

SAYINGS OF JESUS
EAST/WEST NORTH/SOUTH PEOPLE

Text on Sunday, October 3, 2010

Luke 13: 22-30

In a few minutes, First Church will celebrate the reception of new members, and we will ask our brothers and sisters three questions. I want to think about the first of them with you. It is “Will you follow the teaching of Jesus Christ?” Not plural—teachings—but just “the teaching.” What is that singular teaching?

Since the beginning of summer, all our sermons have been grounded in the sayings of Jesus found in chapters 10—14 of Luke’s gospel. We’ve been marinating in Jesus’ teaching. How do he taste? How does we taste? What is the elemental character of Christ’s Body? I think you know the answer— but before I say it in so many words, I will say something about the way Jesus imparted his teaching, for his medium is part of his message.

Any teaching that can heal you deep down must have a Yes and a No in it, a giving and a taking, a paradox. This is to keep you from thinking you have grasped it once and for all. Otherwise, you would become strong and proud in mastery. You would stop growing. You would market the teaching. When the slogans of politics and religion sound alike, someone has got hold of half the truth and missed the whole teaching of Jesus. The road to hell is paved with half truths. The whole truth you can *only* follow, for the whole truth is always on the move. You never have it. This is the Christian paradox.

If one says that Jesus’ singular teaching is Love, she is right—but since we think we love to love, we often do not feel the strangeness and the paradox in the command to love. So, more often, Jesus puts the teaching another way. He says The last will be first; the first will be last. He says, Those who try to save themselves will lose, those who lose themselves for my sake will live. He says, Faith no bigger than a mustard seed can move mountains, O you of little faith. He says power is made perfect in weakness. He says, Forgive, forgive, a thousand times a day, forgive. Let go! He says, Take the low seat at the table. He says, You who do not live and love like this will be cast out. Now this is shocking—a terrible sentence. Yet he says the cast out will come from east and west, from north and south to sit at one table in peace. Where are you? Cast out? Cast out is not the worst place to wake up. Ask the prodigal son. This is the Christian paradox.

Today, some of you are joining this teaching, this Body of Christ with your whole heart. I hope each of us is, again. Though we have but a short ceremony, the act of joining is not a little thing. It is the word made flesh. Will you follow Jesus’ teaching? Will you learn to love the cast out and the cast down—in yourself, in this community, in this city of life and of death? There is only one way to learn Jesus’ way: *Take up your cross and follow me.*

Today, some of you will be ordained as elders of the church. “Ruling elders” we have called you for five hundred years. It sounds like power. Some have mistaken it for power over others, to the church’s peril and their own. Jesus says, *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* (Mark 9:36) Will you who are elders sign up for that—not just the two whom we ordain today, but each of you who serves as an elder? The teaching never ends.

Today, all of you will come to the table of the holy communion. When we say, “People will come from east and west, from north and south” to sit at table in the kingdom of God, hear the invitation not as to an insider, not as to a soul saved and secure, but to that of you who is cast out, cast down, uncertain, guilty—yet open to be loved not for what you have done or not done, but because you have being, because you belong to God. Into our body in a moment we will take the sign of such love: *This, my body; this my blood—for you.* This is Jesus’ teaching: In everything for which you will die to yourself in good faith, your God will raise you into life which God alone gives. Do this, says Jesus, remembering me.