

TEACHING JESUS TO FISH

Texts on the Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31: 27-34; Luke 5: 1-11

One often hears it said of Jesus that he was a great teacher. In today's story, so many want to hear him at the lake shore that they press him down over the sandy beach right into the water. Taking to a boat, it says, "he sat down and taught the crowds." (Good acoustics, by the way. Haven't some of you been amazed to listen in on fellow fishermen quietly talking a hundred yards away?) So what did Jesus actually say? *Love your neighbor? Pray every day? Don't be greedy? Brush your teeth? Be here now?* Many churchgoers say that Christianity is about "following the ten commandments and the teachings of Jesus," as if Jesus' teachings were fairly straightforward rules for good behavior—maybe harder to get down than the times tables, but just as clear.

That can't be what Jesus was teaching. That would just be a new set of rules added on and Christianity would be no more than a fruitless branch of Judaism with more rules. Jesus and Paul both say that Moses' rules are plenty good enough and no one is doing very well with them anyway, so why suppose that God sent Jesus to burden us with still more ways to fail? "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets," Jesus says. "I have come to fulfill them." Christianity is not about having the best rules. Let's stop teaching that Christians should follow the teachings of Jesus like directions in a recipe book. That's not it.

Sometimes they called Jesus "great teacher." What was he teaching that was so great? When we call a local school teacher "a great teacher," what makes her great? Don't all sixth grade teachers use the same material? What makes the difference? Her *method* makes a teacher great, not her material; not her knowledge, but her connection. The reason for this is that great teaching is only great if great learning takes place. So a great teacher must have a method that actually gets through to the learner at an unexpected level.

For church people, this is both bad news and good news. The bad news is, if you want to learn something from Jesus, you can't get away with just going to church and hearing or reading Jesus' material—the so-called teachings of Jesus. You can't learn from a great teacher just through a book. The good news is, your spiritual development is not over. In fact, it's mostly still in front of you—if you are willing to become a disciple of Jesus' method. Jesus was a great teacher because his method was great, and so disciples learned deeper than thought can think. They learned life and love down in the depths where the self can actually be changed. What was Jesus' method?

The gospels are very clear about this. He spoke in parables. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say he "taught the crowds . . . in parables; he told them nothing without a parable." Do you have a feeling for how strange this might be? You go to a lecture and you want it straight and direct. A preacher is praised when she teaches "God loves you, so be nice." But Jesus will have none of this. He offers nothing except it be found inside a parable—a little egg you have to crack.

The word parable has an interesting root in Greek. It's the same as *parabola*. It means a *side throw*. Para-ball! Like in basketball: fake to the left, pass right to confuse the defender who is caught looking in the wrong place as the ball swooshes in the net. That's what a parable does—it catches you looking in the usual place, the wrong place. But unlike the game, the confusion you feel from Jesus' parables is for your sake.

A parable aims to make you stumble out of your usual way of thinking. To interfere with the habits you are comfortable with. To bring up stuff you thought was settled, stuff you don't even see in yourself.

To bring up your self from the bottom. Most of the time, we don't even want what the great teacher offers. We just want to plod along in our ruts. Unlike famous preachers, Jesus can't have been thrilled to see big crowds on the shore. Crowds mostly come out to hear some great material, then go home saying "Wow! What a great speaker!" But Jesus had only a few dozen disciples after all those years. Many are called. Only a few choose to be disciples of the deep.

With a parable, the teacher gives *you* the work of emerging from your confusion into a new way of seeing, a new way of being. The teacher leaves the stage so that you can perform. This is how Jesus taught. This is all that he taught, how to let go so that new life might burst forth..

According to our story, only *after* Jesus has finished talking to the crowds does he say to Simon Peter, "Put out into the deeps and let down your nets." And though Peter does not know the voice or the teacher, and though he knows this water well and has worked it all through the night, still he listens. "If you say so, I will let down the nets." Then he acts. Here is the parable. *If you, O Master whom I do not know, yet who speak to me as if from within myself—if you say, 'Let down, go deeper'—if you say 'Never mind your superior knowledge, your experience and your skill, but drop down now beyond what you know'—If you say so, I will.*

This story isn't about something that happened one sunny day long ago. It is a parable about your finding a way to stop thinking just what you think or feeling just what you feel and become open. The boat Peter is in stands for the church. Jesus' voice in the boat is the Spirit of God moving over the waters, creating new, coming to you distinctly, yet as a parable requiring you to choose and be changed. The deep waters stand for all things made and unmade that can give life—all knowledge, all art, all beauty, all power to heal and all power to suffer without despair. Your task, you, disciples of the church, is to learn from the Master how to go down and bring up the treasures of life from the depths. To fill the boat of the church with life—not with rules or old worn out language and music that makes you comfortable that do not touch people in their depths—but with people who are fed from the waters of life. Will they come if they sense that you think they are ignorant and you have stuff to stuff in their heads? They will not. You must become yourselves great teachers, who learn to leave the stage for the sake of the other.

"To be a teacher in the right sense," a great teacher once wrote, "means to be a learner . . . to put yourself in the other's place so that you may understand what he understands and in the way he understands it, in case you have not understood it before. This is the secret of the art of helping others. It begins with self-humiliation: the helper must first humble himself under the one he would help, and therewith must understand that to help does not mean to be a sovereign but to be a servant."¹

In great teaching, the method *is* the message. The method is: self-humbling. The method is: God comes down! So can you. God comes into our depths, comes up under us, comes beneath our boat, rocks us off balance so we may become aware of the One who has no name at all. Who sends Jesus who humbles himself. Who refuses the Palm Sunday crowds' demand for a sovereign. Whom Pilate cannot persuade to call himself king over anyone. Who still refuses to lord it over you or to teach you in the old school manner by giving you stuff to memorize and tests to pass or fail. Christ enters lower than we have gone fishing for, down among the least and the lost whom we ignore, down in parts of our nature of which we are ashamed. Jesus is always teaching, not ideas, but himself. He is teaching Jesus to fish. And we're the fish.

When Simon Peter sees this great catch, as our story tells it, he falls down at Jesus' knees. You see? Peter humbles himself. How great is the teacher, for in one hour the learner has learned—not the

¹ Søren Kierkegaard in *the Point of View for My Work as an Author*

material, but the method. Peter makes himself low. He dies to himself, we often say. In the moment of recognition called “I am a sinful man” he dies to his old self, the sinful man, and comes to himself, a new life ready to fish.

When you want to teach the highest, hardest things—the things of Christ that help a person move from misery to peace—you really have only one thing to teach, only one parable: Be like Jesus for the world. You are the Body of Christ. Get out of the way of your knowledge and your material. Show how to give your life that you may keep it. Demonstrate how to strive to be last that you may be first. At home, at work, at play, live how to be a servant of all that all may freely serve. This is the only teaching of Jesus. He says it in different ways—but in the end, it isn’t his material that matters; it is his method. With all his heart, all his soul, with all his mind and all his strength he taught this method, “becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”—ah! his perfect parable— so that you and I might also see and live like this on earth, as it is in heaven—where, the LORD declares, “I shall put my law within you and I shall write it on your hearts. No more will they teach one another, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

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