



Meeting Jesus Again BUT THE TEACHER SAYS...

Matthew 5:38-48

January 23, 2022

In the fall of 2015, just before his second birthday, our son Samuel began at a brand-new school. In fact, he was the very first student enrolled in this new school. The teacher is the cousin of a dear friend of ours who had moved to Decatur, Georgia, with the vision of opening a play-based preschool in her home. And so, with Sam enrolled and Jen ready to teach, Jen's House Preschool began. Over the three years that Sam spent at this extraordinary place, we watched him grow in knowledge, in confidence, and in compassion. And, in that time, Jen became a teacher and a friend to our whole family.

Sometimes on Friday afternoons, I would ride my bike down the hill to pick Samuel up and bring him home from school. One Friday afternoon—I think Samuel was almost four years old—we were riding home, and our conversation was all about numbers. From behind me on the bike, Sam shouted, “Dad, I know what the biggest number is. It’s a million billion zillion!” I decided to correct him, but also to be deliberately provocative and perhaps a little bit annoying. Smiling, I said, “No, actually son, that’s not true. I know an even bigger number: infinity.” Without missing a beat, Sam shouted from behind me, “That’s not right, Dad. Infinity is not a number. It’s an idea.”

“How did you know that?”

“Jen taught me that, and she knows everything since she is a teacher.” Humbled, I had to agree with Sam... and with Jen.

Teachers may not literally know *everything*, but how many of us could relate a similar experience? *I used to think _____, but the teacher says...* Teachers are these extraordinary human beings who open our minds to transformative discoveries, who bring to our hearts

previously unimagined realities, new ways of seeing and understanding the world and our lives in it. Each of us can remember the names of the teachers who have had that kind of impact on our lives. I will be forever grateful for Ms. George, the Speech and Debate teacher at Southeast Guilford High School, who believed in my speaking abilities more than I did and helped me discover a passion that has become central to my vocation.

In the New Testament, and throughout the centuries of Christian life, Jesus has been called by many names. He’s been given many titles. But it’s fair to say that among his earliest followers, the most common title was *teacher, rabbi*. As we continue to meet Jesus again at Second, we would do well, I think, to return to this basic title that was core to his identity.

Jesus was a teacher. He taught in stories and parables. He instructed through examples and deeds. He used direct commands and provocative questions. Even the gospel narratives that center on miracles or healing stories are applied as lessons for those who are his disciples. *Disciples*—even the name happens to be the Greek word for students. Like all master teachers, Jesus drew from the well of wisdom that was the past, the tradition in which he was raised. But also like all great teachers, Jesus challenged his listeners with imaginative, demanding reinterpretations of previously accepted truths.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the most well-known of Jesus’ teachings, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. It takes up all of Matthew’s fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters. The Sermon on the Mount. Even the location is meant to evoke the example of another of scripture’s greatest teachers, Moses, who

climbed and then descended the summit of Sinai with lessons for God's people to follow. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus, too, is a teacher. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus, too, climbs a mountain and begins to offer instruction to those around him. But this "sermon" is really a seminar. The audience is not general but really quite specific. Jesus here addresses his disciples, those who, like him, are well-versed in the laws of Moses and the teachings of the Torah.

He addresses his students directly. He begins by affirming the tradition in which they all stand. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the commandments. In fact, I have come to fulfill them all." *But then he signals a shift.* Lifting up familiar commands of Hebrew Scripture readily accepted by his audience ("You have heard that it was said..."), he immediately intensifies those commands ("But I say to you...").

You used to think _____, but the teacher says...

Jesus was a teacher, and his lessons here are clear. They're bold. They're challenging. You heard them. He instructs his students to turn from all acts of vengeance, to give without judgment or concern, and to *love* the ones who they would call enemy. Here I can imagine some bewildered looks on the faces of Jesus' followers. The teacher has gone too far. How can anyone obey these commands? And, it's at just that moment, as if the rest is not enough, that he chooses to close the section of instructions with the command: "Be perfect, just as God is perfect."

Now, we may be tempted, and many interpreters of this passage have been, to read these commands as a kind of intentional hyperbole, meant to provide not literal instruction but some metaphorical guidelines. Or, we may want to dismiss the commands because they are from another era, an era when it was ok for Jesus' followers to be weak and submissive. These kinds of reactions, these kinds of interpretations, may give comfort to those of us who feel inadequate to such high standards, but I must confess they don't account for the seriousness or the repetition of these lessons. I found that whenever the instructions of

Jesus feel uncomfortable or daunting, we should not explain them away. Better to take the teacher at his word, to be students who try our best to listen.

Followers of Jesus are called to be lifelong learners. We must never claim to have it all figured out, to be all finished with our lessons. There is no graduation from the school of gospel living. We will never be the teacher. We are students. *At Second, we want to be serious about spiritual growth, about the importance of learning together. As I shared earlier this morning, in the month of February we'll be offering Saturday evening sessions on scripture, part of our effort to deepen our understanding and broaden our perspective on the Word of God.*

Jesus was a teacher, and the central focus of his teaching and preaching was the kingdom of God. These radical redefinitions of ancient commandments were part of a larger picture he was painting. It is a picture of what will be, a picture of what should be, a picture of what can be. It *can* be because Jesus was *not* simply describing something that exists *out there*. These were not object lessons. His teaching was not meant to offer us more information or knowledge, not to make us smarter or more intellectual in our faith. No, Jesus embodied and taught a way of life. A path to transformation.

