

West Branch Friends Meeting
September 29, 2019
Sue McCracken, Pastor

“Jesus’ Teachings, Part 1”

One of the remarks you often hear from me is how, as Christians, we are followers of Jesus’ teachings. Other religions have leaders’ teachings they follow as well...Buddha, or Gandhi, for example. George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends (later nicknamed Quakers for the way some seemed to quake as they sat immersed in the Holy Spirit) is probably quoted most often for testifying to his understanding of Jesus that was revealed to him in his search for truth. Fox wrote:

“And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition;” and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.”

So yes, the teachings of Jesus have been at the center of our particular understanding of Christianity. I remember back several decades ago when a popular saying was often asked of believers. It was simply, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Now at the time, I thought that probably had to mean: do you believe and testify to what you have been taught about Jesus? That he was God’s son, come to earth as God’s way to save sinners by having him die on a cross. This was the theology promoted by Paul, the earliest of the Biblical New Testament writers. Paul began these letters to try and establish a theology for these new gatherings that was different from the Judaism he had been a part of all his life. Paul’s new ideas were based on the teachings’ of Jesus that had been passed down orally for the 25 years since Jesus’ death.

It never really occurred to me that there might be a better way to answer that question of the evidence to convict; and that would be by asking Christians like you and me how our lives show we are following Jesus’ teachings. So for the next couple of weeks, let’s take a look at the core of Jesus’ teachings that are found in the collection of verses often

called the Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of the book of Matthew. What I'd like to do is phrase some of the teachings as queries: questions to help us consider the evidence in our lives that we ***are*** following Jesus' teachings.

Probably the most often discussed verses these days are lumped together as 'The Beatitudes' from Matthew 5, which I read for our call to worship. Since I spent several weeks going through each of these teachings two years ago, we aren't going to spend a lot of time on any one of them. But just as a reminder, here are queries to help us assess how well we are following Jesus' teachings:

Am I relying more on God when I'm at the end of my rope and it seems like I've lost what is most dear to me? (vs. 3, and 4)

Do I feel blessed when I am content with exactly who I am - no more or no less? (vs. 5)

Have I worked up a good appetite for God? (vs. 6)

Do I find myself being cared for because I am caring for others? (vs. 7)

Is my heart and mind in the right place so I can see God in the outside world? (vs. 8)

Am I working to be a peacemaker, showing people how to cooperate rather than compete or fight? (vs. 9)

Do I consider being put down, or had lies told to discredit me, as a blessing because those who tell the truth are often treated this way and it draws me closer to God? (vs. 10-12)

Then Jesus starts talking about salt and light in verses 13-16 – also very familiar verses:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the

world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Salt is a preservative that suggests longevity, purity, and enhancement. Here's the query to assess our ability to be salt:

Am I living in a way that works to preserve and enrich life for others? Particularly those who may be homeless, those without adequate health care or proper nutrition, immigrants being held in horrific conditions, or those in prisons?

On being light, I love this lyric that Sydney Carter wrote and dedicated to Fox,

“There's a light that is shining in the heart of a man, it's the light that was shining when the world began. There's a light that is shining in the Turk and the Jew and a light that is shining, friend, in me and in you.”

Is God's light shining in me for others, and what does that light look like?

Am I putting that light I have in my Christian faith on display for all to see, or am I keeping God a secret?

Then we have the verses about murder. If you're like most of us reading these next verses, you're probably thinking you have no problem following this teaching. However....Jesus flips the script on this one. Listen to verses 21 and 22 from The Message:

“You're familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.”

So I often wonder about not only my tone of voice, but also the actual words I say to (and about) others. If it's words that kill, I'm pretty sure this is an area I need to work on! And this query:

If my words can be as dangerous as actual murder, what can I do to follow this Jesus teaching?

The verses that follow are also tough ones because I'm fairly certain we all have some people in our lives who are difficult to deal with. They may have hurt us, or they may just be people we don't like because of their opinions, their politics, or their attitudes. Jesus had something to say about our responses to these folks, too, in verses 23-26:

"This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God. Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with that person."

So again, here's the query to challenge us as we seek to follow Jesus' teachings:

Who might I have a grudge with, or who might be an enemy that I need to make things right with?

I think these are probably enough challenges for all of us to think about for one message! It's a lot easier to just say the words, "I'm a Christian," or "I'm a Quaker" or even "I follow Jesus' teachings," without really doing the hard work that demonstrates how our actions are evidence that we are truly followers of Jesus' teachings, and worthy to be called Christians.

I'd like to leave you with this thought from St. Albans Episcopal Church:

At the end of life, what really matters is not what we bought, but what we built; not what we got, but what we shared; not our competence, but our character; and not our success, but our significance. Live a life that matters; live a life of love.