

McCabe United Methodist Church
Faith in the 21st Century (Part One): Jesus Alternative Wisdom
Matthew 23:1-12; 23-24
Pastor Ray Baker

Pastor Rick and I are starting a new sermon series for the Lenten Season. It's called: Faith for the 21st Century. We will examine the following topics:

- Seeing Jesus Differently
- Redefining Faith
- Global God
- Loving the Over Looked
- Putting Faith into Action.

Q: What is the difference between an elephant and a plum?

A: An elephant is grey.

Q: How do you know if an elephant was in your refrigerator?

A: By the foot prints in the Jell-O.

Elephant jokes became popular in the 1960's. People enjoyed them because they were based on parodies, conundrums and paradoxes. These silly jokes allowed people to laugh at the most common elements of our world and at the silliness of imagining an elephant in our refrigerator. They were short, memorable, and often absurd.

The authors of our Gospels followed the teaching style of an Oral culture, using of short - hard hitting - memorable sayings, which help people remember Jesus' most important teachings.

Jesus teachings turned the conventional wisdom of his era upside down. He spoke against the wisdom of Rome's Imperialism and military dominance, by proclaiming the Kingdom of God was at hand: it was even available to children. He also spoke against the conventional wisdom of the Pharisees religiosity and misguided legalism, with statements like today's passage of "woes" in Matthew 23.

"Conventional wisdom" is a part of every time period and every culture. It is found in the agreed upon, unspoken, beliefs which identify what is good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate. It defines the right way to live and the wrong way to live. Conventional wisdom has its own sense of agreed upon rewards and punishments. Every culture, and often subculture, has its own sense of conventional wisdom.

An example is found in this statement made by at least two of our Presidents, regarding the amount of the earth's resources used by the United States, in discussions with other world leaders: "THE *American way of life is not up for negotiation....*" (Both Presidents' Bush)

Much of our conventional wisdom is centered on wealth, power, and prestige. Here are three examples of our cultures convention wisdom:

- The only thing our shareholders care about is profit.
- Americans, 5 % of the world's population, have the right to use 24% of the world's energy.
- He who has the most toys wins!

I wonder what Jesus would say about this conventional wisdom?

The Gospel's contain numerous examples of Jesus alternative wisdom. In today's gospel reading we heard two memorable and powerful statements:

"The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Mt. 23:11-12)

He challenged the Pharisees with seven statements of "woe," pointing and specifically pointed out in verse 23 they had neglected the most important aspects of the law.

"...have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" (Mt. 23:23-24)

Isn't this a wonderfully absurd statement? When someone is focusing on the wrong issues we can quote Jesus and say: "You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" Can you imagine their confused expression?

One of my favorite authors is Marcus Borg. He born in 1942 and grew up in north eastern ND. Attended school at Concordia College and a few years later he returned as a faculty member. He became a seminary professor, renowned speaker, and an author.

Listen to what the author Marcus Borg has to say about Jesus use of alternative wisdom:

"Jesus often used the language of paradox and reversal to shatter the conventional wisdom of his time. Impossible combinations abound in his teaching. What kind of world is it in which a Samaritan – a heretic and impure person – can be "good," indeed be the hero of a story?

What kind of a world is it in which a Pharisee – typically viewed as righteous and pure – can be pronounced unrighteous and an outcast can be accepted? What kind of a world is it in which riding a donkey can be a symbol of kingship, in which purity is a matter of the heart and not of external boundaries, in which the poor are blessed, the first are last and the last first, the humble exalted and the exalted humbled?” (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, page 80)

Living outside of conventional wisdom will help us understand that God is the center of all that exists. Money, power, and prestige don't really matter. Chasing the perfect job, buying the perfect car, and having the biggest house in the neighborhood...are all of little importance.

Throughout history there have been people who speak out against conventional wisdom. For example, Dave Ramsey is the CEO of an organization called Financial Peace University. He teaches his student to set aside conventional wisdom and stop buying things on credit. He teaches his students how to get out of debt and stay out of debt. He loves it when someone calls his radio show and shouts: “I'm debt free!”

One of Dave's slogans is: “Live like no one else today, so you can live like no one else tomorrow.”

President John F. Kennedy said: “If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.”

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, said: “Earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can.”

Then [Jesus] said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'" (Luke 12:15)

Today, we gather around a simple meal of bread and wine to remember and receive the gift that God is offering to the world. Our communion service grew out of the Jewish tradition of celebrating the Seder meal, which is a remembering of their escape from slavery in Egypt. Today, we celebrate communion to remember our escape from sin and death; by remembering Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

I will conclude today's message by sharing Jesus most powerful statement of all:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16 NRSV)