

Meet Your New Spiritual Teacher

Sermon by Rev. Robert V. Thompson
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When I was a kid I used to love to watch those Charlie Chaplin films. Failing to see the banana peel on the sidewalk in front of him, Chaplin inevitably ended up on his posterior. And then of course there was Laurel and Hardy. Laurel was always moving in just the wrong way at the wrong time, and Hardy, not paying attention, ends up being blind sided by a ladder, or stepping into a paint can, crashing spread eagled and on his kisser. Viewers laugh hard at the unexpected mishaps in those old slapstick films, partly because the unexpected is funny, and partly because we all know what it's like to feel a fool. We all know what it feels like to have, as they say, egg on your face.

It's when your guard is down that you become vulnerable and find yourself in a teachable moment. I recently read about a very creative high school teacher. One day four of her students decided to cut their morning classes. After lunch they all reported to their teacher that they were late because their car had a flat tire. The teacher simply smiled and said, "well you boys missed the test this morning, so take your seats and get out your notebooks. Dutifully, they did as they were told. Still smiling she said, "Here is the first question on the test. Write this down. Which tire was flat?"

According to our Gospel lesson there was at least one time when the spiritual teacher Jesus found himself a student in a teachable moment.

There was a woman who had heard that Jesus could work miracles, so she brought her sick daughter to him. The woman was a Gentile. When the mother begged Jesus to heal her daughter, he brushed her aside, saying, "Let the children first be fed. For it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." He was saying that, since there were so many of his Israelite brothers and sisters in need of healing, it wouldn't be right for him to give time and attention to a Gentile. But he doesn't just say, "no, sorry, I can't". He actually insults the woman.

Maybe he is tired; after all, everywhere he turns, some other person wants a piece of him. No doubt there were times when he felt like he was drowning in the sea of human need. We all have our limits after all. But whatever the reason, Jesus loses his cool and insults her. He says "all you Gentiles are like a pack of dogs.

This is not what we'd expect from Jesus—and, truth be told, most scholars say that this story was added later and probably didn't happen this way, if it ever happened at all.

I like this story for two reasons. For one thing, it implies that Jesus wasn't perfect. Most Christians like to say that Jesus was perfect as God is perfect—this means of course that he never screwed up the way the rest of us screw up. As the Son of God he never said the wrong thing at the wrong time; he was never inappropriate or insensitive. Jesus was perfect. Jesus never slipped on a banana peel; he never said anything ignorant or stupid. The conventional line is that Jesus saves us from our sins because he never committed any.

But in today's story he does say something stupid and ignorant. In today's story he comes off as a self-righteous Jew. Looking at this woman he says, "you and your people are nothing but dogs."

He's name calling. To say she is a dog is like a racial slur. But the woman doesn't take the bait. She's desperate. She won't take no for an answer. All she wants is for her daughter to get well. After she is insulted she says, "okay, call me a dog, but look, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." The woman says, "okay, call me a name, call me an Aunt Jemima, call me a camel jockey, call me a beaner, call me a chink, call me a honkie, whatever you want. I don't care what you call me. All I care about is my daughter. My kid is really sick and I'm willing to stand in front of you and take this abuse because I want her to get well."

So, the first reason I like this story is that Jesus comes off imperfectly; he's not just some paragon of perfection, but a human being who, like every other, opens his mouth and inserts his foot.

The second reason I like this story is that Jesus first says no. He's clearly reached his limit. His walls are up. He's ready to move on, but then the pleading woman begins shedding tears and refuses to be ignored. Suddenly, Jesus sees her in her vulnerability and opens his heart in compassion. Jesus lets the situation change him. He opens up, he softens, and then he heals the girl.

This is a remarkable story. Jesus, the spiritual teacher becomes the student. The mother teaches him—reminds him—to see you in me and me in you. Perhaps he is suddenly speechless. Perhaps he stutters and feels foolish. Nonetheless, it's rather refreshing that Jesus the spiritual teacher finds himself in a teachable moment.

Those of who teach for a living, have no doubt a great appreciation for teachable moments in the classroom. A teachable moment arises spontaneously. It's not something you can plan out ahead of time. It's like that teacher who asked each of her students to write down which tire was flat. Teachable moments just appear. A teachable moment is one that catches you off guard. Your defenses are down. You didn't expect that question. Not knowing how to defend yourself, all you can do is open up nakedly to the moment.

In today's gospel story the mother is the teacher who makes the most of a teachable moment, and Jesus becomes her student. Most spiritual seekers I know would challenge themselves as students of spirituality.

