

In the chapter of his book, We Make the Road by Walking, which coincides with this week of the liturgical year, Brian McLaren discusses “Jesus the Teacher,” and suggests pairing the chapter with the reading of some of Jesus’ parables, which seems like a pretty obvious choice. Less obviously, he also suggests the segment of Proverbs which I just read, part of which we read together as our Call to Worship. He doesn’t give any rationale for this suggestion of Proverbs 3, doesn’t discuss it in the chapter, doesn’t mention it in the study questions at the end of the chapter, and it doesn’t come up in his supplemental online guide to the book. Naturally, I want to start out this morning by talking about it. Isn’t it fun to have a contrarian as your pastor?

I can think of several reasons why McLaren would connect this chapter from Proverbs with the theme of “Jesus the Teacher.” It was the function of a teacher, then as now, to pass on to their students the wealth of accumulated knowledge in their field. Jesus, as a teacher of the things of God, would have been expected to be fluent not only in the Law and the Prophets but also in what is often known as the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, that is, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. The Book of Proverbs is itself a sort of compilation of human wisdom, inspired by God. We find very similar writings among the Deuterocanonical books, specifically in Sirach and The Wisdom of Solomon. We can be pretty sure that our four canonical gospels and others such as The Gospel of Thomas do not contain all of what Jesus taught. Some of his teachings may have been more conventional, like the Proverbs. It is likely that what his disciples remembered and passed along were his teachings that were new and illuminating to them, even if, as the Gospels suggest, they didn’t understand them at the time.

The content of this section of Proverbs is another reason for McLaren to suggest it in the context of “Jesus the Teacher.” Specifically, it connects to Jesus through the language in verses 19 and 20 concerning the place of God’s wisdom in creation. Listen to those two verses again: “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.” I hope that these two verses remind some of you of other passages we’ve studied together before – those in Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon that personify God’s Wisdom and attribute to her a key role in creation. I’m thinking specifically of Proverbs 8: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth... When he established the heavens, I was there... when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” I’m thinking of Sirach 24: “Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, “Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.” I’m thinking of Wisdom 7: “For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty... she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.” What does all that have to do with Jesus? Remember that the Greek word “logos,” generally translated in the New Testament as “word” can also mean “wisdom.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” What

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those Old Testament writers said about wisdom and what John says about the Word are pretty much the same thing. And the Word, for John, we know means Jesus.

McLaren reminds us, through his reference to Proverbs that Jesus was not just “a” teacher, he was “the” teacher, the ultimate interpreter of God to humankind because he was the very incarnation of God’s wisdom. Other teachers may open our eyes to aspects of God and the way God calls us to live but no one, before or since, has done such a comprehensive job of it as Jesus. As a teacher, Jesus is matchless because of his connection to his subject.

With that in mind, I turn now to what McLaren says about “Jesus the Teacher” in his book. How, he asks, did Jesus teach? Well, our New Testament reading gave us part of the answer. “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.” Perhaps most famously, Jesus taught in parables. McLaren’s suggested reading for this week includes all of Mark 4, in which we have at least four parables, depending how you count them. These subtle, even mysterious teachings are complex metaphors for God and God’s work in the world. We still create parables to express our ideas about God and to teach others. The book and subsequent movie, The Shack, which have been popular during our time together, are a good example of a modern parable. We sang another one just moments ago: “Lord of the Dance.” Parables unlock different ideas in each of us, depending on our own experiences and ways of seeing the world. They are memorable because they make us think about the truths they are portraying.

Matthew 13 also takes up the idea that all of Jesus’ teaching came in the form of parables. That idea used to appeal to me a great deal when I was forming my rationale for seeking a ministry in theatre. Charlie Scalise, I probably used the Matthean form of the verse in my paper for you back at Southern Seminary. And, indeed, I pursued a “parabolic ministry,” as I called it, for some sixteen years after I left seminary and still support, in various ways, professional theatre companies that seek to speak of spiritual things to our consumerist society. As you all know, Connie and I regularly attend shows at Taproot Theatre and I still count many of the staff as dear friends. I’m excited for Taproot’s founders, Scott and Pam Nolte, as they anticipate separating from the company and entering into retirement. I also attend shows when I can at Pacific Theatre in Vancouver, BC, another professional theatre with a Christian mission, where I serve on the Board of Directors. In fact, I spent the day on Friday driving to Vancouver, helping to interview candidates for their Executive Director position, and driving home. So, I’m still enthused about and involved in “parabolic ministries.” But I agree with Brian McLaren that parables are not the only way that Jesus taught.

In fact, we find a couple of examples of non-parabolic teaching in Mark 4. After Jesus has told the Parable of the Sower, which opens chapter 4, he retreats from the public space in which he has been preaching. “When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.” A great deal of the teaching from Jesus that is recorded in the Gospels comes in the form of private conversations between Jesus and his disciples, between Jesus and the smaller group of the Twelve, or between Jesus and his closest friends: Peter, James, and John. This morning in Adult Sunday School, we wrapped up a study of the prayers

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of Jesus, both what we know as “The Lord’s Prayer,” and the great pastoral prayer of John 17. The latter of these is an instance of Jesus’ more intimate teaching.