Love for all, strength through service, gaining by giving. We followers of Jesus are not simply called to understand the importance of these values. We are not called to simply listen closely or nod in agreement. "That sounds like a good idea, Jesus." No, we have the awesome responsibility of *demonstrating*, in our individual and communal life, the reality that God's kingdom is already among us. And that kingdom comes among us when we who follow Jesus put into practice the lessons we've learned. If you and I believe that what Jesus teaches us is the truth, then we must live as if it is true. We must resist all that stands in the way of this kingdom, and I think that begins with our own cynicism, with our hard-heartedness.

What if we allow the teachings of Jesus to challenge our assumptions and accepted truths?

***For we have heard it said** that self-centeredness, endless acquisition, and unchecked greed are acceptable. After all, we live in a world of scarcity and competition.

But the teacher says that God's kingdom is a place of abundance, and that abundance is freely shared. Neighbors are never left to suffer in the ditch in God's kingdom.

***We have heard it said** that there is nothing that we can do about the intractable sins of generations past, or big systems outside our control, or suffering that is beyond our comprehension.

But the teacher says that we are accountable for the work of God that is set before us, to use the power we have in the service of others. We are called to the dogged hope that inspires perseverance.

***We have heard it said,** and we hear it said often, that those who disagree with us, those whose path is different from ours, are to be avoided, or othered, or feared, or judged.

But the teacher says that humility is the mark of discipleship, for the grace of God is wider than our restricted vision and deeper than our limited understanding.

***We have heard it said** that we simply must accept the inhumanity of others as inevitable, that the absolute division of people into warring factions and the total loss of common ground on which to stand is simply a part of the lived reality, and we might as well get used to it.

But the teacher says that even those we call enemy are beloved, and our love for them is an essential step in our growth as his followers.

So, what does it look like to love your enemies in this moment, in this time?

We might begin by identifying who those enemies are. We tend to think of enemies in those same hyperbolic terms that we ascribe to Jesus' teachings. We tend to concentrate our attention on distant

well-known figures or perhaps those who personify all that we detest. But perhaps we'd do well to start a little more modestly. Seventy years ago, C.S. Lewis suggested that if you are going to start taking up the practice of forgiveness, we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. Lewis suggested a spouse or coworker.

In the same way, I think, loving our enemies might be a lesson we learn best by practicing. Maybe start very close. Last week, a friend gave me a new book by Adam Grant, a professor of organizational psychology at the Wharton School. The provocative title is *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. The title of the first chapter certainly caught my eye. "A Preacher, A Prosecutor, A Politician, and A Scientist Walk into Your Mind." I'm disappointed to report that there's no punch line for a good laugh. Instead, Grant recommends that we think again about how we relate to our thoughts, our ideas, our perspectives, and especially the people who challenge our beliefs or threaten our assumptions. The author's practical advice is a kind of roadmap for, I would say, loving our enemies (the term is not too strong, I think), the ones that are right in front of us. It begins, he writes, with listening or, in his words, "increase your question-to-statement ratio." Even though I'm a preacher, I'm going to try to do that.

I must also acknowledge this morning that loving our enemies (our adversaries, our opponents, especially those who have harmed or hurt us) is really hard work. Jesus is a challenging teacher. It helps me to remember that we do not love our enemies because they have done anything to deserve our love. We love them simply because they, too, are created in the image of a loving God. It helps me to remember that we do not love our enemies because we hope it will change them but because the simple act of choosing love changes us. I'm reminded of one of my favorite lessons: "To withhold forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and expecting the rat to die."

My friends, what if, in this time, a time of palpable tension, battle lines clearly drawn, we who follow

Jesus adopted the posture not of soldiers but of students? What if we asked ourselves how God might be teaching us in each encounter and every conversation? Could we model a different way—a way that our teacher insists will lead to more impact and change for our neighbors in need, more dignity and justice for those denied them, more safety and peace for all God's children? Could we maybe gather some unlikely partners (even enemies?) in service of the common good? I'm more than eager to give it a try, if you're willing, in our church, in our city, in our state.

After all, you're here today because Jesus is your teacher. Our teacher has told us to love our enemies. We must love our enemies. Our teacher insists that this radical, peculiar action offers a pathway to the kingdom of God. Our teacher instructs us to live differently in a world hell-bent on following the destructive path of retribution, to leave it behind. My friends, now is no time for us to abandon this central call of the gospel in favor of the short-lived satisfaction of striking out, hunkering down, or shrinking back. No, the world is begging us to be the church of Jesus Christ. I believe that God has placed within us the grace to meet this moment with faithful resolve, compassionate speech, and tangible action.

Jesus, open our hearts and our minds.

Jesus, *teach* us to listen, to speak, to live as your disciples. Amen.