

Matthew 7:6, 13-14, 21-23
Luke 13:22-30

STRANGE TEACHER

Many of us have noticed, somewhere along the line, that the games we played as children were profound vignettes of what was coming. Like “previews of coming attractions,” the games symbolized life and how it unfolds. Hide-and-go-seek has many variations, for instance, and we have all played it in many forms. We are all playing it still – in our relationships and in the ways we seek security, position, meaning, comfort, pleasure. Of course, we don’t all play the same games in the same way. If you play tennis with Harry Kipp and Dennis Short, it is a very different game. Never mind size or skill level or age differences; they simply come at the game differently. And if you think about it for a while, you realize that the game is also a psychological inventory. We have patterns and they operate wherever we go, in whatever we do. So guess what? If you change your tennis game, it will affect the way you raise your children, make love, go at your work, and even the way you pray. Around here, it is suggested that sometimes we go at it the other way around.

I guess it is no mystery or surprise that all of us are still playing hide-and-go-seek with Jesus. Just because it is necessary for us to pray every day does not mean that we always do. And even when we do, it does not mean we always want to be found – that we are always open, willing, or ready to serve. Hide-and-go-seek is one game; follow-the-leader is even tougher. We keep discovering that playing follow-the-leader with Jesus of Nazareth is *not* an easy game. If that realization forces us to ask whether or not we really want to play the game, the very same realization also reveals that the game has a unique and endlessly fascinating purpose, and that it might well be the most thrilling way there is to spend one’s life.

Getting to it: Jesus was faced constantly with hard decisions and difficult choices – just as we are. It is exciting to watch Jesus wrestling with His choices, and it is particularly important for us to notice how many of His decisions were *not* the decisions we would expect Him to make or think He should have made – even according to our present-day level of wisdom. I simply would not have played His hand the way He played it. I keep wanting and trying to learn to play His Way more and more; have been for many years now. But in any moment of honesty, I know that I would not have played His hand the way He played it. That troubles me. It shows me how far away I still am from His WAY.

On the other hand, it often is also my personal doorway into faith. I probably should not confess it in public. Most folk seem to have much grander ways to recognize and honor Jesus: Christmas lights, Virgin Birth, Easter anthems, creeds, trumpets, angels, and all. But I watch Him in the memories we have of His everyday life: dealing with people, making choices, telling stories. And quietly, bits and pieces at a time, I find myself on my knees, so to speak, in awe and wonder. He does not do life like anybody else I have known or heard about. Certainly not like I do it. I simply cannot explain Him to myself in terms of normal life – in terms of what I expect from a human being. When I call Him “Son of God,” that is what the phrase means to me. He is no “Son of Earth” like I have ever known. And I have known some incredibly wonderful people. Nevertheless, by the time I get to Good Friday, however amazing and disturbing, I also realize in dismay that I should not be surprised. Living, thinking, deciding, and caring in the way Jesus does – in our kind of world – what else would I expect? What else could it come to? And when it comes to Easter, what else would I expect? If there is a Living God, what else *could* I expect? Only, now I am not only on my knees, but I am weeping and broken. This incredible “man beyond man” has finally made it clear: how far we are from the Kingdom; how much we long to belong to the Kingdom; how genuine the invitation to enter the Kingdom is; how much God cares ... or what is He doing here?

Who He is – what He is like – does not seem to have much to do with how well I “follow Him,” only with how much I want to. Yes, of course I know lots of people who are not moved at all by any of this. I keep wondering if they have ever paid any attention to the stories. Nevertheless, from my perspective, a great deal of Christendom is so busy with the paraphernalia – the creeds, traditions, rituals, and accouterments of Christianity – that it pays very little attention to Jesus: to knowing Jesus, or to following Jesus. That would be okay, I suppose, if it did not mean that so many of earth’s children keep missing the joy and the glory – the knowing Him and the trusting Him that change all life and light on this planet.

In any case, He is a strange teacher, this rabbi from the northern borderland. People just beginning to read and ponder the New Testament experience a period of shock and surprise. The man is hard to fathom – difficult to understand. The deeds and sayings of Jesus are endlessly confusing and contradictory. We really cannot make any sense out of what He is saying if we take His words as separate and isolated little axioms of truth. In one moment Jesus chides the Pharisees for ducking

their responsibility to take care of their parents. In another moment He says that if a man does not hate his father and mother, he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. (This is of course in direct contradiction to the Fifth Commandment. Do we wonder that the scribes and Pharisees are enraged?)

