

Soul Stretching: Newness

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

January 29, 2006

The gospel reading reminds me of an old story. A noted actor was called upon to give an oration. He stood, cleared his throat, and recited the 23rd Psalm with perfect dramatization and inflection. When he finished, the room was filled with applause.

Then an elderly priest stepped forward and proceeded to recite the same words. When he finished, there was not a sound in the room, but nearly every eye was filled with tears.

Someone asked the actor what the difference had been. “Well, you see,” he said, “there’s no doubt that I know the 23rd Psalm backwards and forwards. But the Padre here, well, he knows the Shepherd.”¹

The people in the synagogue at Capernaum who hear Jesus teaching are astounded by his message. He teaches as one having authority and although he undoubtedly teaches familiar scripture texts, he proclaims a new teaching. The congregation is awed and amazed by this man, Jesus, his presence, his power, and his message.

What made the difference? There are several dynamics going on in this story. The scribes are the typical teachers of the law in Jesus’ day. They are well studied in religious law and tradition. They teach the law mainly in the form of legal judgments. They know the law book very well.

Jesus, however, knows the Lawgiver, the Holy One, the God of Israel. There is an intimacy to Jesus’ knowledge about the religious law, for he knows not only about God, he knows God personally. He speaks as if he has spent a great deal of time in God’s presence. Strangely, at times it almost seems as if he is speaking as God. He speaks not so much from the head, as from the heart.

Jesus goes beyond the law to the spirit underlying it, a rule of life drawing people into relationship with God and one another. There is far more to the law than ordering society according to right and wrong, what is pure and impure, what is clean and unclean. Far more important than the surface divisions of the law is the community of righteousness, justice, compassion, and care the law is meant to create.

In our day and age, people spend a great deal of time on the road, going from one place to another. Because of the vast numbers of commuters and the laws regulating traffic, we often spend a lot of time waiting – waiting in a slow lane of traffic, waiting at red lights, waiting for accidents to be cleared. If there were no irritating traffic lights or no slow speed

limits, we think could get where we are going much faster, forgetting the chaos that would ensue without such regulations. The laws create some kind of order and civility for living together in community. The spirit underlying our laws is respect for human life.

The authority with which Jesus spoke and which astounded people derived not from a traditional conferring of authorization to perform a task. If a president authorizes an ambassador to represent the nation, then that person can speak for the president. He is authorized and deputized to do so. That was a familiar concept in Jesus' day also, but in Jesus' case, his authority seems to be self-grounded. It is as though he did not need any external authorization or licensing to speak for and about God. When Jesus speaks, there is an internal grounding and strength that provides his authority. That internal source is his relationship with God.

This foundation gives Jesus a broader perspective on the law. He sees beyond the typically self-serving interests of humans and our need to control things and our desire to have things go our way. Frequently in the gospel stories we see the scribes and Pharisees and even Jesus' own disciples plagued by the limitation of their own perspectives and by their inability and unwillingness to see beyond their own desires and categories. Such limitations keep them stuck in sameness, stagnant, lifeless and loveless. Because Jesus sees through the broader vision of God's reign of justice and peace, he emphasizes the spirit of the law more than the letter of the law. Through his new teaching, he offers the people a new way of looking at the world, a new way of seeing things.

Jesus' perspective and teaching are threatening to the scribes and Pharisees. His words challenge their traditions. Out of their fear and resistance to the new thing that God is doing through Jesus, they verbally attack and seek to undermine the ministry of this new teacher. While Jesus advocates for life abundant, others strive to limit and restrict life to tight parameters.

We cannot be too harsh on the scribes who were stuck in their rut, for few of us embrace change and newness with great excitement. Most of us prefer not brand newness, but modified newness. We like things just like they are, only better. Perhaps you know of the man who came home one day to find that his wife had hung a plaque on the wall which read, "Prayer changes things." Within 24 hours the plaque had been removed. She asked, "What's wrong? Don't you like prayer?" He said, "Sure, I like prayer. I don't like change."

People who've had heart bypass surgery, most definitely a life-and-death matter, are directed by their doctors to change their eating habits, stop

smoking, exercise - significantly alter their lifestyle. They know they should make those changes — know that they'll die sooner than later if they don't — yet multiple studies have shown that in just two years after such major surgery, 90 percent of these patients have not significantly altered their behavior. Change is just too tough.

