

Are You Talking to Me?

Matthew 10:24-33

Martin B. Copenhaver

Congregational Church (United Church of Christ), Wellesley, Massachusetts

I don't know how it is with you, but I find that there are two kinds of Jesus' teachings that are difficult to hear, two categories of Jesus' teachings that convict me to such an extent that I want to cover my ears and sing a loud song. There are those teachings that clearly are directed to me, and there are those teachings that clearly are *not* directed to me.

The first category—those teachings that clearly are directed to me—includes, among other things, the entire Sermon on the Mount. The most pointed words in that sermon find a bulls-eye in my heart:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother or sister shall be liable to judgment (Matthew 5:21).

Beware of practicing your piety before others (6:1).

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven (6:19).

Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself (6:34).

Judge not, that you be not judged (7:1).

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? (7:3).

I could go on, of course, but I would rather not. All of those teachings are just too clearly directed to me. When Jesus gets going like that, I feel like the man who reported that he felt so convicted by John Wesley's preaching that he would bury his face in his hands, and when he raised his head he expected to find the entire congregation staring at him because he was convinced that the preacher was talking just to him, and to him alone.

The second category of Jesus' teachings I find difficult to hear are those that so clearly are *not* directed to me. This gospel reading is one of those teachings. Jesus is preparing his disciples to go out and preach and to teach in his name. In some sense, he is preparing all of his followers. He is preparing us. He is telling us what we need to know to be sent forth in his name, and from the beginning, he makes it clear that his followers are going to have a rough go of it. Jesus says, in essence, "As my followers you can't expect to be treated any better than I am. In fact, you'll probably have it worse. They have called me Beelzebul. Imagine what worse things they will do to you."

And when I read that I think, "Are you talking to me? I don't think you're talking to me." You see, I have not been reviled or persecuted or cursed for being a fol-

lower of Jesus—at least, not in ways that Jesus seems to have imagined I would be. After all, I serve a church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, a bastion of privilege. I lead a rather comfortable life. And as a congregation, we’re not reviled. We’re appreciated. We’re the oldest institution in town. We’re on a hill, on the most prominent intersection in town, as if watching over all that we can survey from this perch. And even people who have never set foot in our building seem to like the fact that we’re there. Why, a picture of our steeple graces the cover of the new phone book of our town. Obviously, we don’t pose much of a threat. So Jesus’ words seem not to be addressed to me or to the church I serve. We are not reviled or persecuted or cursed for being his followers.

Does that mean that we have found ways to do our master one better, to proclaim the Realm of God in ways that everyone is ready to sign on? Or, in the two thousand years since Jesus sent out the first wave of his followers with words of warning and encouragement, has the culture really come around? Perhaps the society is so transformed that there is no one left to revile us. But, alas, there is another possibility. Perhaps we are no longer worth persecuting anymore. Perhaps we don’t pose that kind of threat. Perhaps we no longer represent the kind of clear alternative to the ways of the surrounding culture. And that is why I feel convicted by this word, because clearly it is not directed to me. It assumes that I, as a Christian, would pose a threat to earthly powers, that I would be worth persecuting.

A while back I was invited to participate in a meeting at a center for leadership associated with a prominent church. The center aims to equip people at the beginning of their careers to lead as Christians—not in the church, but in the secular workplace. They are asking, “How does a Christian faithfully exercise leadership in the world?” When I asked what I might read in advance of that meeting, I was referred to several books, including *Jesus CEO* by Laurie Beth Jones. This popular book has about forty short chapters, each with an engaging title that conjures a characteristic of Jesus worth emulating, including these titles:

- “He Kept in Constant Contact with His Boss”
- “He Believed in Himself”
- “He Said Thank You”
- “He Formed a Team”
- “He Said, ‘Why *Not* Me?’”

And, my personal favorite:

- “He Was a Turnaround Specialist”

But I couldn’t help noticing that one chapter that is conspicuously missing is the one entitled “He Was Crucified.”

Have we done our master one better? Have we figured out how to proclaim the Realm of God without having to pay the consequences? Or perhaps we are simply not worth persecuting anymore. Some of the leaders at the center clearly assume that whoever is supervising these young leaders in the workplace would love to have them get this kind of training in Christian leadership. It would make them better employees with more promising futures. But what if the program were evaluated by how many people went back to work and were reviled, perhaps for asking questions that no one else dared ask, or for insisting on a higher code of conduct than others are willing to

adhere to, or for failing to see the bottom line as the sole measure of success? Would that be too much to expect from a Christian leadership center? Perhaps they could keep track of how many folks were demoted some time after they left the program. After all, Jesus sent his followers off with words of encouragement, yes, but also with words of warning.

Soren Kierkegaard once mused, "I wonder if a man handing another man an extremely sharp, polished, two-edged instrument would hand it over with the air, gestures, and expression of one delivering a bouquet of flowers? Would not this be madness? What does one do, then? Convinced of the excellence of the dangerous instrument, one recommends it unreservedly, to be sure, but in such a way that in a certain sense one warns against it. So it is with Christianity..." Indeed, when Jesus handed over the gospel to his followers, he did so with a warning: "They called me Beelzebul. Imagine what they are going to call you." But did we need that warning? Was he talking to us?

