

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Rediscovering Jesus: Teacher
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Ezekiel 37: 15-23; John 3:1-9

I wore this stole today because we're talking about Jesus as a teacher. This is the stole from my Seminary, where I had lots of great teachers. In every institution that I've ever attended as a student, there seems to be that one teacher that rises to the top as everyone's favorite. Since we were talking about Jesus as a teacher this week I tried to figure out what it is about these teachers that make them a favorite. The only thing I could maybe see as a consistent pattern was that they aren't the teachers who give the easy A's. They're the ones that challenge us, the ones that reasonably meet us where we are, and help us to become better. Their methods are all different, their subjects, how old they are, what kind of music they like, all these factors are completely random. There is no guaranteed formula for becoming the favorite teacher that I can find.

Our story today, however, has two great teachers meeting for a conversation. Nicodemus is first introduced as a leader of the Jews. This title means that he has his colleague's respect. He would have been a high-tenured senior faculty in his time. The teacher that other teachers go to with the questions and seek advice. Nicodemus is more than just respected among scholars; he is also referred to later as "teacher of Israel" which means that he's also well-loved by the people. He's a relevant teacher, and easy to understand. Having the favor of the people and the respect of the elite has brought Nicodemus to a position of immense authority.

Nicodemus' reputation makes it a big deal that he wants to have a conversation with Jesus. This meeting means that Jesus has great scholarship and is worthy of Nicodemus' valuable time. And he doesn't just give Jesus any time of day, he seeks Jesus out at night. Scholars at this time considered nighttime to be the best time to think. They believed that the best time to study was when the hot sun went down, the people went to bed and the animals all found their cozy little corners. There was no bustle, no responsibilities left in the day. You could simply sit and focus on studying. So if two teachers are meeting at night there is something very important that they want to discuss. They don't want distractions! Even more, Nicodemus doesn't want Jesus to confuse his arrival and questioning with the other questions that have been thrown at him with the intent to trap him. Nicodemus wants to be clear that this is a friendly discourse to truly speak about important matters. Nicodemus wants to learn from Jesus, the teacher.

The lesson Jesus teaches is not just important because he describes baptism, it is also an optimal example of how Jesus works as a teacher. Now if you ask me on any random day what I thought about Jesus as a teacher you would either get the answer that Jesus is a genius teacher or I will answer by saying Jesus is the worst teacher. Most likely if I give you that second answer I probably read about a fig tree or wicked tenants or some other complicated parable that week and I'm just frustrated about its unclarity. There are some days that I just want Jesus to tell me what he means. If I'm supposed to live in a certain way, if my faith is supposed to be acted out or lived, or have correct belief in something specific, why isn't this more specific? I can get so frustrated with the unclear and ambiguous and vague teachings. But then on those days when I would say that Jesus is a genius teacher, it's the exact same things that I think make him a genius teacher. That lack of clarity leaves room for us to be part of the learning even 2000 years later. Leaving that ambiguity for us to ask questions allows us to be a part of what is being taught. Jesus' teaching method is always the same, I just don't always appreciate it.

As I examined Jesus as a teacher I realized the methods sounded familiar to me. Jesus' teaching was very similar to the way God teaches in the Hebrew scriptures. If God teaches in a certain way and Jesus teaches in a certain way, then there is a good chance the Spirit teaches in that way too. It would be wise for us to better understand the way Jesus and God teach so we can see the lesson the Spirit is teaching us today. So let's do that now. Let's look at the methods Jesus uses when he teaches, see how those methods work when God teaches in the Hebrew texts, and then spend this week looking for those methods in our lives and finding the Spirit's teaching.

There are many, many methods of teaching. Especially now that we have made it a professional career we know a lot about these different methods. We can also analyze what works better for different kinds of students to help us get the results we hope for. Many of you probably came from churches that relied on rote memory. A couple of verses later in our reading today we get to John 3:16. I bet a few of you could rattle off what John 3:16 says because we were raised on rote

memory faith development. We were expected to memorize these words. Jesus doesn't use rote memory methods, even when teaching the Lord's Prayer; he had to be pressured to give words to repeat over and over. It just isn't his style.

Jesus mostly uses the method of asking questions. This method is really helpful in saving time and quickly meeting the learner where they are to begin an impactful lesson. Asking a question helps check someone's understanding. There are times when people ask Jesus a question and he asks back, "What do you think? How have you read the meaning of that scripture." When they give an answer that is right on track Jesus can save time and say "yep" and move on to a lesson they still need to learn. It saves a lot of time if Jesus does not have to go through the whole lecture and the whole conversation. If the person already has a good understanding and a good grasp of the concept, asking a question will reveal that to Jesus and allow him to focus on something that is more worth the time spent teaching.

The other thing asking questions does is it allows Jesus to meet people where they are. Wherever that student's level of understanding is, Jesus can start there and move them slightly further. This ensures students don't get overwhelmed with information. This technique was very helpful when I entered High School. We were required to take a year of a foreign language. Unfortunately, our elementary schools and middle schools did not have the same curriculum for foreign languages. Some elementary schools had after-school programs, some middle schools had classes to begin their student's learning formally. All these students came into one high school and they'd have to figure out how to teach all these different levels of students. Their solution was to have us all go to the language hall during freshman orientation. There we found three doors with "German" "Spanish" or "French" posted on the outside. We lined up in front of the door with the language we wanted to take and one by one we were asked to come in and meet the teacher. Once inside, the teacher asked a question...in that foreign language. The students who were practically fluent would be able to answer the question with no problem and be assigned to Spanish 3. Students that maybe had a little less understanding of the exact words could maybe piece together and answer or at least ask for clarification in the language they wanted to continue learning, they were assigned to Spanish 2. Then there were students like me. We knew no Spanish whatsoever. We just stared blankly at the teacher with silly smiles on our faces, we started with Spanish 1.

