

“Good Students are Good Teachers and Vice-Versa”
Sermon based on Luke 2:41-52, Mark 11:15-18 and 12:13-17

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There is only one story in the entire New Testament about the childhood of Jesus. As a twelve-year-old boy, Jesus had come to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate the Passover, when Jews commemorate the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egyptian bondage under Moses' leadership. But as the family headed back home to Nazareth once the holiday was over, Jesus was nowhere to be found among the company of travelers. In a panic, his parents raced back to Jerusalem to look for him. Three days later, Mary and Joseph finally found Jesus in the temple, discussing theological questions with “the teachers” whose company he had sought out (Luke 2:46). Not surprisingly, his mother scolded her son: “Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been worried sick and looking everywhere for you!” (Luke 2:48). In reply, Jesus makes a puzzling remark: “Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I would be in my father's house?” (Luke 2:49). Luke tells us that, although his parents didn't understand what their son meant by these words, Mary “treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). If I had been lost for 3 days when I was 12 years old only to have my parents find me sitting in a church talking about theology with the ministers, like Mary my mother might also have treasured these things in her heart, but I would certainly have been grounded for a week!

I've always liked this story because it reminds me a lot of myself growing up. When I was 13, just one year older than Jesus was in this story, I attended a United Methodist summer camp in Wrightwood where I met a young minister who impressed me with his ability to engage

me in theological conversation in a way no adult had ever done before. He treated me with great respect, exactly the way a teenager yearns to be treated by adults. He took all of my questions about God with complete seriousness. He also said some things that were very insightful, even if they weren't very easy for me to understand at the time. For instance, I remember how my mind had to work overtime just to understand his answer to one of the questions that I had asked him about the Bible. I spent the entire week at camp pondering it. When I finally grasped what he meant, it was as if a light in a dark room had suddenly been turned on. I had never met a minister as smart as he was. I not only asked him questions; he asked me questions. It was during that week at camp that he asked me: "Have *you* ever considered becoming a minister?"

We know that as an adult, Jesus became a theological teacher in his own right. That's why this story about his childhood is so revealing since it gives us a glimpse into who he already was as a boy. His comment, "Didn't you know that I must be in my father's house?" can also be translated as: "Didn't you know that I had to be concerned with the things of my father?" That is, didn't you know that I was preoccupied with all the questions of theology (Who is God? What is God's will? How do we interpret the Law of Moses? What does God expect of Israel? What about the Gentiles, the non-Jews? Will they be saved?) Before Jesus became a good teacher, he had been a good student; before he answered the questions that others asked him about God, he had posed his own questions about God to others. Indeed, in this story, Jesus is depicted as an ideal student, "listening [to the teachers] and asking them questions" (Luke 2:46). *Listening and asking!* For their part, the teachers were "amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47). This shows that the teachers also asked questions of him. Not only did Jesus pose his questions to them, but they also posed questions to him. These Jewish teachers clearly treated

the boy Jesus with utmost respect. They could see how smart he was and how much potential he had to become a great rabbi himself. And so, they took him and his questions very seriously.

Teaching and learning occur whenever there is genuine dialogue and conversation, when people feel free to ask their own questions and are willing to let other people ask them questions in return. Through dialogue and conversation, we learn by asking questions and by being willing to take seriously the questions of others. The Jewish tradition in which Jesus was raised has always placed great value upon learning and thus upon the importance of dialogue, conversation, even debate and argument as a necessary part of the religious life. In fact, the Jews so relish intellectual debate with one another in pursuit of learning the truth about God that they even tell a joke among themselves about their willingness to argue multiple points of view and to explore every side of an argument: “Two Jews, three opinions.” Unfortunately, however, Christians haven’t done so well in this regard. Not everybody feels they are allowed to ask their questions about God in church. Many people in churches are told that they shouldn’t ask questions, since questions can lead to doubt and good Christians aren’t supposed to have any doubts; we’re just supposed to believe! Indeed, faith is often described as the opposite of doubt, so having doubts means you lack faith. But I think this is a serious misunderstanding of faith. Doubt should be seen as a necessary element in the life of faith. Moreover, if you aren’t allowed to ask questions, how can you learn? How can you test the truth of your religious convictions if questioning is prohibited? Yet, too often, churches suppress the kind of free and open dialogue that would encourage us to ask our questions about God and the Bible. Instead, they promote blind faith.