During the Clinton administration, at the height of the debate over whether gay folks should be allowed to serve in the military, Stanley Hauerwas wrote an op-ed piece in the *Charlotte* [North Carolina] *Observer* entitled, "Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)." In that article he observes that the military is somehow threatened by having gay soldiers, but they're fine with having Christians. And Hauerwas tries to imagine what it would be like if Christians took their own discipleship so seriously that they would pose a threat, that they would be so dangerous to have around that the military would exclude them as a group. For example, Christians are potentially dangerous for morale in the barracks. You don't want these people gathering at night, holding hands with heads bowed. Who knows what kind of disgusting behavior in which they might be engaged? Why they might be praying for the enemy. Could you trust someone who would think it more important to die than to kill unjustly? When they eat as part of their worship, they say you cannot come to the meal with blood on your hands. And would you want to shower with such people? They might try to baptize you. And that, concludes Hauerwas, is why gays as a group are morally superior to Christians as a group, because Christians as a group don't do those things that would exclude them from being in the military. In that setting, we are not reviled, persecuted, or cursed. In fact, it's hard to find a setting in this country in which we are.

And yet...and yet, Jesus still knows how to get his friends into trouble. I'm thinking of the star high school lacrosse player who misses a week of practice during spring vacation because he is with his church, building homes in partnership with the poor through Habitat for Humanity. He knew that he would have to sit out two games upon his return—it's the usual punishment for missing practice. In front of all of his teammates, the coach says that his decision to go on the Habitat trip makes it clear that he is a loser. When the team does lose both of those games, the coach is quoted in the school paper as saying that the only reason they lost those games is because this young man didn't play. He put his own interests above the team's interests. The coach did everything but call him Beelzebul.

I'm thinking of the woman who lives in the neighborhood where her church is establishing a home for adults with mental retardation. The whole neighborhood is up in arms—property values, you know. She invites all her neighbors to her home for a reception and invites the young adults who will live in the home to pass the hors

d'oeuvres.

I'm thinking of the doctor who lives in an affluent suburb, but her patients are all men, women, and children who live on the streets of Boston. The church helps support her work financially. Then one day she stands up and says, "I am grateful for the help. But we need to do more. So I want to ask everyone in this church who has a second home to sell it and give the proceeds to help those who don't have any home." Even those of us who support her work slipped out the side door that day.

Or, how about the new pastor who refuses to baptize the grandchild of two pillars of the church because in baptism covenant promises are made and those promises mean something, and because the parents are not committed to raising their child in a church. Under other circumstances the grandparents might have understood. But this is their grandchild!

Or, how about the fourteen-year-old boy who calls his parents from summer camp. "How are things going?" the parents ask. "All right, I guess. I gave the vespers meditation last night before lights out. I told my cabin that I don't think it's right for someone to be called 'gay' as a put-down, that there is nothing wrong with being gay." The parents ask, "How'd they take it?" A long pause. "They didn't get it. No one really understood what I was trying to say." "And what gave you the idea to use that as the subject of your meditation?" "I guess I have you to blame," the boy says with a bit of a laugh. "You and the church."

Then there's the young personal financial advisor, with a wife and three young children at home, who is getting pressure from his supervisor to push certain financial products, even though those products are not suitable for a lot of his customers. He's supposed to act like he is giving impartial advice and at the same time recommend only those products from which the firm derives the greatest profit. He can't be fired for refusing to go along with the scheme, but there are ways in which his life can be—and is—made difficult. So he quits.

And there's the attorney who for sixteen years defended someone on death row on a pro bono basis. Sixteen years of arguments, motions, and appeals. For most of those years this lawyer is the only contact his client has with the outside world. So, in addition to his official correspondence, the attorney writes his client chatty letters. He sends him pencils and chewing gum. When the final appeal is denied, he gets on a plane and flies to Alabama with his thirty-year-old son so that someone other than the guards and state officials will be there when his client is executed. And when he approaches the prison, there are demonstrators outside holding signs that commend both the condemned prisoner and his lawyer to the fires of hell.

Yes, Jesus still knows how to get his friends into trouble. All of those people I just told you about are members of the church I serve, all in some way aiming to be a follower of Jesus and getting themselves into trouble in the process. You know, none of those folk are exactly reviled or persecuted. These are not heroic gestures on a grand scale. Certainly they do not represent the magnitude of all we are called to be as followers of Jesus. No, these are just small incidents, little incursions and inroads, small glimpses, cracks in the established order through which a light shines. Just that. Something small.

But then I remember that Jesus says that God likes to work with small things—things like mustard seeds and pinches of salt and teaspoons of yeast. And Jesus says that God watches over small things with great care—things like sparrows, the smallest

of all birds. In this passage, when Jesus gives his followers some instructions, it is with soaring words and high expectations, as if asking them—asking us—to mount up with the wings of an eagle. And I want to ask, “Are you talking to me?” But then Jesus adds, “And God watches over the sparrows.” The *sparrows*.