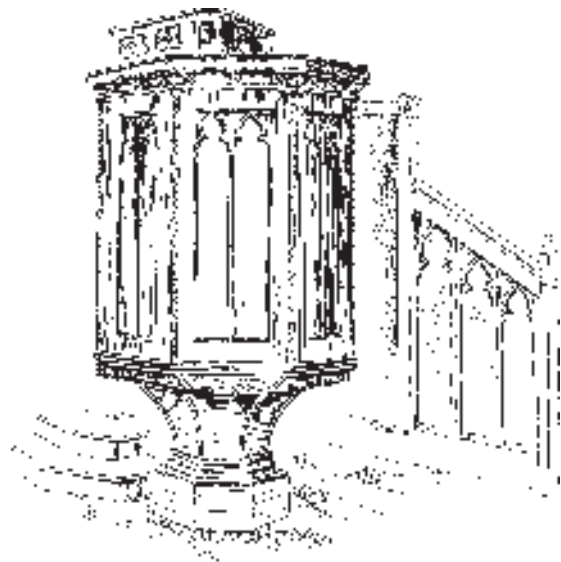


May 30, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Jesus, the Teacher

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

John 7:14-18

For 2000 years we have debated about Jesus. Was he divine? Did he perform miracles? Is he the Messiah? Was he sent from God? Did he rise from the dead?

The one attribute of Jesus that no one seems willing to debate is that he was a great teacher. Even his enemies concede that. Yes, if Jesus had no other claim that was remembered, he would be remembered as one of the world's master teachers. In the gospel narratives, he is called "teacher" more than 50 times. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, he opened the conversation with these words, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God" (John 3:2). Ever since, history has echoed that verdict.

One college summer I had a job as a runner for a brokerage firm in Pittsburgh. Our office was right next to the U. S. Steel building. Every day on the corner of 5th and Grant a man would literally stand on a soap box to explain to whoever would listen about the evils of U. S. Steel. As a U.S. Steel employee, he received some injustice, real or imagined. At every lunch hour he tried to convert the masses with huge signs and a loud voice. It wasn't an easy task. He was ignored in droves.

All teaching which is done in the open air, demands one outstanding quality: it must be immediately arresting. The preacher in a pulpit, or the lecturer in a college lecture hall, or the teacher in a classroom has one initial advantage. She has an audience who cannot get up and move away when they wish!

But the teacher in the open air has first to persuade people to stop, and then persuade them to stay. The successful open-air teacher will be immediately arresting, immediately intelligible, permanently memorable, and have a universal appeal. Jesus was all this and more.

Jesus' teaching was crisp and pungent, whimsical and ironical. No one has ever known better than Jesus how to express profound thoughts in simple language:

A person's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. (Luke 12:15)

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:14)

What will it profit a person, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? (Matthew 16:26)

Jesus used thought provoking paradoxes—like in the Sermon on the Mount where he flatly and bluntly contradicted the world's standards:

Blessed are the poor.

Blessed are the hungry, the sorrowful, the persecuted. (Luke 6:20)

Or how about this one!

Unless a man becomes like a child, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)

He employed many a grotesque exaggeration:

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away. (Matthew 5:29)

If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 15:25)

Literalism is here forbidden. This is the language of poetry and passion. Sometimes a picture has to be overdrawn, if we are to see it at all.

He used humor like the picture he drew of a man with a two-by-four in his own eye seeking to extract a speck of dust from the eye of someone else.

Or the humorous comparison - it is easier for a rich man to drive his Cadillac through the safe deposit vault at National City Bank than to enter the kingdom of God.

But Jesus also was logical:

"How can Satan cast out Satan?" he responded to those who accused him of being the devil. "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not stand." (Mark 3:23-26)

He used the logical dilemma:

Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.

By far his most effective teaching device, however, was the parable—stories in pictures:

- the forgiving father embracing his black sheep of a son
- the Johnny-come-lately vineyard worker who gets as big a slice of the worm as the early bird.

I think you'll have to agree if Jesus had no other claim to fame, he would rank as one of history's supreme teachers.

But, you know, there is a danger in teaching, even for the gifted teacher like Jesus. The danger in teaching is that the best student, the one with all the assignments in on time, the one with 100% on every test, the one whose report card has all A's, even the best student, can miss the point. Has that happened to us? Have we, who call ourselves Christians, missed the point of our Savior's teaching?

Let's take a quick look at just one issue: non-violence. No matter how you interpret the New Testament, it cannot be denied that in his core teaching Jesus advocated non-violence and practiced it himself to the very end. You cannot square the Sermon on the Mount with any theory of war, even a so-called, "just war." It is particularly significant in our own generation that support for nuclear arms and, in some cases, for a nuclear "first strike" capability comes from Christians who pride themselves on their "loyalty" to the Word of God and the full deity of Jesus.

In general, it must be said that Christians of all parties and denominations have failed to come to terms with the full meaning of Jesus' words about non-violence, except, of course, the Quakers, Mennonites, and others in the tradition of total pacifism. What is true of non-violence as a whole is even more so when we consider the most original, most revolutionary pronouncement Jesus ever made: "You have heard that it has been said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

If we are to be judged solely as students who have incorporated into their lives the teachings of Jesus, we of all people are to be pitied. Luckily, and this *is* the point—Jesus is far more than his teaching. **It is not the teaching of Christ that saves, but the Christ who teaches.** Jesus came not so much to preach the gospel, but rather that there might be a gospel to preach.

Even in his own time there were other great teachers. Remember Socrates? In fact, Jesus and Socrates have many similarities. Both were outstanding teachers; both of them urged and practiced great simplicity of life; both were regarded as traitors to the religion of their community; neither of them wrote anything; both of them were executed.

And yet, while Socrates is still studied, Jesus is worshipped.

Let us pray:

Jesus, we marvel at your ability to teach. We wonder at the wisdom of your teachings. But we are thankful that in the end you have not said, "This is the truth: accept it or perish!" Instead, you have offered yourself and whispered to each of us, "I am the truth: follow me, and you will find it." Amen.