

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Second Sunday after Epiphany- January 14, 2007

Scripture lessons: Romans 8:14-17 & Luke 6:40

JESUS, OUR TEACHER

In this new church year we're taking a close look again at the gospel stories of Jesus' life. In Advent, we reviewed his family tree as recorded in Matthew's gospel and pondered its meaning for us. We reflected on the present significance of St. Luke's story of the announcement of Jesus' birth to his mother, Mary. We learned about the big city of Sepphoris near which Jesus grew up and of how his experiences there likely helped shape his understanding of the city he meant and still means to build.

Today in the Epiphany season, during which we traditionally highlight Jesus as "the light of the world", we'll focus on the gospels' portrait of Jesus as our Teacher. Through his teaching, Jesus' light shone and still shines. In the gospels, Jesus is called "Teacher" forty times and "Rabbi", meaning "Master", fourteen times. In the culture of his day, being worthy of the title "Teacher" or "Rabbi" was *a very big deal*.

It was about the best a young Jewish boy could aspire to. Being a rabbi meant you were immersed in the study of the Torah, the Jewish sacred scriptures, especially the first five books. Commitment to the Torah defined the Jewish people as Jews. They weren't known for their numbers or their military might or their material wealth. They were known for their Torah through which they knew God.

One of the questions hotly debated among Rabbis during Jesus' time was the age at which children should start being taught the Torah. A popular saying among them went like this, "Under the age of six, we do not receive a pupil. (But) (f)rom six upwards, we accept them and stuff them with Torah like an ox."

Stuff them with Torah like an ox because Torah was the best. Torah was the center of all Jewish education. At six years old Jewish children would enter the *Bet Sefer*, the "house of the Book". The book, of course, was the Torah. From ages six until ten and from dawn until afternoon, Jewish children would sit at a Rabbi's feet and hear of nothing but Torah, Torah, and more Torah. They would learn it, memorize it, chant it- get stuffed with it like an ox because Torah was the best. Sometimes in the middle of all this stuffing, a Rabbi would put honey on his pupils' tongues so they'd associate Torah with the best, sweetest, and most delicious thing they knew.

After the *Bet Sefer*, most children would be released from intensive Torah study. For the boys, that meant focusing more on learning their family trade. For the girls, it meant concentrating on moving towards marriage and motherhood. Those who had a special gift and love for learning the Torah, however, could enter the *Bet Talmud*, the "house of learning". By the end of *Bet Talmud*, at around age 14 or 15, the best students would know the whole Hebrew Bible by memory, from Genesis all the way through Malachi. The best of them would then seek to enter the *Bet Midrash*, the "house of study". To enter it, they had to approach a Rabbi they'd especially come to admire. They had to seek specific permission to become one of his *talmidim*, one of his disciples or followers.

In Jesus' day, Rabbis *never* recruited their disciples. You had to come to them- they never came to you. And when you asked if you could become one of their *talmidim*, they tested you hard. Did you know Torah? Had you memorized all the books? Did you know how to interpret them properly? Did you know the history of different Rabbis' interpretations of them?

It wasn't easy to become a Rabbi's disciple. Most of the time, the Rabbi would say, "No." They would accept only the best of the best.

Now the gospels don't give us many details about Jesus' own boyhood. They give us only one story of it in Luke, chapter 2. In it, Jesus is twelve years old and goes to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate the Passover. When it's time to leave he stays behind in the temple and astonishes the scribes there with his knowledge of and questions about the Torah. When his parents return and find him, they ask why he's caused them so much worry by staying behind when they had gone ahead. He says to them, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (2:41-49)

From this story, it sounds like Jesus certainly must have been in the *Bet Talmud* by that time. It sounds like he must have been among the best of the best, among those who later would enter into the *Bet Midrash*. We don't know which Rabbi might have accepted him at that point, but we do know that later he connected with John the Baptist and was baptized by him. We do know that after his baptism, he started his own public ministry and people began calling him "Teacher" and "Rabbi". It turned out that Jesus was a Rabbi with a big difference.

We remember that in his day Rabbis never recruited their *talmidim*- but Jesus did. In the gospels, we have several stories where he seeks out and calls specific people to be his followers.

One of the first and best known of these call stories is in Mark, chapter 1. Jesus is walking along and sees two brothers, James and John, working in a fishing boat with their father, Zebedee. Jesus calls out to them to follow him. Immediately, they leave everything and follow Jesus (verse 19-20).

To us this seems astonishingly, even unbelievably abrupt. How could two young men, working for and with their father, suddenly leave everything behind to follow an itinerant Rabbi who's just called out to them? How could any responsible father sit back and allow his sons to go?

We have to work hard to imagine what Jesus' call actually meant to James, John, and Zebedee. We remember that only the best of the best could ever be accepted by a Rabbi to be among his *talmidim*. James and John are working in a fishing boat, learning their family trade from their father- which means they must *not* have been among the specially gifted ones who would have entered the *Bet Talmud*. They must *not* have been among those who later could enter into the *Bet Midrash* or finally approach a Rabbi about becoming one of his *talmidim*.

