

Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus – Jesus’ Last Lecture

Mark 1:14-15

The great progressive Christian writer and teacher Marcus Borg died this week. Many people I know have been shaped by Borg’s books: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, *The God I Never Knew*, *The Heart of Christianity*. Borg developed his theology of a more inclusive, wide open, less judgmental God over the course of a long career as a scholar, but you always knew that he was also speaking his own truth. If you followed his books you could hear his voice and his faith change over time. Borg knew he was dying, and his final book, published just last fall, is called *Convictions*. It reads like a last lecture, a way of saying, “This is what I hope you remember.”

Do you remember a few years ago a professor from Carnegie Mellon University, Randy Pausch, got momentarily famous for doing something similar. He was a professor of computer science and only in his mid-forties when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He gave his students what he called “The Last Lecture,” and he talked not about computers, but about life; what he had learned over the course of his life and his illness; what he most wanted his students to remember. The video of that lecture went viral, and that’s why we know his name.

Great teachers—or maybe all of us—have something to say to the ones we leave behind. Something we want them to remember, something that will give them the benefit of what we have learned already. We want them to have those lessons as a foundation, so they don’t have to spend their lives learning the same things, so that they can go on and accomplish something even greater. The speeches and writings of the great prophets of our time—people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama—do this. That’s what great teachers do: they not only express themselves; they teach to make change that lasts long beyond their lifetimes.

Despite the title of today’s sermon, Jesus did not give a last lecture. Jesus didn’t actually do lectures. His style was to speak in shorter, less direct stories, quizzical sayings that left people wondering what was buried underneath his words. Sometimes he didn’t need words; his actions and the way he treated people said, “Watch me.” But he had one message, one cause that he kept coming back to over his years of teaching. This is what he most wanted his followers to hear and hold onto. And he said it not in his last lecture, but his first. Jesus’ first message was the one sentence Janine read this morning from the Gospel of Mark:

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;
repent, and believe in the good news.”*

That needs some unpacking, doesn’t it?

The *Kingdom of God* is what Jesus came to talk about. It’s what he *did* talk about, over and over again. It’s there in every Gospel-writer’s version of the story, although Matthew calls it the

“kingdom of heaven” because his Jewish culture didn’t think it was right to use the word “God” in a sentence.

“Ugh,” you may be thinking. That’s not what Jesus’ message to *me* is, or what I want it to be. We don’t do “kingdoms” in a democratic, egalitarian world. “Repent” is a word that you see mostly hand-lettered on cardboard signs, held by irrational people who shout on street corners. But let’s not give away Jesus’ most central teaching, just because it’s been mis-used. If we’re going to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, we may have to excavate a little to find them, under the layers of stuff that the church and fanatics have piled over them.

What *is* the Kingdom of God? What does it look like, if it’s near but we can’t see it? It’s hard to explain. Even Jesus had a hard time putting it into words. And often the words he did use sound contradictory to us.

What Jesus meant when he talked about the *Kingdom of God* is what the world would look like if God were in charge. He called it a “kingdom” because that’s who *was* in charge in those days: kings, caesars, pharaohs. Today we might call it the “commonwealth” of God, or “culture”, or “society”. You might think of it as the world the way God intended it, imagined it, at creation. Jesus chose a political word—kingdom—to describe it; he didn’t call it the “family” of God. He had in mind something bigger, more universal, more inclusive than a family can ever be. It’s about justice, peace, equality—all those systemic things that happen in public, not just in your heart.

And he said, “the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21) --which sounds like it is a matter for each of us personally, our own transformation.

It’s here, Jesus said; it’s not impossibly far away, in space or in time. Don’t look for it in some non-earthly, spiritual dimension. Don’t postpone it, for after life on this this earth has ended. The kingdom of God is for *now*, and it is for *here*. It is a reality that can land right in the middle of everyday life. Your everyday life. *Our* everyday life. It is right here, right now.

And he said, pray to God for this: “thy kingdom come...”—which sounds to me like it’s not here yet.

When Jesus tried to describe the Kingdom of God to his disciples, he could only do it with metaphors, pictures he drew with words. “The kingdom of God is like...” many of these stories began. It’s like a woman who lost a coin and looked all day to find it, because every cent mattered to her. It’s like a shepherd who was in charge of a hundred sheep and who risked the whole flock to find the one that got lost. The kingdom of God is like a father who loved his son so much that he welcomed him home even after that son had turned his back on everything that father had tried to teach him. It’s like a big dinner party that has a seat at it for every person, whether they look like they belong there or not. It’s like something that starts out tiny—a mustard seed, a teaspoon of yeast—and somehow grows into a gift that is almost ridiculously big.

Whatever the Kingdom of God looks like exactly, we know this from these images: it is radically inclusive, extravagantly generous, unreasonably joyful.

Sometimes it seemed like Jesus was saying, “Your work is to make the world into a place that looks like that.” Feed the hungry. Free the prisoners. Welcome outcasts.

And, it seems like he was saying, that kingdom happens in some way that is totally mysterious, beyond your power or your responsibility. Building the kingdom is God’s work, not yours.

No wonder we’re confused. If only Jesus *had* given a last lecture, summarized all of this with a clear, succinct power point presentation. Why didn’t he? It’s possible, I suppose, that he simply died too soon; that if he had grown to be an old, wise man, he would have massaged these lessons into something more easily memorized, more bottom-line-focused. But I think Jesus was more intentional than that. I think maybe he said everything he needed to say.

And I want to suggest to you this morning that the key to understanding what Jesus was talking about is in that one word you may have wished was not in this reading: the word *repent*. “Repent and believe in the good news,” Jesus said. We have learned to hear “repent” as a word about God’s judgment. The picture it can conjure up is everything we hate about organized religion: its mean, threatening, judgmental, punishing face. But that’s not what the word means, or what it meant when Jesus used it.

The word Jesus used is the Hebrew word *teshuvah*, which means to *turn*. Turn around and face the other way, Jesus told his people. And he said it to everybody, not just bad people. Whoever you are, whatever direction you’ve been walking in already, he said, face the opposite way, and there you’ll find good news. Let go of the things you’ve always assumed were true, so that you can open your eyes to something you have not seen before. Because the Kingdom of God is *always* hidden. It *always* shows up where we were not inclined to look for it: in someone who was lost, in that relationship that seemed irretrievably broken, in an idea that looked like it had no value at all. In fact, maybe we can *only* recognize and enter the Kingdom of God when we’re a little off-balance, not too sure of where we stand, or how God will show up. God’s intention—the Kingdom of God--will *always* surprise us.

This was Jesus’ first message, and maybe also his last lecture. It’s no three-step plan for a better life, is it? It sounds dangerous and slightly un-stable, and it is. It means being ready, always, to lay aside our own agenda, even when we thought we had it right. It requires trusting at every moment that there is a vision bigger and more complete than our own. It means living counter-culturally, as though we are already citizens of a kingdom that is most often invisible. It is quietly, but with single-minded focus, collaborating in God’s vision of hope and compassion and justice for each of us, and for all of creation.

This is a little slippery to hold onto. That’s how it’s supposed to sound. It keeps us connected, humble, attentive to the One whose vision we are enacting. Listen to these words, written in 1979 by Catholic Bishop Ken Untener, as he remembered Bishop Oscar Romero:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. ...

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

May it be so for us.