

# *Who is Jesus?*

## *Good Teacher*

*Fifth in Lenten Series*

by

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Luke 18:18-30

<sup>18</sup>A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>19</sup>Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>20</sup>You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” <sup>21</sup>He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” <sup>22</sup>When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” <sup>23</sup>But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. <sup>24</sup>Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>26</sup>Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup>He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” <sup>28</sup>Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” <sup>29</sup>And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, <sup>30</sup>who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Brooklyn teacher and poet Taylor Mali published a poem several years ago that I first encountered in my early years of ministry as I was trying to understand and find within myself the elusive alchemy that some pastors seem to have that enables them to engage and compel young people to not just learn about the faith, but to live it out as well. I wanted to be a good teacher of the faith. The poem is called “Undivided Attention.”

A grand piano wrapped in quilted pads by movers,  
tied up with canvas straps—like classical music’s  
birthday gift to the criminally insane—  
is gently nudged without its legs  
out an eighth-floor window on 62nd street.  
It dangles in April air from the neck of the movers ’ crane,  
Chopin--shiny black lacquer squares  
and dirty white crisscross patterns hanging like the second-to-last  
note of a concerto played on the edge of the seat,  
the edge of tears, the edge of eight stories up going over—  
it’s a piano being pushed out of a window  
and lowered down onto a flatbed truck!—and  
I’m trying to teach math in the building across the street.  
Who can teach when there are such lessons to be learned?  
All the greatest common factors are delivered by  
long-necked cranes and flatbed trucks  
or come through everything, even air.  
Like snow.  
See, snow falls for the first time every year, and every year  
my students rush to the window  
as if snow were more interesting than math,  
which, of course, it is.  
So please.  
Let me teach like a Steinway,  
spinning slowly in April air,  
so almost--falling, so hinderingly  
dangling from the neck of the movers 'crane.  
So on the edge of losing everything.  
Let me teach like the first snow, falling.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://taylormali.com/poems/undivided-attention/>

It gave me a lot of comfort that even this charming poet struggled to keep his students attention - and he was just teaching middle school math. I was trying to teach 8th grade Confirmation students to care about Presbyterian polity. I wanted to be a good teacher, the kind of teacher who could capture the undivided attention of my students, to actually shape the hearts and minds of these young people into disciples of Jesus Christ.

The man in our Gospel story this morning calls Jesus, Good Teacher, the only time anyone does that in all four of the Gospels. While other Gospels describe the ruler in this passage as young, Luke instead presents him as older man who has tried his whole life to follow the letter of the law, keeping the commandments faithfully. He asks Jesus directly for the key to inheriting eternal life, and Jesus enumerates the commandments for the gathered crowd. You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not lie, honor your father and mother. This student has asked a question about heavenly possibilities and Jesus answers him with earthly expectations.

He pushes back against Jesus, or maybe actually seeks to celebrate with Jesus that he passed this test. If this is what it takes to inherit eternal life, he has kept all of these since his youth. Jesus responds with one more examination, one more obligation, one more test. “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor; then come, follow me.”

What’s especially interesting about the way that Luke tells this story is that in other versions the man reacts with sadness and walks away. Not in Luke. Yes, he is sad. He is discouraged, because this is going to be more work than he expected. But he stays. Jesus has his undivided attention. Jesus looks at him, and Jesus continues to teach him. He goes on to offer a teaching that is familiar to many of us about rich men and their unlikelihood to enter the kingdom of heaven as unlikely as it is for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle.

This teaching sparks more questions from his disciples. They too want to know if they have done enough, sacrificed enough, walked away from enough

to ensure their salvation. How will they know when they have been saved? Jesus tries to encourage them in their confusion and explains a truth they likely didn't quite grasp, a lesson that he comes back to over and over again - that even though these kinds of demands seem impossible for us as human beings to ever get right, nothing is impossible for God.

This story is just a small vignette of Jesus teaching the crowds which falls in the middle of a larger story that illustrates Jesus' range and flexibility as a good teacher.

Agnes talked to us last week about Jesus as an especially skilled storyteller, teaching and illuminating his message through a wide range of parables. But right before today's passage, we are reminded that Jesus himself wasn't above a good object lesson as well, taking young children into his arms and then using them to teach the adults what it means to truly welcome the reign of God's kingdom into their lives. After our passage Jesus teaches through the miraculous healing of a beggar sitting along the side the road who cries out to him as he passes by, and then in the end encounters the tax collector Zacchaeus and teaches his disciples about the abundant grace of God by taking them on a field trip to share a meal in the home of a sinner.

There is no doubt that Jesus was a good and skilled teacher in his time, but our struggle often comes when we seek to experience Jesus as our teacher 2,000 years later, looking for more creative ways to learn from him, to have that experience of being *challenged by* him and *seen by* him when mostly we just *read about him* in a book.