Jesus exalts the poor – the widow’s mite – and urges people to share their goods with the poor, even to sell all they have in order to do so. He turns right around and says that we do not live by bread alone and that we should not be overly concerned because “the poor you always have with you,” and He pays high tribute to a woman who pours a whole jar of incredibly expensive oil on his feet.

Catholics and Mormons had the right idea for years: never let the people read the Bible for themselves; it will only upset and confuse them.

You must forgive your neighbor seventy times seven times – but if he will not feed and house you, shake the dust from your feet against him and leave him to perdition. Pray for and love your enemies; give them the shirt from your back, and your cloak as well – but do not give dogs what is holy or cast your pearls before swine.

Not one hair of your head will be harmed, but maybe you should cut off your hand and pluck out your eye. And blessed are you when men persecute you, and you must take up your cross daily (and He did not mean the kind we wear around our necks). And why, pray tell, would anybody want to persecute or dislike us in the first place, when we are all going to be so politically correct – so sweet, loving, gentle, and kind?

If you pray to the Father with faith, you can ask anything and he will do it, even move a mountain into the sea for you. Yet Jesus Himself prayed for the cup to pass from Him and it would not, for it is always a matter of “*not my will, but thine be done.*”

No indeed, it is not an easy matter to play follow-the-leader with Jesus of Nazareth! More than one acquaintance of mine has concluded that Christianity is just gibberish because of the hopeless maze of contradictions and inconsistencies. I hope it is no longer true around here, but I don’t think the dividing line should be between atheists and agnostics who *have* read the Bible and church members who have not.

Stop off for a moment with me at just one of the teachings: “*Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot, and then turn to attack you.*” This is “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”? Well, “meek” does not mean what most of you think it means, but never mind. How many of you have ever in your lives heard a sermon preached from this text? Jesus taught it but the church has a secret pact to never mention it, never try to understand why Jesus said it, never officially suggest that anybody should use this teaching in real life. In fact, if you started thinking about and using this teaching in any situation – applied it to any person you know – would you not automatically start accusing yourself of being “unchristian”? I know that every time I have felt required to obey this teaching, I am automatically accused of being “unchristian” by quite a few folk – no matter how much I have prayed about it, how much I may regret it, or how hard I have worked to keep it from coming to this. That’s okay; it’s a broken world. Where do we think we are? But my question is: If you have never tried to be obedient and faithful to this precept, are you really trying to follow Jesus? I mean, do we really get to pick and choose which teachings of Jesus we “like” and which ones we don’t have to pay any attention to? The Christian Life is like going to a buffet dinner?

Well, people have said to me in times past: “This is just a minor, obscure comment, so why think about this one when Jesus said so many other wonderful things?” An obscure comment? This is among the closing statements of the Sermon on the Mount, just before, “*Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened unto you.*” Obscure comment? If Jesus did not think it was important, why would He declare it so creatively and prominently? Does it never cross our minds that one of the reasons we are sometimes stupid, useless, and ineffective disciples is because we *will not* pay attention to His instructions? We insist on reworking everything into some generic, goody-goody pabulum that makes us feel saintly or spiritual in our spare time but which has little to do with His purposes or what He needs or asks of us. Follow Him, but do it “our way.” I am not scolding you; I am begging you to be part of a faith family that knows what the WAY is really like – and how far short of obedience we will always be in this world. That never means we are content with falling short. Playing follow-the-leader with Jesus of Nazareth is *not* a simple task. And why is it that so many of you are *sure* that the saints of God are always smiling, affirming, accepting, pleasant, gentle, and nonthreatening – when I cannot find a single one of them who even remotely matches that description?

