

Teaching for Transformation

Ephesians 2:11-22; Romans 12:1-2; Mark 6:30-34

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 18) 2021

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My long-time friend and long-time friend of this church, Curtis Freeman, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, tells of a time when he was drinking coffee with his pastor. His pastor reminded Curtis of the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19-20 which speaks of making disciples and baptizing them throughout the world. He went on to say, “We are doing a pretty good job of baptizing them, but we are falling short in our obligation of teaching them to obey everything the Lord commanded” (Curtis Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, p. ix).

Of course, this is what the Great Commission says. That we are to teach. And that we are teach people to obey everything Jesus Christ has commanded.

This is no small thing, given the world we are living in, where we are inundated with violence, bigotry, hatred, fear-mongering, rage and anger, and on and on. Studies show that by age 16, our children spend more screen-time on devices and TV than time spent in school (cited in Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 23). Some years ago, a study out of the Univ. of Pennsylvania said that people who watch a lot of TV are more likely to own guns because they become more fearful (cited in Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, p. 15). That study was before our deluge of computers and smart-phones and hand-held devices, social media, and the immediacy and instantaneous dissemination of news and commentary. It was also done before the deluge of violent games on devices.

My point is that we and our children are indoctrinated and malformed by violence, fear, rage, and aggressive competitiveness more effectively and exhaustively than in anytime in human history. Meanwhile, Jesus Christ calls us to teach and obey everything he has commanded, the very opposite of what we're inundated with.

One of the most prominent and respected studies done about youth in church over the past several years was the massive National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) done from 2003-2005. Here's the gist of it: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith – but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school... One more thing: we're responsible (see Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, p. 3).

This exhaustive study was done with churches of all types in American Christianity and here is what the study tells us that young people believe: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), which the study calls “an alternative faith that feeds on and gradually co-opts if not devours” the Christian faith. MTD basically means:

- (1) This god wants people to be good, nice, and fair. (Moralism)
- (2) The main goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
(Therapeutic)
- (3) This god is not really involved in my life unless I want this god to resolve a crisis (Deism) -- (p. 13-14 of Kenda Creasy Dean).

Jesus is not all that important in this except to get us “saved.” Otherwise, Jesus is not involved.

Not much of this was a shock to ministers and laypeople who work with young people in churches. What was shocking is the finding that young people do not have this half-Christian, or semi-Christian, or what John Wesley called an “almost Christian” faith because we’re not doing youth ministry or children’s ministry, or because we need better children and youth ministers. Young people get this watered-down, semi-Christian faith because that’s what we have. They’re getting what we pass along to them. The study shows that most U. S. teenagers mirror their parents’ faith (K. C. Dean, p. 18). The trouble is we’re not living and practicing a faith in the Triune God who shows us the love of Jesus Christ that leads us into the world. We’re not teaching our children to obey all things Jesus Christ has commanded us.

Moral Therapeutic Deism will not and cannot stand against the inundation of violence, rage, fear, meanness, and aggressive competitiveness that our children and youth receive and that we participate in.

The life of the Christian takes work and discipline, hence the word discipleship. And discipleship does not come naturally, is not in accord with our inclinations. Being a disciple of Jesus is not the same as being nice. Nor is it enough to say I already have it down, therefore I have no need to be taught.” Nor, do we say, “Well, if we’d only come back to being a Christian nation.”

Disciples are those who have been formed by the good news of Jesus Christ into certain sorts of people who live in the world in certain sorts of ways that are often counter to the world’s ways. Therefore, we must be taught, formed, prepared to walk this narrow way called discipleship.

Which brings us to Mark and our lesson for this morning. Mark’s gospel presents Jesus as a teacher. “Then he went among the villages teaching” (Mk 6:6).

One day, when the apostles reported to Jesus “all that they had done and taught” (Mk 6:30), Jesus suggested that they get away and “rest a while” (Mk 6:31). They go to the desert, but by the time they get to where they are going, it is anything but deserted. A great crowd gathers and Jesus “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (6:34).

In a short time, we find out that this great crowd is hungry. Jesus will respond to their hunger with a miraculous outpouring of food. Yet is it not interesting that the first thing that Jesus does for them, sensing that they are “like sheep without a shepherd,” is not to feed them but to teach?

Our situation today, as Christians in this culture, sometimes resembles sheep without a shepherd. We seem to be in a wilderness where many lose their way. Sometimes we feel like strangers in a strange land, people in exile. Isaiah 5 speaks of the sadness of God’s people going into exile “without knowledge.” We have those who are forced, by the nature of American society, to live in circumstances of exile without knowing how to resist. A Black preacher friend of mine put it more bluntly, lamenting the loss of youth and young adults from many predominately Black churches. “I fear,” he says, “that we have the first generation of Black youth who are growing up ill equipped by the church for the rigors of slavery.”

We must be taught how to resist; how to be and grow as followers of Jesus, when much of the people around us, many of them our friends, live “almost Christian” lives of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, while others around us live the gun-toting religious culture that wears t-shirts that say, “Come and Take It” and “Kill Them All and Let God Sort Them Out.”

One of the most telling features of much popular religion is the lack of love. Much popular religion is about making me feel good but very little about the love of God known in Jesus Christ who sends us into a hurting world to love others. So, we should not be surprised when we hear so much of the rhetoric of public life in our society to be about “my freedom,” and “my rights” but little about caring for others or our commitment and responsibility for others.