In the early 1980's Psychologist Howard Gardner published a new theory of multiple intelligences - the idea being that humans learn and understand in very different ways, even though most schools at the time taught everything in a singular way. Schools teach through words and logic, but some human beings learn through art, through the experience of their bodies, through music, through an ability to interact with other human beings or through the natural world. Actually it was not just that people learn

differently but that they possess intelligence in ways that the world never thought to measure or celebrate.

A decade later, this theory of multiple intelligences entered Sunday School classroom, including here at Bryn Mawr, as pastors, educators and volunteer teachers sought to find new and creative ways to tap into the multiple intelligences of our children in the hopes they would connect with Jesus, the church and the faith in a way that maybe Bible reading and worksheets never really accomplished. We taught them about the last supper by inviting them to cook and share a meal together. We taught them about miracles by turning Sunday school rooms into science labs. We taught them about the ministry of Paul by creating giant maps of the Mediterranean on the floor of their classrooms so they could physically walk Pauls' missionary journeys alongside their classmates. These teaching practices are now standard in most of our children's classrooms.

As we employed these creative teaching tools in my previous congregation in Indiana, we decided to create a new curriculum to teach our children to know and love our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith. Each Sunday in Lent this year, in our worship here at BMPC the Jesus portion of that statement has been our Affirmation of Faith. When it came to teaching them these affirmations about Jesus which focus so intentionally not just on what Jesus said but how he taught through his actions, we used a particular multiple intelligence technique focused on those who learn through their bodies. We technically refer to it as kinesthetic intelligence.

Students were placed in groups of three or four and invited them to illustrate the different acts of Jesus found in the Brief Statement of Faith by sculpting their classmates- positioning their classmate's bodies - into scenes. So that they could feel in their bodies what it feels like to heal the sick, to bind up the broken hearted, to break the power of sin and evil. To be fair some lines of the statement are easier to imagine and sculpt than others, but that is where the learning begins -when we imagine and debate together not just what it meant that Jesus did these things, but that we are called to do them as well.

A fifth grader actually has pretty insightful thoughts on what it means to eat with an outcast as well as what human pain looks and feels like.

While I am doubtful that too many of us as adults would be all that open to me asking you as a part of an adult class here to sculpt one another into scenes of the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus Christ, but as adult learners it is incumbent upon us to find ways to say yes when creative moments present themselves outside the classroom to experience Jesus as a good teacher. To learn from Jesus and to give him our undivided attention.

Within my body I feel Jesus' teaching about blessing children and welcoming the kingdom of God into my life every time I bend down to have a conversation with a child about what they have learned recently about life and love, about grace and the Bible. That feeling is mostly in my knees that have started making a little clicking sound when I bend them too deeply. But I feel it all the same.

We can learn about the hope and restoration that came with Jesus' healing touch and his teaching of grace and wholeness that he offered friends and strangers every time we sit with, and pray with, and hold the hands of those experiencing illness and grief.

We experience Jesus as a teacher every time we push ourselves to be in fellowship and honest conversation with people whose lives and experiences and struggles are so very different from our own. I may not know exactly what binding up the hearts of the broken looks like, but I can feel it in my bones as though Jesus himself is sitting alongside me and encouraging me on in the midst of important and challenging conversations.

As we enter into Holy Week, we will experience Jesus as a good teacher as he practices every commandment he has taught us to keep, as he gives up himself everything he has asked us to sacrifice, as he walks the path of love himself that he keeps encouraging us to follow, as he lives out his lessons in his own body on the cross. There is nothing he has taught us to do that he didn't willingly do for us first.

In his classic work - the *Courage to Teach*, Quaker teacher and author, Parker Palmer has his own insight into what makes someone a good teacher that I think has a lot to do with Jesus' strengths as a teacher.

“Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a word for themselves. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts - meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.

As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder then that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart and even breaks the heart - and the more one loves teaching the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in the very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and student and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning and living require.<sup>2</sup>”

Jesus' teachings aren't just about asking us to give everything away like he did this rich ruler, his teaching is about asking our hearts to hold more than they are able, and that inevitably means letting some things go.

As we reach the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is just a few verses away from entering Jerusalem, he is just on the edge of losing everything. If we are paying attention, this is when we can learn the most. Jesus is teaching us that all things are possible for God, and that is a lesson best taught when God through Jesus, transforms something so painful, something so heartbreaking, something so final, into something impossible, something new and alive and good.

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<sup>2</sup> Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998.

May we learn this lesson again this Lenten season, and in these holy days ahead, that having learned the lessons of sacrifice in our hearts, and our minds and our very bodies - lessons of letting go and taking on, that we might ourselves be living lessons of grace and hope and love. Amen.