Jesus seems to have known what change experts have discovered about the nature of change. “We tend to view change as something we *do* — an activity or habit that must be altered. We tend to approach change issues such as heart disease or other behaviors with facts, analysis, and information —with the left brain. We *think* about changing something in ourselves, but thinking is only one part of the process.

“What we're missing, says John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and expert on organizational change, is the right brain. ‘Behavior change happens mostly by speaking to people's feelings,’ he says. ‘In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions in ways that influence emotions, not just thought.’

“Dr. Dean Ornish, founder of the Preventative Medicine Research Institute in California, agrees. Rather than tell a heart patient to change or die — the conventional approach — Ornish focuses on helping them tap into their emotions. He realizes that death is too frightening to think about for most people, so denial and depression are the cognitive result. After all, who wants to live longer if they feel sick and depressed? On the other hand, Ornish convinces his patients that feeling better is the goal, believing that those who feel better live longer. ‘Joy is a more powerful motivator than fear,’ he says.

“What we need in order to make real change is the ability to ‘reframe’ our thinking. For example, many organizations operate with a military framework — with hierarchy, rules, policies and standard operating procedures. Change happens rarely and, if at all, very slowly. Reframe the organization as a family or community, however, where relationships are paramount, and it makes people view the organization very differently.

“Not that it's easy. People become very attached to their frames. The challenge is to offer a completely different frame that goes beyond cognitive thought. The solution? ‘When one is addressing a diverse or heterogeneous audience,’ says Howard Gardner, a cognitive scientist, ‘the story must be simple, easy to identify with, emotionally resonant, and evocative of positive experience.’

“What these change experts have discovered is something that God has known all along. If you really want to change people's behavior, you

need to give them a story, an identity, a relationship that is ‘emotionally resonant.’”²

That’s what the prophet Moses did. He gave the Hebrew slaves in Egypt a new awareness of the possibilities of life and freedom. He tapped into their feelings of oppression and exploitation and helped them imagine a release from those burdens. In today’s reading from Deuteronomy, God promises to send a new prophet like Moses who will arouse the people’s passion for freedom and justice, who will speak God’s word of truth and love, who will inspire right and holy living.

That is also the nature of Jesus. With authority, his new teaching stirs people’s emotions, inspires them to a new vision for themselves and others, and motivates them to a higher standard of living. While his new teaching is threatening to a few, it is life-giving and renewing for all.

In what areas of our lives might Jesus be speaking a new teaching, calling us to a new way of thinking, a new way of living, a new way of being who we are. Newness can stretch our soul in ways that sameness never can. “Sameness stagnates your soul’s biceps and withers your spirit’s hamstrings. Sameness shrivels your mind and atrophies your heart. Newness, on the other hand – whether it’s pleasant or unpleasant newness – gives your sweet spiritual self the kind of workout that can make a champion out of you... Newness can do for the soul what adversity often does for the heart: stretch, strengthen, and vitalize.”³

Our family recently watched a delightful French film called *Les Choristes*, or *The Chorus* in English. It is set in a boarding school for incorrigible boys and orphans in 1949. Clement Mathieu arrives as the new supervisor students at the school, where a harsh philosophy of punishment is enforced. The students tease the new teacher, who is bald, calling him “Chrome Dome.” They are unaware that he is more on their side than they would have guessed. Still they persist in trying to take advantage of him, make him miserable, and force him away.

The students design a song intended to be a cruel parody of their teacher, but when Mathieu catches them singing it, he surprises them by being delighted to discover that they can sing. He designates the boys as sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses. They have had no music classes before, so he starts from scratch teaching them the scales. Soon he is composing songs for them to learn. The students prove to be a very talented choir, but the headmaster only reluctantly gives his permission to Mathieu to continue. As the beautiful music begins to enhance the lives of the students, they find a sense of accomplishment never felt before. It also ennobles the teachers,

most of whom had considered the students worthless. Even the headmaster is seen in the privacy of his office smiling and almost dancing.

This “new teaching” of music, although initially discouraged, brings new life to the students, the staff, and the school.

Jesus’ new teaching offers refreshment, insight, abundant life, and abounding joy. We need not be stuck and stagnant in sameness; we can launch forward into the newness God provides. Let us trust in God who is making all things new.

¹ Rev. Richard J. Fairchild, www.rockies.net.

² *Homiletics*, April 2, 2006.

³ Rev. Howard Hanger, *Seeds for Celebration*, Winter, 2005, Jubilee! Community, Asheville, North Carolina.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA