

Back to School with Jesus  
(PART TWO OF A FIVE PART SERMON SERIES—JESUS: THEN AND NOW)

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at  
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Matthew 13.1-23

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'*

*Then the disciples came and asked him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' He answered, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:*

*"You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.  
For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them."*

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*

*'Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when*

*trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'*

It has occurred to me that if our congregation chose to launch a school, it would be well placed to succeed. As I look out at the pews this morning, and muse also on those parishioners not present with us today, I see educators equipped to teach K through 12 and others who could take us through college and even into graduate school.

I see administrators of various stripes who could ably run our new educational enterprise. Even our non-educators would be able to contribute to our success: we have people who could handle marketing and finance, the library, the arts and facilities management.

All we are missing is someone to run the cafeteria—and based on the pies, soups, and chili enjoyed at this weekend's Apple Festival, I am confident we could find people to capably fill that role, too.

Where do you see yourself fitting in? As a teacher? An administrator? Maybe some of you would prefer to be students. And, of course, some of you might not see yourself anywhere in this picture. Some of you might be intrigued, others excited. Perhaps you're a bit worried about whether we could pull this off, or maybe you're just lukewarm to the whole notion. You may think this concept is wonderful. Or you may think it's utterly daft.

Now, for those wondering where I'm going with this, who are waiting eagerly for some textual exegesis, I must ask your forbearance—for I want to take this exercise a step further. You see, while it's entertaining to imagine how we, with our current congregation, could staff a school (or, I'd note, a medical practice), or other churches in other places might start a law firm or construction outfit, what I think would be really interesting is to explore the question of what would be our goal in embarking on this new endeavor. Why start a school?

Or, to go one step further, why teach?

To shape young minds? To earn a salary? To build a resume? To have something to do until the dream of being a rock star or best selling novelist finally comes to pass? To change the world? To maybe just change one life?

Our answers, of course, will vary; but even if we won't arrive at a consensus, the question "why teach?" is most definitely worth posing. Why? For not only what we discover, but our reaction to what we learn will tell us something about how prepared we really are to travel the way of Jesus.

Jesus? Where does he come into this? We're engaged in a, pardon the inelegant phrase, thought exercise about starting a school, are we not? What does Jesus have to do with any of this?

The answer, of course, is a lot.

I suspect you know that we have no plans to start a First Congregational Academy. However, we already run a school here. Indeed, we run more than one. There's the Sunday School, in which our children are introduced to the Christian faith. There's our upcoming confirmation program, in which teens and adults will have an opportunity to explore faith. And then there's what we do here on Sunday mornings, during the forum hour and during worship, not to mention on Saturdays during bible study and other times when we have special classes and programs.

It's all a kind of school. We just don't have pop quizzes and essays.

That's all well and fine, you say. But Jesus? Where is he? Didn't you just say he has a lot to do with all of this? I did. And here's where Jesus comes into the picture.

Throughout the ages, the church has described Jesus in many ways: healer, king, priest, Son of God, Savior. But go back to the beginning, to the disciples and those first followers, the ones who engaged in conversation, dialogue, even dispute, with Jesus. You remember what they called him?

Rabbi.

He didn't have a diploma from a divinity school, or credentials from a denomination, but he was definitely a rabbi.

And what did he do as a rabbi? He studied Scripture, he considered its meaning, and he explored it with others. He got people to think and respond and react. He was, in short, a teacher. And without understanding what this vocation meant to him and to us, it is impossible for us to truly grasp what Jesus can mean for us today. Fortunately, we have some of Jesus' lesson plans, complete with commentary and explanatory notes telling us how he used them and how they were received to help us in doing this.

Consider today's reading from Matthew, the parable of the sower. It's a splendid example the form, and comes complete with not only an explanation, but Jesus' reason for telling it in the first place.

Let's start with the story itself. And as we do, recall our hypothetical new school and the way we imagined how we might be part of the enterprise. Remember how I tried to draw you into the plan. What I hoped to do was involve you, to make you feel as if what I was

describing wasn't something that was going to happen somewhere else but would unfold in a way that included each of you.

That's what Jesus was trying to do when he told his parable. Think about what you heard. What was your reaction? Did you see yourself fitting in? Were you the sower, spreading his or her seeds around? Or were you an observer, watching him or her at work? Maybe you have an active imagination and saw yourself as a seed. If so, which one did you want to be? And which one, in actuality, were you, are you?

Jesus doesn't tell stories because he enjoys spinning a good yarn.

He tells them because he has a message to convey, news he needs to share. And he tells it the way he does because he knows when we can imagine ourselves being part of what's happening, we will be more likely to act on what we hear.

So what was Jesus telling his disciples? What was he telling Israel, the wider world, and through Matthew's gospel, you and me?

Here's what: God's new kingdom is breaking into our world, right now, right here. And if we are to participate, we need to be ready for this development, because with this new creation, comes judgment. Actions—our actions, attitudes—our attitudes, have consequences, Jesus says.

Everything Jesus does, everything, every way he teaches, is meant to convey this message. Remember, Jesus doesn't just tell parables. He performs miracles, he frees people from demons, he heals the sick, he even raises the dead. And why? To show the power of God, to demonstrate that he is real, that his message should be heard, and understood.