My father once told me that I shouldn't ask so many theological questions because I should simply believe the Bible. He heard that I had been asking our youth minister some pretty tough theological questions one Sunday evening at Methodist Youth Fellowship, and he was angry with me. You can imagine, then, just how refreshing it was to meet that other young minister at summer camp who was not at all put off by my tough questions! But to my father, my theological questions were an affront to God. After I had become an adult myself, however, I suddenly remembered something very odd and puzzling about my dad because it completely contradicted his own explicit statements to me. What I remembered was this: My father could never understand the doctrine of the Trinity, that the One God is somehow three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, every time my father had the opportunity to do so, *he* would ask a minister to explain it to him. Wait a minute! The same man who told his precocious son not to ask any difficult theological questions was asking his own theological questions every chance he got. What a contradiction between precept and example. What a mixed message. Obviously, my dad had his own doubts about things he had learned in church that led him to ask his own theological questions. So, why did he tell me not to ask so many questions? I don't really know the answer, but I suspect it was this: My father was afraid that if either of us asked too many questions, we wouldn't have any faith left. Behind the impulse to silence all theological questioning is fear, fear that we will lose our faith. But what if the opposite is the case? What if faith can only grow strong and be deepened in an environment where questions are encouraged? What if dialogue, conversation, debate, and even argument about theological matters are essential to a robust faith? The example of my dad shows that even Christians who say we should just believe and not ask questions have doubts and questions of their own whether they acknowledge this fact or not!

I was a professor of theology at a seminary for a number of years, training future ministers. I noticed that there were two types of students in my classes: those who fearlessly asked questions in their pursuit of the truth about God and those who just wanted to get through their formal ministerial training without risking their faith by asking any hard questions of themselves or others. Some really wanted an education, whereas others just wanted a degree. Those who really wanted a theological education gave themselves wholeheartedly to the give-and-take of dialogue, conversation, even debate and argument. Those who pursued the truth about God threw themselves into the questions. The others, who were afraid of risking their faith, didn't engage the questions deeply; they merely wanted to know the correct answers so they wouldn't have to think for themselves. Typically, this group of students wanted to know my opinions on various theological issues because they assumed that they'd then have the correct answers to the questions they'd be asked on the final exam. But I never gave them the easy answers they wanted. A good teacher assists students to think well, but refuses to do their own thinking for them. That's the kind of teacher Jesus was; he forced others to think for themselves.

In the second story, we see Jesus as an adult, once again at the temple after he has staged a protest against its corruption by other religious leaders. For this reason, he has made enemies and they want to get him. So, we are told that certain people were sent "to trap him in what he said" (Mark 12:13). They ask him a question: "Is it permissible according to the Law of Moses to pay taxes to Caesar, the Roman emperor?" (Mark 12:14-15). They think that they've asked him a question that he can only answer in one of two ways, but whichever way he answers it, he is cornered. In his answer to this volatile political and religious question, he will either arouse the opposition of the Roman occupying authorities or he will ignite the indignation of his fellow

Jews who resist Roman rule. On the one hand, if he says that the Jews shouldn't pay taxes to the Romans, the Romans will arrest him and probably execute him; on the other hand, if he says that Jews should pay taxes to the Romans, he might be killed by a Jewish mob that considers him a traitor to Israel. So, they await his answer to their question so they can "trap him" in his words.

But before they ask him their question, they acknowledge Jesus as a "teacher" and begin to flatter him: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth" (Mark 12:14). Even though they don't mean a word of what they've said, they've actually given a correct description of what makes someone a good teacher of theology. Listen to their words.

"Teacher, we know that you are sincere." A good teacher is "sincere," that is, genuine, authentic, not phony; a good teacher is a real person who can be counted on to be honest and forthright, not duplicitous or manipulative. A good teacher is there for students, to help them.