The very end of Mark 4 tells the story of yet another teaching style of Jesus, although we may not recognize it as such immediately. It is the story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and (probably) the Twelve are in a fishing boat, crossing to the Gentile territory on the east of the lake. A storm arises, the boat is being swamped, but Jesus is comfortably asleep in the stern. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus rebukes the wind, “Peace! Be still!” “He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’” Jesus also taught through what Scriptures term “signs and wonders.” He taught the disciples the reality of God’s power, flowing through him, and, perhaps even more importantly, he taught them the reality of God’s love for them and for all of creation. Every healing, every miraculous feeding, all of the miracles Jesus wrought, point beyond himself to the One who sent him and the Creator’s great love.

Sometimes Jesus gathered great crowds to himself, or perhaps just let them gather. Those feeding miracles I just mentioned came about because people came from far and wide to hear Jesus teach. And, despite the verses I cited earlier about parables, not all of Jesus’ public, verbal teaching came in that form. Consider those chapters in Matthew which we call “The Sermon on the Mount.” Yes, there is a good deal of metaphorical language in those teachings, but then all teaching about God is in some way metaphorical. But there is direct teaching as well. For one thing, there is the Lord’s Prayer, already mentioned. But there are points Jesus makes perfectly clearly that have too often been classified as metaphor by Christians who wish to escape their clarity. “I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment... I say to you that everyone who looks at (another person) with lust has already committed adultery... in (their) heart... Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... Do not judge, so that you may not be judged...” I could go on in this vein for some time, but I think you get the point. There’s a lot of truth in that silly internet meme in which questions cause Jesus to repeat what he has said and then to ask his questioners, “Did I stutter?”

Sometimes, Jesus didn’t wait for a crowd to teach. For Jesus, the “teaching moment” could erupt out of the simplest circumstance. You had to be on your toes when traveling with Jesus. Jesus gets invited to dinner and turns it into a teaching moment. Jesus meets a Samaritan woman when he is resting by a well and it becomes a teaching moment. Jesus starts getting questioned by a group of religious leaders and everybody around learns a thing or two. Jesus was always teaching.

Jesus did teaching in ways that Rev. Dr. King and others learned from, what we now call “direct action.” He went into Jerusalem for the last time at the head of a crowd of his supporters. They were chanting slogans and performing actions that usually went with the advent of a ruler. But Jesus rode a humble donkey, not a war horse. On one visit to Jerusalem, the Gospel writers do not agree on which one, Jesus went to the Temple and turned over tables and chased moneychangers and animals with a whip. If someone ever asks you, “What would Jesus do?” keep that in mind as an option. But remember, Jesus only did that once.

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And, in his most significant public act, Jesus was crucified. We are still struggling with understanding that lesson, or at least I am. But we know that because Jesus gave himself up willingly, that it was an act of love for us. In the denouement of the crucifixion came the resurrection. As Charlie mentioned in Sunday School last week, the two events are one. The crucifixion/resurrection is another display of the power of God and the love of God for us, that much seems certain. We're still working out the details.

So, what did it add up to, all of these different styles and methods of Jesus' teaching? What's the take-away? What was he teaching *about*? If you go back and read the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), you will quickly find the repetition of a phrase, "the Kingdom of God," or, in Matthew, "the Kingdom of Heaven." It's the same thing. Don't be distracted by the word "heaven." Jesus was not talking about the afterlife, about paradise, about "pie in the sky when we die by and by." Jesus was talking about how human beings can live in the real world in a way that reflects the loving desire of God. Then, here and now, centuries from now, if we can manage not to destroy ourselves in the interim, the way to live a fully realized life, a life of integrity, a self-actualized life, a life of joy and love and peace and hope, is to live the way that Jesus taught. We're not big on kingdoms here in the U.S. I see people on Facebook absolutely frothing at the attention given to the British royals in our country. But the late 19th century philosopher Josiah Royce gave us a good alternative to "kingdom of God" which was later popularized by Dr. King: "The Beloved Community." If we want to live in the "Beloved Community," my friends, if we want the Beloved Community to characterize our world, we must follow and teach the Way of Jesus.

The author of the Gospel According to John gave us some alternate words to use for this same idea. He called it abundant life or the life of the ages. Again, some have been distracted by the translation of "eternal life," but this is also not about what happens after we die. It's about what happens in our lives now. Jesus' ultimate teaching, the combined event of the crucifixion/resurrection is all about how that abundant life cannot be stopped, interrupted, or defeated even by death. Our Loving Creator's plan for the creation will be fulfilled, regardless of human evil, bad choices, corrupt systems, or the chaos that still lurks in the universe, waiting for humankind to join in the ongoing work of creation. As we commit to the Way of Jesus and change the way we think and live to match that way, we become part of the transformative energy of God which continues to push back the darkness and shine the light of love. The future is settled – we shall overcome. All we need do is heed the teaching of Jesus, the wisdom that comes from God, live it out, and call others to join us. It will only take all of our lives. Thanks be to God! Amen.