Israel had long awaited the day of the Lord, the time when the oppressed would be freed and the oppressor punished. And Israel long knew there'd be a time of reckoning that came with that deliverance. That message, complete with imagery involving seeds and plants, had been preached by prophets like Isaiah, and Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, seven hundred years in the past and it had been picked up and preached by others like Daniel two hundred years before the time of Jesus.

And so in one sense, Jesus wasn't saying anything new. His message was familiar, it was part of Israel's history, its legacy, and, it was hoped, pointed to Israel's future. And yet in another sense, Jesus' message was wholly, radically new. The message that was seen as pointing to the future, he said, was now one for the present.

So why speak in riddles? Yes, the parable has the potential to draw in those who hear it, to enlist the imagination in making vivid one's message. But it can also confuse and confound. Jesus knew this. Jesus *counted* on this!

What is going on here? If Jesus was so concerned about getting across his message, why make his disciples, those crowds, you and me, work so hard? Why not try a different approach that everyone could understand, everyone would appreciate, everyone would act upon?

Because Jesus knew that teaching is a partnership. Just as it takes two to tango, with one leading and one following, the same dynamic is at work in the classroom. It takes two to teach, with every teacher needing a student. And if that teacher is to be truly effective, he or she needs a willing student.

Think about it. How many of us have driven above the speed limit on Route 89, despite knowing there are troopers waiting to pull us over and write us a ticket, despite having seen skid marks from cars that have gone off the road, despite knowing what we are doing is against the law? Whose responsibility is this? Do we chalk up our vehicular misbehavior to some long ago Driver's Ed teacher? Or do we acknowledge that our instructor did what he or she was supposed to do, telling us about road safety and speed limits, and that we have chosen to ignore those lessons in favor of doing what we want to do, because, well, we just have to get where we're going a few minutes earlier.

This is what Jesus was confronting, and is still confronting today. Even the disciples came to class with their own agendas, seeking a teacher who would recognize them as being special, seeking a leader who'd oust the Romans, seeking a messiah who didn't need to make a sacrifice—or expect sacrifice of his followers.

What about us? What agendas are we bringing to class? Jesus tells us to take some time to reflect. He tells us that even when our hearts are in the right place we can still hear but not understand. That's right. We can come to church faithfully, we can preach the word regularly, and we can still miss the message.

The new creation, Jesus tells us, is here, now. And the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, that rule of physics that says two things can't occupy the same location, still applies. We need to make room for the kingdom of God in our lives, in our hearts, in our minds, and in our souls, or it will pass us by, not because God doesn't want us, not because God doesn't want to include us, but because we have decided we don't want what God has to offer.

The new creation, Jesus tells us, changes everything, upends everything. It disturbs and it disorients just as it comforts and supports. Our Christian faith is supposed to be all about living in this new reality. "Christianity," writes N.T. Wright, "isn't about cosy little lessons to make us feel better. It's about what God's doing in the world – what he's already done in Jesus and what he wants to do through us today."

That's some message, that's some lesson!

More than twenty years ago, when I was in business school, I took a course on consulting with Professor Alan McAdams. He was brilliant, engaging, quite funny, but also irascible, impatient, and tough. Our first day in class, he told us that we'd be working in small groups on various assignments – and that he'd be picking our partners. Seeing the expressions of dismay on our faces he responded with his own look of mock disbelief as he asked us if we really thought McKinsey or some other consulting firm would let us pick the people with whom we would be working on projects.

That was just a warm up, though. He next told us about the essays we'd be writing for each class. A short analysis of a company, two pages. That seemed reasonable.

Then he told us about the margins, one inch, no less to be exact.

And the font and point size. Times Roman, twelve point, thank you very much.

The next session, he gave us our first assignment. The session after that, he turned back our papers. As he did so, he held one up for all of us to see. He told us that what he'd read was well written, insightful. Unfortunately, it was getting a low mark because it didn't have a conclusion.

The conclusion, you see, was on page three.

Just a paragraph we saw as Professor McAdams tore off the offending page. But, of course, it was the critical paragraph that tied together the argument.

Harsh? Perhaps. Effective. No doubt. Purposeful? You bet.

Throughout that semester, Professor McAdams pushed us, made demands of us. He was also willing to take as good as he gave. And though we all had to work very, very hard that semester, we joined the devoted legions of B-School students who regularly voted him the best teacher.

Professor McAdams, we learned, did what he did because he wanted us to not only hear but, if we were willing, to truly understand what it meant to be consultants. I suspect many of you have had teachers who've done something similar with you, to you, for you in your academic careers, whether in the first grade, sophomore year or college, or multiple times in between.

This is what Jesus did, and still does. And he does so because he wants us to not only hear about the kingdom of God, but to truly understand what is at stake. He wants us to be ready for God's new creation, for a transformed world that is capable of accepting and embracing God's grace, God's hope, and God's love.

That sounds like it should be an easy thing to do, but we know from Scripture, we know from experience it's not. Fortunately, school's still in session and Jesus is our teacher.