

John 3: 1-5;10-15

Rabbi, My Rabbi

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Jesus was and still remains the most fascinating human being in all of history. His birth date sets the beginning of most calendars. His life is the topic of thousands of books. His life has inspired more works of charity and justice than anyone in history. When millions of people decide to kneel in prayer they call on his name.

For 2000 years scholars and people of faith have sought to know more about Jesus and debated what his life meant. At no time in history has the level of academic scholarship been more intense than it is right now. With the use of carbon dating and the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library and the Dead Sea Scrolls we have seen renewed curiosity which has sparked excitement and original scholarship. Just 3 weeks ago the Boston Globe and New York Times ran front page stories about news from Prof. Karen King at Harvard Divinity School, about the discovery of an ancient papyrus containing a portion of a writing from the first century that gives clues about Jesus' life and the possibility that he had a wife. Whether the papyrus proves authentic or not remains mysterious, but the Vatican was concerned enough to publish a condemnation 2 weeks ago which also made front page news around the world.

We are so fortunate to be living in this generation in time, when scholarship is so fresh, and the level of inquiry so far-reaching. Our theme for the whole church program year is "Who Was Jesus and How Does His Life touch Mine?" This month we lay the groundwork for this year-long quest with our series of sermons on Jesus. There are many ways to see Jesus but we have chosen four of the most prominent and provocative- Rabbi, Healer, Revolutionary, Savior.

We begin talking about Jesus as a Rabbi. In Mark's gospel, which was the earliest gospel Jesus is called Rabbi. It is the Jewish word for teacher. The word rabbi is still used in Jewish synagogues, where the leader is primarily a teacher. If you have seen the ad in the Needham Times for Temple Alliyah Rabbi Carl Perkins is shown studying a scroll. Jews see Jesus as a great moral philosopher, a brilliant storyteller and someone who can make ethics accessible through parables.

But it is a stretch for most of us to think of Jesus as a Rabbi. That is a Jewish term. Jesus is not called reverend or pastor or father, but Rabbi. Whenever we think about this term it reminds us about as forcefully as anything can that Jesus was Jewish. Jaroslav Pelikan has written about the many faces of Jesus in his primary source Jesus through the Centuries. He has a chapter on each aspect of Jesus – his chapters include- Turning Point of History, King of Kings, Light of the Gentiles, Son of Man, Prince of Peace, Mirror of the Eternal and The Liberator. He has 18 different titles for Jesus that he explores. Pelikan starts his book with a chapter on Jesus as Rabbi. He ends the Rabbi chapter with an important observation. If more Christians appreciated that Jesus was Jewish and known to his followers as Rabbi, maybe history would be different. I might not have been riddled with so many pogroms, and so much anti-Semitism. It would have been hard for the Third Reich to justify the Holocaust if Christians really recognized that Jesus was Jewish.

Mark says, Jesus came teaching. In Mark 6 it says that when Jesus arrived on the shore of the Sea of Galilee there he saw a large crowd, and he had compassion for them ,so he came to teach them many things. This was a standard theme for him. He wanted to teach people about God. He began teaching them about the keys to a life of meaning. Over 50 times in the New Testament the Bible speaks of Jesus teaching the people. It was his primary activity. In 50 other places his followers call him Teacher. In fifteen places his disciples call him Rabbi. Today we read a story about Nicodemus, himself a leader among the Jewish people. He was drawn to Jesus because the power of his teaching pointed to a

holiness or divine connection. When he taught them his authority had integrity, and Nicodemus, himself an authority, wanted to learn from Jesus.

So let's look at Jesus the Rabbi and see what that title means and what difference it makes in our lives that Jesus is our Rabbi.

In the first place true disciples are curious. Nicodemus knew that real learning is always experiential. So, in today's passage, he challenges Jesus – How can I be born again? I cannot go back into my mother's womb. Jesus replies- don't take me literally, but take me seriously. My teachings will transform your life. You will be made new.

To follow Jesus is to engage on a quest. It is to embark on a spiritual adventure. To follow Jesus is to start a on a path of life-long learning. There is a newness to life when you come to faith. When you follow me you embark on an odyssey.