"Teacher, we know that you show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality." A good teacher is not a people-pleaser, is not looking for the praise or approval of others. A good teacher does not treat students differently depending on their status or rank.

"Teacher, we know that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." A good teacher is committed to the truth above all else; that, by the way, is why a good teacher is not a people-pleaser and is not out for praise or approval. A good teacher is committed to teaching what is true about God and teaching students how to know which beliefs about God are true.

So, how does Jesus, whom his opponents acknowledge to be a good teacher, answer their question that is designed to trap him? He refuses to give them the easy answer they want him to

give. He says neither, “Pay taxes to Caesar,” nor, “Don’t pay taxes to Caesar.” Instead, he gives them something to think about. He articulates a theological principle: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). He has given his answer to their question, but it’s not one of the two answers they expected from him. Rather, he has thrown the question back into their laps. By answering that they should give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God, they now have to ask themselves: “What things belong to Caesar? What things belong to God?” As a good teacher, Jesus has taken their question seriously, indeed, far more seriously than they intended it. But he has refused to give them an easy answer. He has forced them to think for themselves. We are told that his opponents were “utterly amazed” at what he said (Mark 12:17), just as earlier it was reported that “the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching” (Mark 11:18).

Many people don’t want to do the hard work of thinking for themselves, especially when it comes to the questions of theology; that’s why they gravitate to churches that tell them not to ask too many questions, since questions imply doubts and doubt is antithetical to faith. But this is not the model we have of Jesus in the New Testament. As both a student and a teacher, Jesus asked lots of questions. He engaged in deep thinking himself and he encouraged others to do the same. He gathered twelve disciples around him whom he could teach. The word “disciple” means “student,” so we would be correct in speaking of Jesus and his twelve students. He taught them so that they would teach others. Good students become good teachers of others; but good teachers never cease to be students themselves. As the Methodist theologian Schubert Ogden has put it: “Good teachers are, above all, good students who are equally at home in asking their own questions as in understanding and appreciating the questions of others.” They cultivate an ethos

of free and fearless questioning where people can trust that their own questions will be respected and taken seriously since no one will say to them: “Don’t ask questions. Just believe.”

One of my students at the seminary was Jay Bakker, the son of televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. When I met Jay, he was a young man struggling to make sense of the debacle of his family’s televangelism empire since, as you may recall, his father was sentenced to a term in federal prison while popular culture made fun of his mother’s eye make-up. Jay came to the seminary because he desperately needed to find a teacher, a good teacher, someone who was sincere, impartial, and truthful. After having grown up in the exceedingly narrow-minded world of right-wing Christianity with people such as Jerry Falwell, Jay was trying to discover what, if anything, in his religious upbringing was true, or whether he should simply leave Christianity behind. And so, we began our teacher-student relationship which lasted for a few years until I left Minnesota to move back to California; during that time, I watched Jay’s transformation as he went from being someone who was wounded, uncertain, and confused into being someone who is strong, certain, and clear in his own mind as to who he is as a person in his own right distinct from his parents and why his understanding of Christian faith is different from theirs. Alas, there are many Jay Bakker’s in our world who are victims of churches that insist upon blind faith with disastrous results. Such people would appreciate the opportunity to become good students if only they could find good teachers who take their questions seriously.

As we ponder what is it that Christ Church by the Sea has to offer our community, we might do well to lift up the fact that ours is a church where people are encouraged to ask their theological questions freely and without fear of being shamed. Churches like ours might be in

the minority these days, since we have witnessed such an upsurge in right-wing Christianity that shuns critical thinking and honest inquiry. But if Jesus is really our guide, as all Christians claim he is, then we should aspire always to be both good students and good teachers just as he was, asking and listening, respecting the truth that the ability to pose questions is one of the distinctive marks of being uniquely human. To suppress critical questioning in the name of blind faith is both anti-human and anti-Christian. And it goes against the clear witness of the New Testament. So then, let us be known as a church of good students and good teachers, where all are invited to join us in open dialogue and conversation about any and all theological questions they may have.