Asking that question allowed the teachers to meet the students where their level of learning was and to take them farther from that moment without overwhelming them. If I had been in Spanish 3 I would have been frustrated and failed immediately. Meeting students where they are is very important in teaching and it's important to Jesus too. It's actually so important to Jesus that even at the moment he was about to ascend to heaven and end his teaching career on earth forever he said, "There is more I want to teach you but you are not ready yet." Up to the end, Jesus was aware that overwhelming students with information would not do anyone any good. That's how we get the Holy Spirit to be our teacher now.

God of the Hebrew texts asks questions as a teaching technique too. Look at Job. Job asks questions to God and God asks questions right back. It's this discourse of "Well what do you think... well let me guide you a little bit further...how about this," to walk with the student through the problem. If this is how God teaches in the Hebrew scriptures and the way Jesus teaches, asking questions is probably how the Spirit teaches too. So pay attention to the questions that arise around you. Whether it is an internal wondering or something people keep bringing up with you. These questions could be the way the Spirit is guiding you to a fuller understanding of God and this world.

The other main way that Jesus teaches is on this spectrum of pure discovery versus guided discovery. If you've ever had a class where they give you a bunch of marshmallows and sticks and a couple of lengths of tape and you have to build the highest tower, that is pure discovery. The teacher backs off and you and your classmates have to figure it out on your own. You have to fail and try again and discover better strategies on your own. That's pure discovery. Pure discovery is how humanity has learned throughout time. We see the sun and we think maybe it's rotating around us or maybe we're rotating around it. Pure discovery is how we learn new things as a collective. If no one else knows the answer the only choice is pure discovery.

Unfortunately, there are some issues with pure discovery when the answer has been established. Pure discovery has a tendency to develop a lot of misconceptions. Human knowledge shifts as we discover new things but if we all have the begin at the beginning and discover everything for ourselves, we have to process through all those misconceptions we have proven wrong. It's a waste of time and energy. Pure discovery also creates high levels of frustration and dropout rates. It also does not always make the solution clearly replicable. We might make the highest tower, but have no idea why we were successful. Missing the key to the solution is often overlooked. Understanding how to reliably build a tall tower requires replicable strategies.

Thankfully Jesus does not make us discover everything about God all by ourselves. Jesus' teaching style is on the guided discovery end of this teaching method. Guided discovery starts as pure discovery but the teacher is allowed to give hints and feedback. They can praise the students who are catching on to important concepts and redirect the ones who are missing the correlation. I was excited to learn that guided discovery often includes visual aids which we saw in our first lesson today. This is God's way of teaching in Ezekiel. Having those two sticks held up with labels on them is a visual guide toward discovering the solution God wants Israel to understand. In the second lesson, Jesus guides Nicodemus through the concept of spiritual birth. First Jesus makes the statement plain, "We must be reborn." Nicodemus then thinks about it and asks a question to check his understanding or clarify any confusion. He asks, "How can a grown man be born again from his mother's womb?" to which Jesus guides a better understanding by talking about flesh birthing flesh and spirit birthing spirit. Nicodemus wrestles with the new information and the process repeats. Jesus is able to guide the learning but also allows Nicodemus to discover for himself and be part of the learning. This back and forth allows the student to bring themselves into what is being learned to follow their own logic trail so that they have a better chance of being able to follow the problem-solving path again and finding the solution later on when the teacher is not there.

Other signs that Jesus uses guided discovery are that he will debrief the disciples about the meaning of parables, he will remind them of past teachings, and show how that lesson relates to the new one. Jesus knows the disciples will not come up with a better understanding of God and creation by pure discovery. They need guidance but they also need to wrestle with reality in their own ways. This makes the teaching personal and lasts longer. If God uses visual aids to guide us to new discoveries of truth, and Jesus guides discovery with slight adjustments to current understanding, we can be fairly sure the Spirit is trying to teach us with guided discovery too.

That's the challenge this week: to recognize where you are being guided to discover a truer understanding. In this process of engaging the teaching of the Spirit, please be kind to yourself. Remember that Jesus said there are lessons we aren't ready to learn just yet and that is okay. It does not mean we are dumb or weak. It means learning is a process and we can't skip steps. The old saying is that "When the student is ready the teacher will come." When we know how the teacher teaches we can be confident we won't miss anything.

Pay attention to questions that repeatedly arise in your own heart and in the conversations around you. These could be the questions the teacher is asking us to shape our answers and examine new ways to see the problem. Look for patterns in the emotions, or situations you find yourself in. If there is a relationship that keeps presenting an issue, or the same problem happens over and over, there is probably a reason the Spirit keeps guiding you to that place. Open up your mind and heart and try to see something new, seek a deeper understanding, and discover what it is you are meant to discover.

If you need a place to start this learning I suggest looking at boredom. I am reading Brene Brown's most recent book (*Atlas of the Heart*) and one of the things that she talks about is boredom. She says boredom is the imagination calling out for attention. Just like those scholars that knew nighttime was the best time to think, imagine, and explore new possibilities and ideas, those places where we feel bored are also a rich ground for us to imagine what we can fill that boring space with.

If we can push past "I'm so bored; I'm so bored; I'm so bored," the things that our spirit and our imagination and our inner selves can create might be the thing that the Spirit is guiding us to discover anew.