Yet here this Rabbi Jesus approaches *them* and says, "I want *you* to be my disciples." James and John can hardly believe it. Such a thing never happens, but here it has happened and they're not about to let it pass them by. Their father, Zebedee, won't let it pass them by, either, for this is the great dream for any Jewish boy of their day- to become one of a Rabbi's *talmidim*, and later, perhaps, become a Rabbi yourself. It was the highest aspiration they could have.

An example from our own day might help us understand this more. Ned Coletti is a devout Christian. He's also a vice-president for the San Francisco Giants major league baseball team. As part of his job, he goes to the Dominican Republic to scout promising young baseball players. The Dominican is one of the places from which many of today's major leaguers come.

After one of his scouting trips, Coletti sent an e-mail to his pastor, John Ortberg. Coletti said, "Most of these players (that I scout) have only one parent. Most have never met their earthly father. They have no Abba on this planet watching out for them, and most have never been educated beyond the fifth grade.

"On this trip, there was one player in particular that our coaching staff told me had great tools, but who was too timid because he didn't want to fail. I asked one of our coaches to help me communicate (with him) in Spanish. I told him- he's only sixteen years old- that failure is a part of baseball. I told him that the great (Barry) Bonds fails. I told him that his countryman, Moises Alou, fails.

"But I also told him that God had blessed him with a special talent. God had blessed him with a special touch that was perfect for him, that was meant just for him. When I said that, he looked up at me and had tears in his eyes.

"I left two days later, and as I was saying my goodbyes to the staff on this makeshift baseball field in the middle of nowhere, this particular boy stayed behind and waited. He came over to me

and we shook hands. He spoke no English and I spoke no Spanish, but God can work between us beyond our language. This boy and me- we connected- and I told him and all the other kids that I will be back with them next year and the year after that and the year after that from now until the earthly end of me. I will be back with them and for much more than baseball because my heart yearns to help these kids.”

I ask you to imagine that *you* are a sixteen-year-old boy in the Dominican Republic. Imagine that you have no father and that you have only a fifth-grade education. Imagine that you’re probably destined for a life of deep poverty, a life that likely will end much too soon.

Yet one day a vice-president from the San Francisco Giants comes and looks you in the eye and says to you, “I think you’ve got what it takes. I want you. I want you to follow my lead and become a major league baseball player.” What would you do?

Would you say, “No thanks, I’ll just stay here and stick with what I’ve already got going?” Or would you drop everything? Would you drop everything and, with tears in your eyes, follow his lead?

James and John dropped everything to follow Jesus. They were nobody special, two young men apparently destined to live life far short of their highest aspirations. Yet one day Rabbi Jesus comes along, looks them in the eye, and says, “I think you have what it takes. I want you to be my disciples. Come and follow me.”

James and John never heard of any Rabbi ever doing a thing like that. So they jumped at their chance, and immediately left everything behind to follow Jesus.

The point of all this, of course, is that today Jesus Christ also comes to each one of us and says, “I want *you*. I think *you* have what it takes to be one of my disciples. Come and follow me.”

What does that mean for us? What do we leave behind to follow this Rabbi Jesus, our Teacher? One thing we certainly have to leave behind is our self-doubt.

Maybe we feel, “Yes, Jesus, I’ve tasted the greatness of this life you call us to- real life, true life, life that flows from God’s love for all of us. And yes, a big part of me wants to live that life- I really, really do.

“But there’s this other part of me, too, maybe even a bigger part, that resists You. I don’t know if I believe in You enough to leave everything behind so I can love like You do. I just don’t know about that.

Which is likely true- we don’t know about that for sure, but that’s not what matters most. We don’t yet believe enough in him, but guess what? He believes in us. That’s what the stories of his calls to his disciples are about. He believed in them so much that, unlike with other Rabbis, they didn’t have to come to him. He came to them . . . and today he comes to us.

He comes and claims us as God’s children. From him, as St. Paul says in our first Scripture, we receive *not* “a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear”, but “a spirit of adoption” that makes us bold- bold to keep coming back even when we’ve strayed away, bold to keep on believing that even when we don’t believe in him, he believes in us, bold enough to see that Christ’s love, so amazing and so divine, makes us want to follow him all the more.

Follow him at here at church, back at home, on the job and at school. Follow him to the Dominican Republic to a makeshift baseball field in the middle of nowhere. Follow him to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and welcome the stranger.

Follow him here in Haslett, over in Lansing, out at Pine Ridge, and down in New Orleans. Follow him here in our country and across the globe in Rwanda and the Congo. Follow him into Iraq and in Afghanistan. Follow him everywhere *to do what he does* because he is our Rabbi, our Master, our Teacher. We’re meant *to be like him* because we are his disciples. Luke’s gospel puts this point to it in our second Scripture, “(Every disciple) who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.”

They had a blessing for this back in Jesus’ day. It was offered to anyone who was a disciple that followed in the footsteps of a Master. It was a blessing born in a dusty world where when

you walked, inevitably you kicked up dust. The blessing said, “May you be covered by the dust of your Rabbi.”

I invite us to make that our daily prayer for ourselves and for each other. Let’s pray that we will follow Jesus, our Teacher, so closely. Let’s pray that we’ll follow him so closely that we’ll be covered by the dust of our Rabbi. Amen.