The love of Jesus Christ must be taught. We are to be trained in love – how to receive it and how to share it. The early church wanted to see converts to Christ change their habits, so you not only were trained on Sundays, but also throughout the week, by what is called catechesis. Usually using a question-and-answer format, catechesis was part of the family conversation of learning to be like Jesus. It meant that every day these Christians were practicing putting away their old habits of trying to be in control and inhabit new practices of patience and loving behavior – let me say that again – behavior. The early church knew what you felt would change if your behavior changed. You would feel love if you learned to act loving. They also believed that until you started acted loving, you would not even understand what love is. Indeed, until you changed your habits, you could not even understand what Jesus was talking about.

One of the most difficult parts of being a pastor, at least for me, is me practicing and helping you practice forgiveness. It’s incredibly difficult and incredibly rare even though it is at the very heart of being Christian. The Great Commission says that we are teach people to obey everything Jesus Christ has commanded, and this is central. It means to go to someone we have offended or, more likely, has offended us or hurt us, and go with empty hands and open hearts. We give up our defenses, give up all our pretensions that we are right, and they are wrong, and say something like, “I’m sorry. Please forgive me.” It means, as

theologian Stanley Hauerwas says, “our enemies get to tell us who we are.” Our job is to listen and hear and dialogue for however long it takes until we reach a place of new understanding, repentance upon all involved, and hopefully reconciliation and wholeness. It will usually mean we have to change our behavior and will also mean we rediscover our enemies are really our neighbors.

This is hard work and we have to be in community where we will be supported and held accountable and prayed for and prayed with. And it is in this community where we are taught.

This week I remembered one of those teachable moments we have when we hang around one another at church. A few years ago, during Sunday night youth group, Michael Chism was showing clips from the Harry Potter movies, and had asked me to sit in. There was a scene when the Harry Potter characters were discussing the evil villain, Lord Voldemort, but instead of calling him by name, they would only refer to “he-who-would-not-be-named.” The question came up why don’t they call him by name?

In response we talked about the power of language. Our modern tendency is to think that words are merely labels, while the older Hebrew biblical tradition is that words have power, language is constructive. When we say something, something happens or changes. Language conjures. So, in Harry Potter, to mention the bad guy’s name is to conjure him, to evoke him, to empower him and help him be present.

The conversation went on to other things until several minutes later the topic of cussing came up. Hayden Cooper, who was about a seventh grader at the time, made the connection. If language is constructive and powerful, then “cussing,” aka

cursing means to evoke evil upon a person. Therefore, “cussing” is not so much about us expressing frustration as it is evoking evil and darkness into this world when we curse people, when we cuss someone out.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love and bless your enemies and pray for those who curse you” (Mt 5:43-44). After Hayden Cooper’s comments, it makes a difference how I hear Jesus’ teachings. Indeed, it is instructive to read all of Matthew 5-6-7 with an understanding that language is powerful and can evoke God’s blessing, conjure goodness into this world, or it can conjure darkness and evil. It makes a difference if we understand ourselves as a conduit through which evil and darkness enter our world as well as entering our own hearts, or if we are conduits through which God brings life and love and blessing. It’s worth thinking about.

So, you see, it’s not neutral out there. Not only our children but all of us are overwhelmed with countless stories and images that shape our imagination, determines what we see, what we say, and what we are becoming. Television, advertising, music, pop culture, computer devices, phones, and technology, video games, education, and on and on, constantly, constantly, constantly telling us “You’re a consumer,” “it’s all about you,” “beware of those who are different,” “it’s their fault,” “it’s all about competition,” “it’s all about getting ahead,” “it’s all about making more money,” “don’t trust,” and “get them before they get you.”

Meanwhile we get one hour in worship a week to counter that. Two hours if we avail yourself of Sunday School, and maybe another hour or two a week if we gather in other ways like Bible-study groups and various other meetings. If we do daily devotions, Bible reading, and prayer, a little more time.

So, in the time we have we have to be taught and we have to work at it, and we do it over and over and over again. Our intent is not to illuminate what you already know but rather to form you into a new way of life; it's less about learning some facts as it is being transformed by doing new things over and over again, out of habit, retained through repetition. Rather than construe the Christian faith as a set of interesting ideas to be affirmed, this faith is a set of practices to be inculcated, a set of habits to be assumed.

Now I know and you know that we're in the heart of the summer. The congregation is scattered with about a third out on any given Sunday, not even counting those of us not yet ready to regather due to Covid. We are about a month from starting things up again for the fall – Bible study will begin again, and various other ways we teach around here. Committees and mission groups will start cranking up.

In Mark 6, Jesus and his disciples have gone out to the desert to be alone. With so much human need and pain pressing in upon them, they need a respite from the work of ministry. And so he begins to teach (Mk 6:34), as Jesus so often does in this gospel where he is usually the teacher and his disciples are learners. Later he will miraculously offer them food. He will heal. But first he will teach. He will teach them words of life that will enable them to know the secret of what's afoot in the world, enable them to lay hold of their lives so they will cease to be jerked around by the principalities and powers of the present age. His good news finds them in their lostness. He becomes their shepherd in teaching them.

He still does.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.