Anyway, did you ever wonder about Jesus applying this precept about “*Do not give dogs what is holy*”? During Jesus’ lifetime, the closest thing the Jews had to a king was Herod Antipas. Ideally, a Jewish king was supposed to be a godly man – obedient to God – not just a political ruler like in some pagan nation. It was, after all, supposed to be a “Holy Nation” – a “Chosen People” – a nation living in Covenant with God. Herod Antipas was a travesty of it all. Now, if you like “love” Hollywood style, Herod Antipas was terrific. He went to Rome to strengthen his political position in Galilee. While there, he visited his half-brother and fell in love with his half-brother’s wife, Herodias, and she fell in love with him too. He stole her away from his brother and dumped his own wife, a princess of the powerful Nabatean Kingdom on his border, and ended up in a horrible war with her father, Aretas, which he was never able to win. It is a terrific love story – everybody loses everything. If it were not for the links to Jesus’ story, Herod and Herodias would be one of the great love stories in history. Eventually Caligula came to power and banished Herod to Gaul because Herod had made more messes than he could keep up with. Caligula pardoned Herodias, but of her own free will she chose to follow Herod into exile. In those days, this was not Paris and high fashion; it was the boonies and the barbarians. Herodias really did love Herod. That is probably why she so hated the prophet who kept smearing his name. A wonderful and sizzling love story.

But Jesus had no use for Herod. Herod had killed Jesus’ friend and mentor, John the Baptist. It seems clear that Jesus would have died at Herod’s hands as well if Herod could ever have gotten his hands on him. Herod was no kind of Jewish king if you cared anything about Jews or Judaism. And Herod held the position that rightly belonged to Jesus. He was an imposter; Jesus was the rightful King – Messiah. Herod loved Herodias but he paid little attention to God, Jewish traditions, Jewish purpose, or anything for which Judaism existed to achieve or represent. So on the last day of Jesus’ life on earth, they brought Jesus bound before Herod. Herod was delighted. He had heard so much about Jesus. He questioned Jesus at length. But they were questions with no answers. Jesus would not utter one single word in Herod’s presence. I suspect that in all the annals of earth, there has never been a more scathing silence. Despite all the abuse, mocking, and chiding, Jesus is silent. “*Do not give dogs what is holy. Do not cast your pearls before swine.*” It is not the main scene in the terrible drama, but are we *watching* our Lord? Are we learning? There is no word of comfort or forgiveness here.

There is no word, period. Do you not know that if you follow Jesus, from time to time you will find yourself in a situation where this is your *only* faithful move?

And how would we like it if we used our time and our lives, our gifts and abilities, our hopes and aspirations in such a way that when we finally meet Jesus, He will not even speak to us? I think the fires of Hell would be a picnic in comparison to that.

I tried to suggest a few weeks ago that if we concentrate on Jesus' favorite theme – the Kingdom of God – many of the seeming contradictions and inconsistencies melt away. But that is for you to decide. I am only hoping that you will use this time to review how you are doing with Jesus' teachings. My suggestion is that you keep reading Matthew 5, 6, and 7. Are you okay with His teachings? Do you ignore or reject some of them, or do you keep working to comprehend what they are calling us into? The key is the Kingdom. The central theme of Jesus' life is the Kingdom of God. The backdrop, the context, the framework of everything Jesus does and says is always the Kingdom.

God offers us citizenship in his Kingdom because he loves us, and our response to his love is a decision to accept the offer. If your life and your allegiance are sworn to a certain king, it doesn't really matter where you are physically; you still belong to this king and his kingdom. Jesus makes this picture very clear, if we are open to it. The Kingdom of God is everywhere present – available here and now. We can enter God's Kingdom any time we are willing – any time we sincerely and truly want to. Earthly death comes sooner or later, as we all know, but that is just a step along the WAY. We can pass through the "Pearly Gates" and into God's Kingdom whenever we like – yesterday, this afternoon, tomorrow morning. Only, *"The gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few."*

There He goes again. Just as we start to get it, Jesus confuses us all over again. But is it really confusing, or do we just not want to get it? The price of admission is clear, and it never changes. Inflation cannot touch it. Anybody and everybody has the price of admission – if they are willing to pay it. The price is the sincere intention to love and serve God above everything else in life. It is the Pearl of Great Price. And the price is always the same: all that we have.

The price has nothing to do with our present circumstances, native abilities, material resources, psychological complexes, or present problems. The price is always the same – whoever we are, wherever we

are – whether we feel we have much or nothing at all to offer. The price is the sincere intention to love and serve God above everything else in life.

