a while since most of us, well, all of us, were in school, yet the names of those favorite teachers came right to all of us! Because those teachers were special, they made learning special and fun, and they made us feel special.

I had a lot of great teachers over the years. You might be interested to know that Sonny Tenney not only taught me in the classroom, he was also my driver's ed. instructor – so you can blame him if you have any complaints about my driving! My father was my all time favorite teacher, and I always told Dick Shaffer that he was my second favorite! And he was. I loved his class. He taught US History and it was great. He loved the subject, and he loved to teach it, and taught it in creative ways. And he loved all of us.

Teachers are special people, they bring things alive for us, and help us grow in so many different ways. And that certainly was the case with Jesus – the teacher. Look, for example, at what happened in this morning's Gospel lesson.

Nicodemus, a very learned man, by the way, came to see Jesus in the dark of night. Why? Oh, there has been much speculation on why he came at night. Some say he came then because he didn't want anyone to see him. After all, he was a learned man, well versed in the law, some might think less of him for seeking more from Jesus. Others say, he was a little embarrassed himself, coming to Jesus to learn more, so he just wanted to keep it to himself and Jesus. Still others say that his visit at night was intentional because scholars knew that the quiet of night was the absolute best time to study.

Well, for whatever reason, Nicodemus came to Jesus and had this conversation with him. The actual meat of the conversation was about faith and growth and new life in Christ – but it's not the "what" of the conversation I want to talk about this morning – it's the "how." I want to talk about how Jesus taught.

There are actually three things I want to lift up this morning about Jesus' teaching. The first is this: It is clear that in all of his teaching he loved his students. He loved them enough to interact with them, challenge them, support them, and encourage them. He loved them enough not to tell them the answers, but to help them figure them out for themselves. First and foremost, Jesus loved his students.

In a wonderful book called *The Courage to Teach*, author Parker Palmer writes this: "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves." (Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, p. 11)

That is exactly how Jesus taught – helping his students learn to weave a world for themselves. When I look at the interactions Jesus had with those he taught, and how life-giving those interactions were, I am reminded of a scene in a movie many of you have probably seen – *Dead Poets' Society*. In that movie, there was a very striking scene where the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher was made crystal clear. Professor Keating, played by Robin Williams, was

teaching a class on poetry, and was rather unorthodox in his teaching style, in spite of the fact that he was teaching at a very conservative and traditional school. So when it came to teaching poetry, he skipped right over the introduction in the book, which was entitled something like “How to Read Poetry.” All previous professors had gone through that essay line by line, and Keating himself, in fact, was supposed to present it that way. Instead, he skipped right over that dry, mind-numbing essay and invited his students to dive right into the beauty and majesty and flow of poems themselves – and they absolutely, positively fell in love with poetry, and formed or re-formed the “Dead Poets’ Society.” Professor Keating was, in the words of Parker Palmer, helping those young men “learn to weave a world for themselves.”

Underneath every bit of teaching Jesus ever did, was a deep love for the ones he was teaching. He wanted them to learn and grow, he wanted them to be all that they could be, he wanted them to weave a world for themselves.

Secondly, Jesus taught in a number of creative ways. Suffice it to say, he was not a lecturer. Some of his most well-known and most-remembered teachings were parables – you know, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son. Jesus could have given a lecture on grace, what it is, how God pours grace upon all of us, but instead he told stories about grace, so it became personal and real, and so his students, his hearers would hear it with their hearts not just their heads. Sure, they might remember the facts about grace should Jesus have lectured about it, but when he told about it in parables, they saw themselves in the stories and knew God’s grace was for them as well.

And he used illustrations all the time in his teaching – illustrations with which they were familiar. He used a lot of agricultural illustrations – they were people of the land, and they got those so well. You know, the sower sowed seeds, and some fell on good soil, some on rocky soil; and the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus used things that were a part of their lives – salt, light, pearls - so they understood exactly what he was trying to teach them. He didn’t try to make things hard to understand; no, in all ways, he wanted to help his hearers as best he could to get what he was trying to say.

And one of the things Jesus did most often in his teaching was use the Socratic method – he answered questions with questions. He did that with the lawyer who came to him and asked him what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus came right back at him with a question, “What is written in the law? What do you read?” You see, Jesus understood, that it was in the dialogue, the questioning back and forth, that the lawyer would understand far better than if he had just given him a quick answer straight away. Jesus absolutely, in all the ways he taught, wanted his hearers, his students, to “weave a world for themselves.”

Underneath everything Jesus did in his teaching, whether it was in sermons, or parables, or questions – however it happened – underneath it all was Jesus’

desire that people would always keep learning and growing, their entire lives. It didn't matter who they were, male or female, young or old, Jesus wanted them to learn and grow their entire lives – because as they did they would draw closer to God, and become more fully the people God created them to be.

And friends, so it is for us today. Jesus still teaches, and we are his students. Every time we open the scripture, He teaches us. Every time we open our hearts in prayer, He teaches us. When we use our Lenten devotional, or the Upper Room, or Our Daily Bread, He teaches us. When we hear something in a sermon and ponder it, or wrestle with it, He teaches us. Still today, He teaches us, and helps us weave a world for ourselves.

And He doesn't do it just through the Word, He teaches us through the world around us as well. I think I told you once how Bishop Robert Schnase talked about how one day he spotted an unusual bird in a tree near his home. Curious, he searched through bird guidebooks to learn more about that bird, and actually bought some binoculars to get a closer look at it. Suddenly, he said, he had become a birder, and he began to love talking long walks to see all the birds he could see. He said that once his eyes and his attitude were attuned to birds, he began to see them everywhere – unusual birds, striking in their colors and behaviors were living in his own backyard. It was because he had studied those books that he began to have “new vision” if you will – seeing what had always been right in front of him, but he hadn't seen. (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, p. 76)

In much the same way, Schnase suggests, when we delve into God's word, we will begin to see the world in a whole new way, actually, we'll begin to see God in the world in a whole new way – God at work in the world. And when we do, it is Jesus, yet again, teaching us “to weave a world for ourselves.”

My friends, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus teaches to this day. The question that each one of us is called to answer is “will I be his student?” My hope, no my prayer is, that you and I will be – that we will sit at the feet of the Master Teacher and learn and grow every day that we are alive. He has so much to teach us, and waits to help us “weave a world for ourselves.”

I want to close with an image for you to think about. When I think about Jesus and the way he taught his students, I liken it to a dance. A dance between two people, back and forth, moving to the rhythm of life and music, learning and growth. Jesus dancing with his students with questions, and stories, and parables, and even silence.

So go back to school – your favorite teacher of all – Jesus the Christ, the Lord of the dance – is waiting for you! Amen.