Spiritual seekers are forever in search of the truth with a capital T. Show me the one true way, the Holy Grail—give me the answer to my questions, solve my problems, show me the one Truth that will fix everything for my life! Spiritual seekers are forever in search of some program, some belief system or spiritual path that will solve their problems.

It's easy to idealize the spiritual path. It's easy to think that some great spiritual teacher will appear to show you the way you need to go and how to get there. It's easy to romanticize the spiritual journey, to see it only as a stairway to heaven.

When I hear people talk about spirituality it's usually in glowing terms. Most of us think of spiritual enlightenment as if it were some destination vacation.

I speak from personal experience when I say that in my own spiritual journey I often find myself living under the illusion that some day I will arrive. If I meditate long and hard enough, if I give hours of selfless service, if I read the right books, think the right thoughts, then eventually I'll find myself in some blissed out state of consciousness. Who in their right mind wouldn't want to live in a blissed out state of consciousness?

Well, today's story reminds us that even great spiritual teachers like Jesus have moments when they don't feel blissful at all. Actually, when you look at the whole Jesus story, it could be argued that his life's journey was characterized more by potholes than a round paved with gold.

Hugh Prather put it best, "Jesus life didn't go well. He didn't reach his earning potential. He didn't have the respect of his colleagues. His friends weren't loyal. His life wasn't long. He didn't meet his soul mate. And he wasn't understood by his mother. But, of course, most of us believe that, to be really spiritual, means we deserve all those things and more.

What is your ideal spiritual destination? What's your real spiritual goal in life? Is it to be free of insecurity, pain and suffering? One problem, of course, is, whenever we find what we're looking for, it has a way of vanishing. The problem is, whenever we find it, we inevitably lose it. The moment we think we've arrived we suddenly find ourselves heading into the next moment, which is not like the moment we just left.

But, as today's gospel lesson about Jesus and the Gentile woman reminds us, it's the unplanned moments that open us up to life. The unplanned moments are teachable moments. You might even say that Whenever life surprises you—especially with something you don't want—that disappointing moment is actually your newest and latest spiritual teacher.

This, of course, is what the truly great spiritual teachers always say. They say our real spiritual work in this life is not to change the world around us but the world within us.

We held our first "Year To Live" conversation in late January. The next conversation will take place in two weeks, on February 28th. These conversations are all about learning what the moments and minutes of life have to teach us as we live through our inevitable transitions and changes.

In our first meeting one man shared about a time when his life had fallen apart. He had been involved in a 12 step program, but he had started drinking again, was going through a terrible divorce, and he found himself in a living hell. He told his AA sponsor that things had never been so bad. As he recited his list of everything that had gone wrong, his sponsor said, "Well, this too shall pass." And sure enough it did.

Several years later, this man's life was coming together in wonderful and amazing ways. It was such a turnaround from where he had been that he told his sponsor he couldn't believe how great everything was. His sponsor answered, "Well, this too shall pass."

The spiritual journey is about finding ourselves in a teachable moment and opening up to that very moment. The spiritual journey is about going not where we want to go, but where we never dreamed of going. And this is why if we are truly open to the moment we are in; this very moment will become our new and latest spiritual teacher.

The 12 step mantra “this too shall pass” is rooted in spiritual insight. Whatever the moment you’re in—good, bad or ugly—this too shall pass, and when it does you’ll find yourself in the next moment, and that’s when you say “Ah, this too shall pass.”

Spiritual maturity is not about arriving at some imagined destination. It’s not about getting there. There is no there—there. There is only here. And here is where we learn to face our fears, face the moment, and face ourselves. Here is where we wake up to see that life is not a problem to be solved, but a possibility to be lived.

This is what happened to Jesus in today’s story. At first he says, I’ll get back to you Gentiles after I have healed the Jews. I’ll get back to you, once I get there. But suddenly he sees that the woman in front of him, the life before him, is what is here and now. And by entering the here and now of that moment, something new is possible.

This very moment is your perfect spiritual teacher because when you open to it you realize there is always something next. When life seems good or bad, when life feels hard or soft, when life brings joy or pain, when life brings loss or gain—whatever this moment is bringing—become teachable again and know that the lesson is ever so simple and ever so challenging. There’s always something next. And you don’t know what it is. But you will be taught and taught again so long as you are open. Every moment is a doorway to the next—and whatever comes next is never the final thing, it’s just the last thing that is until the next thing. Every moment is your teacher. And every moment is an ending and a beginning. But here’s the key that unlocks the door. No matter what moment you are in, you are larger than that moment. The moment is the teacher, but you are spirit. The moment cannot contain you.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”