Yet how many times have I heard myself and others trying to turn this into some terrible contradiction? Jesus proclaims a God of love who is the omnipotent monarch of an Eternal Kingdom. He is a God who wants all of his children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only, *“Many are called, and few are chosen.”*

How we hate it! That is not fair! “If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then *all* of the children should be included in the Kingdom automatically!” Never mind that anything which is automatic is also, by definition, without personal meaning. Nevertheless, we would like to believe that there is no reason for a gate at all. Entrance into the Kingdom should be a normal, natural, automatic process. If God were really loving, wouldn’t God tear down the narrow gate altogether so we could enter the Kingdom without even knowing it, and without it making any difference to us at all? Hey, I sound just like a liberal theologian – Christianity that you can neither see nor feel and that makes absolutely no difference. There should never have been any of this business of *“those who find it are few.”* Jesus must have been in a bad mood that day. Pay no attention.

How we love our own logic, at first. Is it also possible that we feel enough fear and inadequacy to be slightly prejudiced? Let’s be clear: Death is not the narrow gate, and the narrow gate is not death! And the narrow gate through which we must pass to enter the Kingdom has nothing to do with what some people call “The Second Coming.” The narrow gate knows no stopwatch; it has no physical location. It is DECISION. The narrow gate is decision. We can pay the price and go into the Kingdom whenever we choose to, any time we are ready. No person is ever incapable of paying the price: the honest intention and desire to love and serve God above everything else in life. The most we can ever lack is the willingness to make this choice. By the way, I do not mean to minimize that price. It is in reality the highest price any human can pay. Is that not the mark of God? It is the highest price any of us can pay. Yet none of us are unable to pay it. We all have the wherewithal. Therefore, all of our complaints and doubts are excuses. I don’t like that any better than any of you do. On the other hand, it is nice to know. It is called “The Gospel.” The gate is narrow but open. The invitation is real. The invitation is never the real problem; we just keep trying to pretend that it is.

And so you see, scream as we will about “love should admit everybody,” that is only humans trying to change God’s Kingdom back into a human kingdom where we can be in charge:

“I want to live in a Kingdom of love without giving up my own hatred.” (At least not all of it; I still have some use for some of it.)

“I want to live among people who love God without any requirement for me to love God myself.” (At least not all the time.)

“I want to belong where people are forgiving and understanding without the responsibility of forgiving or understanding them.” (Unless I happen to want to.)

Indeed, most of us would be delighted to sign up for the Christian Life on a whole-hog basis, if only there were some guarantee that everybody else in the world had signed up first. But we all know full well that everybody else has not signed up first; it is no easy matter to play follow-the-leader with Jesus of Nazareth! It feels like going naked in a dangerous world, with our necks stuck way out. And since that is the situation, how can God be so cruel as to keep us out of the Kingdom?

“I want to be included in your Kingdom,” say I.

“I want you to come in,” says He.

“Only, I want to stay the way I am,” say I.

“Then you do not really want to come in,” says He.

“If you are content with the way you are, content to live the way you do, then you are content to stay where you are.”

“You are really cruel,” say I. “You are not loving, like you claim to be.”

“Come in and see,” says He.

“But you won’t let me,” say I. “You built a narrow gate and a hard way.”

“You will not let yourself come in,” says He. “I have done nothing but invite you all day long, all through the years.”

“But I don’t like the way you have worded the invitation,” say I.

“Then you would not like the party either,” says He.

“And you would like it even less if I forced you to accept the invitation. So what is your complaint?”

“I think you should let everybody come in regardless of how they feel or act or think or believe. That would be true love,” say I.

“No, that would be Hell,” says He. “As you yourself should know by now. You do not know as much as you think you do about love. You want to turn MY Kingdom into anarchy, mayhem, self-centeredness, alienation, everyone for himself. That is not the way I run my Kingdom. That is what you already have and wish to escape from. So come in if you will or stay out if you insist, but do not tell me how to run my Kingdom.”

“Nuts to you,” say I. “I can do better than that on my own hook. I wouldn’t have your Kingdom if it were the last one on earth.”

“It will be,” says He. “And if you discover that you cannot do as well as you think you can on your own hook, I will still be waiting to invite you into a far better LIFE. For in truth, I do love you.”

So we come to the narrow gate. And we come to love that narrow gate, and we come to realize that the narrow gate is part of the love. It is not about money, possessions, acts of kindness, or terrible mistakes. It is about DECISION: a choice to love and serve this King and His Kingdom more than anything else in life.