Pre-schoolers have a natural curiosity about faith and God. They are often just discovering the words for this exploration but it is nonetheless real. That is why at this church 12 years ago we envisioned and launched our own Pre School – Noah's Ark, a Christian School that reflects the values of this faith community.

33 curious people gathered last weekend to learn about the New Testament – Nate Ramsayer has a gift for teaching; he makes Bible Study fun!! Nate offers Bible study for the curious and inquisitive.

Disciples are curious. Jesus teaches – Do not worry so much about your life. Consider the beauty of the earth and the lilies of the field. We wonder how to find that kind of peace. Jesus teaches – humble yourself like a little child and you will find that God's kingdom is all around you. We stretch to hear what he is saying. Jesus teaches –God is approachable and interested in you like your favorite parent, you can trust God with your honest open prayers. We practice imaging a God who loves us with

that bountiful benevolence. Jesus teaches – the poor have blessings you cannot fathom; don't romanticize them, but live with them and learn. We strive to reach out in new ways and understand the meaning of Jesus' words. Jesus teaches us – life on earth is not a prelude to something else; it is the main act; we listen and wonder about life and death and what it all means.

In the second place-his teaching is experiential. In Galilee 2000 years ago, boys enrolled in school at 6 years and they were expected to memorize the whole Torah by age ten. That meant memorizing Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus Numbers and Deuteronomy. At ten most boys went into the family business of fishing, weaving, tent-making, carpentry. ..

The very best of those students would go on and between 10 and 15 they'd memorize the whole rest of the Hebrew Bible. At 15 most boys would know enough and then leave for home to take up the family business. But the best of the best would continue to study with a Rabbi. The rabbis would test young men to see if they were up to the grueling life of faith debate. Those who passed the rabbi's test were yoked to the rabbi.¹

Jesus chose his followers with a different winnowing process. He was a rabbi who chose ordinary men to follow him. They were not scholars; they were laborers or tax collectors. Sometimes they did not have very bright answers to Jesus' questions. There was learning but not so much memorizing. Jesus often taught by walking around the countryside and pointing things out. He taught them to love children- who were just this side of dogs in those days – by interrupting his meetings when children arrived. He taught them about the value of life by touching the very ones deemed unclean- the lepers, the women, the prostitutes. He taught them that the rules of faith were meant to serve life not the other way around by flaunting the rules and preparing food on the Sabbath. He taught them by example.

¹ Rob Bell's Nooma video *Dust* www.nooma.com

In a similar way, Jesus invites us to experience God when we reach out to the poor, or help a neighbor, or stretch our faith, or pray persistently and without ceasing. Following Jesus is like learning to play a musical instrument- more than mastering a textbook or passing a test. Like an instrument you have notes and scales and a steep learning curve at first, but then you grow in faith and your confidence grows too. Before long you find your tune and relish your harmonies. Before long you wake with the songs of faith on your lips. You rock your weary soul to sleep with faith's sweet lullabies of prayer.

Finally Jesus' teaching will transform your life. In Jesus time the young scholars would trail behind their rabbi and friends would encourage them, saying "May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi". To follow a rabbi was to be changed. The dust was just the most visible sign of that change. Rabbi's informed their students but they also transformed them.

Nicodemus was very smart. He understood that Jesus was calling him to be born again. He was wrestling with whether he was ready. He was standing at the edge of the pool of transformation, putting his toe in the water while Jesus stood in deep end treading water urging him to dive. Nicodemus – you get it, but do you want it. He played the devil's advocate – How can I be born again? Jesus said – you will be changed so much you won't recognize yourself.

Some people assume that the Evangelical notion of being born again is the only one. They talk a lot about their one way- and they tell you that you will need to make a list of all your sins and seek forgiveness as you give your life to Jesus. I don't believe that the fundamentalists can claim they have the patent on being born again. No, in fact, I believe that more people actually deepen their faith slowly, the way that Peter and James and John and Mary did. They tried to follow him; they stumbled and debated, and wondered what he was talking about. They tried again, and over time, in fits and starts, this life of the disciple began to feel right – not perfect, but right.

Over time, not in an instant our lives are changed. That kind of transformation is the kind I see in people in churches like ours. It is not flashy or dramatic. But it is real, powerfully real.