

## **Jesus the teacher**

### **Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 13 2025**

*Isaiah 66:10–13; Psalm 25 (sung); Luke 10:25–37*

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I am an ordained minister of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka and have served as a minister in a number of congregations. But for most of my time in the ministry – in fact for over 20 years – I have been a teacher, teaching first at Colombo Theological Seminary, the common seminary for the Protestant churches in Sri Lanka, and later at the Drew University School of Theology in Madison, New Jersey.

This experience of being a teacher for a long time has induced me to reflect on teaching as a vocation and on what is involved in teaching and learning:

What are the characteristics of a good teacher? What is the ideal model of relationship between a teacher and his or her students? What is involved in the learning process? How to communicate knowledge in ways that open up the minds of the students to think critically? And so forth.

I have also reflected on Jesus, the teacher, and his methods of teaching. Although Jesus has many titles, such as Lord, Messiah, Saviour, or Son of God. his primary designation in the synoptic Gospels – the first three Gospels – is Rabbi, or teacher.

I would like to reflect with you on the parable of the good Samaritan within the wider context of Jesus the teacher.

### **How Jesus was different from the teachers within his Jewish tradition?**

Judaism puts enormous emphasis on teaching. Studying and teaching the Torah (the law) or the Hebrew Scriptures is at the heart of Judaism. Jesus as a teacher, however, was very different from the other teachers within his tradition.

Three differences stand out:

First, Torah was taught mainly in the synagogues, in Rabbinic schools, and by famous teachers to whom student went to learn the Torah in depth. Usually, rabbinic teachers did not go out on to the streets and market places to teach. Jesus, on the contrary, carried out his teaching ministry on the streets, by the sea shore, on the mountains, in the market places, and in the outer courts of the temple

Second, his teachings were not on the Torah. He announced the inbreaking of the Kingdom or Reign of God into peoples' lives, and challenged them to embrace the values of the Reign of God. When he used the words of the Torah, he used the formula,

*“It has been said... but I tell you”*, to call them to follow the law not outwardly, but in ways that fulfilled its true intentions.

Third, Jesus did not teach people who in one way or other were formally qualified to enter the learning process. The followers who learned from his teaching were ordinary folks, often without any basic education, often those who had been pushed to the margins of society. He combined his teaching ministry with the ministry of healing those who were physically or mentally ill.

### **Jesus’ teaching models**

Jesus has three models for teaching:

First, direct teaching, like the teachings gathered and presented in Matthew’s gospel, chapters 5, 6 and 7, generally referred to as the “Sermon on the Mount”. Much of this has to do with the values that must govern our daily life.

The second type is where Jesus takes examples from nature and from day-to-day life. This makes his teaching readily understood by the people:

*“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them.”*

*“You shall know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?”*

*“The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed...”*

*“It is like a man who went out to sow...”,* and so forth.

The third and the most innovative method of Jesus’ teaching is his use of parables. Here, Jesus tells a story and expects his listeners to decide what it meant. Rather than explaining the story, he allows them to discern what it meant.

The two best known parables in the Gospels are the parable of the prodigal son and the parable of the good Samaritan – our Gospel reading today. I would like to use these two parables to delve deeper into Jesus’ teaching method.

### **Parable of the Prodigal Son**

In the parable of the prodigal son Jesus uses three characters, a father and his two sons. Each of the characters teach us something. The younger son asserts his independence and moves away from his father with his share of inheritance. He squanders his wealth and is in deep trouble. Jesus uses this son to show that there is a way out for those who go the wrong way. The son recognizes his situation, repents the folly of moving away from his father, decides to return to him, and is willing to accept responsibility. *“I will tell him, ‘I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called*

*your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.*" Jesus wants his hearers to recognize the steps of repentance and return to wholeness.

Then he uses the role of the father in the story to drive home the generosity of God's love and God's readiness to accept all who return to him.

However, the whole parable is about the elder son, who refuses to enter his father's home because of the extravagant reception of love given to his younger brother. The father goes out to plead with his elder son: *"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."*

The intent of the parable is forcefully presented through Jesus not saying whether the elder son listened to his father's plea and went into the house or chose to stay out.

He wants his listeners to understand that the only way to be part of God's household is to accept and participate in the forgiveness and generosity of love that is the ethos of the household. It is a disturbing prospect that one can choose to be outside God's household because of one's unwillingness to accept the values that that rules the household.

Jesus does not spell this out. The listener is allowed to discern the truth: *"Those who have ears to hear, let them hear."*

### **Parable of the Good Samaritan**

A lawyer tests Jesus by asking, *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus does not answer, except by asking a return question: *"What is written in the Law? What do you read there?"*

The lawyer gives the summary of the law: *"You shall love your God with all your heart... and your neighbour as yourself."* Jesus responds, *"You have given the right answer; do this and you shall live".*

But then the lawyer asks him the second tricky question: *"And who is my neighbour?"*

To deal with the complexity of the issue, we must first know the meaning of the word "neighbour" in that context.

If I ask someone today, "Who is your neighbour?", he or she may say, "So and so lives on the right side of my house, so and so lives on the left, and there are three families across the street, and together we form the neighbourhood." This is a geographical understanding of the word neighbour. The word neighbour derives from the old English root, "nigh", which means "near". "close together", or "adjacent".

The Hebrew tradition uses the word not in this geographic meaning, but in its relational meaning. To the Jew, his or her neighbour is one that belongs to his or her faith community. Others are strangers, aliens, or collectively, gentiles.

In his response, Jesus introduces three characters into the story of the person who has been robbed, beaten, and left half-dead. The first two, a priest and a Levite, are by definition his neighbours, because they are part of his faith community. The Samaritan, whom the Jews considered not part of their faith community, is not his neighbour. Jesus puts his second question to the lawyer: *“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”*

The lawyer is forced to answer, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus says to him, *“Go and do likewise”*.

With this parable Jesus helps the lawyer, and those who were listening to the conversation, a new understanding of what a neighbour means.

The question “Who are our neighbours?” is also addressed to us today. Jesus teaches us that it is the wrong question. The real question is: “Which of us will prove ourselves neighbours to the people around the world who suffer by the ravages of war, hunger, displacement and the many life and death issues of our day?”

In another parable, recorded in Matthew 25, Jesus tells a group of people, *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, .....I was in prison and you visited me.”* And the righteous, surprised by the assertion, will answer him, *“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?”* And he will answer, *“Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, ...you did it to me.”*

Jesus conveys a radical teaching that we can encounter God in the life of our neighbours.

The word that we take away from the parable is Jesus’ demand: *“Go and do likewise.”*