

JESUS' MENTOR

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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We all need mentors, and Jesus was no exception. How did he learn to preach and to proclaim social justice? From one who stood before crowds and declared, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."ⁱⁱ From one who spent time with hated toll collectors and soldiers, telling them "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you," and "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation."ⁱⁱⁱ How did Jesus learn about vital rituals like baptism? From one who became famous for going around "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."ⁱⁱⁱ From one who baptized Jesus himself. How did Jesus learn about what it meant to be called the Messiah? From one who himself dealt with the expectations of the people of ancient Israel who wondered in their hearts whether he met the criteria. How did Jesus learn the humility to say to one who called him "Good Teacher:" "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone?"^{iv} Likely from one who said, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming."^v How did Jesus learn to proclaim the good news? From one who was already using that terminology in his public ministry.^{vi}

All of this information is compiled in this morning's gospel lesson.^{vii} Yet, it's not usually read this way. Instead, annually during Advent we learn of John the Baptist as merely the forerunner of Jesus...as the harbinger or herald...as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare ye

the way of the Lord."^{viii} In contrast, many Biblical scholars like Marcus Borg have called John the mentor of Jesus. They read the biblical record as establishing that around the age of 30, Jesus embarked upon a religious quest. He left Nazareth and became a follower of the wilderness prophet called John the Baptist. Within John's community of followers, Jesus underwent a kind of conversion experience, symbolized by his baptism, which led him to undertake the later ministry that he provided.^{ix} It's therefore entirely proper to call Jesus a disciple of John the Baptist.^x From his own lips, Jesus certainly had high praise for John. The gospels of Matthew and Luke quote Jesus as having said that "Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."^{xi}

When Jesus left John's community near the Jordan River to start his own ministry in Galilee, he took with him some of John's own followers.^{xii} According to one of the gospel stories, that was the way in which Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael became Jesus' first disciples.^{xiii} John the Baptist's own group and movement continued, parallel to Jesus' group, later becoming an open rivalry between their followers after the death of both Jesus and John.^{xiv} For our purposes, though, it's John's mentorship of Jesus that I want to emphasize this morning.

There are three main points I'd like to make about mentors, based on the relationship of Jesus and John: First of all, we all have them and need them, at least at particular times; we all stand on the shoulders of others who've helped us along the way in our lives. Second, mentors open doors for us to worlds previously unseen and unknown; they are our eyes and ears into the future. Third, a rich mentoring relationship means that we continue to have someone to check in with, and someone to check on us, to see how we're progressing.

On the first point, here in the United States of America we have a long and proud tradition of so-called self-made people and rugged individualism. We honor those who fulfill the American Dream of making it from rags to riches, and we tell those who are struggling to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. We radically limit welfare and other social programs, compared to other Western countries. Personally, we value our liberty and don't want to seem dependent on anyone else or even to be required to help anyone else. Liberty is tied to pursuit of happiness in our Declaration of Independence, and liberty has given us the supposed right to define happiness in an individual way, and then to pursue it in our own personal manner, in any direction and by almost any method.

Despite our mythology, though, a commitment to community, to helping each other, indeed to mentoring each other, is also very much part of American history, going back to the Mayflower Compact. We raised our barns together on our own private lands in the East, travelled in wagon trains across the plains together to get our own piece of the Western frontier, and recognized our mutual interdependence in our use of water out here in the arid West.^{xv} We sing of the heroes and exemplars who led us on our way, and it's important now for us to be well networked, both here in the Silicon Valley and throughout the global village.

We think of modern saints like Martin Luther King, Jr., as having been larger than life figures, with enormous personal talent and leadership capability. Yet, King himself made it clear that he was deeply indebted to Mahatma Gandhi in developing his theory of nonviolence and to the mentorship of Bayard Rustin in making it organizationally effective.^{xvi}

As I've explained, Jesus' vision of social justice was formed at John's feet,^{xvii} and he borrowed

the central ritual of baptism from him for initiates to his church.^{xviii} There was much more Jesus learned from John, including a baffling style of avoidance when closely questioned by authorities.^{xix}

My favorite example of mentors opening brand new doors, and the most concrete example possible, is Anne Sullivan's mentoring of Helen Keller. Helen's sight and hearing were destroyed by illness before her second birthday, and she became "wild and unruly," as she later put it, before Anne arrived from the Perkins Institution for the Blind five years later. Anne had only the sense of touch with which to communicate with Helen.^{xx} After she arrived, Anne began spelling words into Helen's hand. I quote from a letter from Anne two weeks into her relationship with Helen: "Helen has learned several nouns this week. 'M-u-g' and 'm-i-l-k' have given her more trouble than other words. When she spells 'milk,' she points to the mug, and when she spells 'mug,' she makes the sign for pouring or drinking, which shows that she has confused the words. She has no idea yet that everything has a name."^{xxi} Two weeks later, Anne wrote: "Something very important has happened. Helen...has learned that everything has a name, and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know."^{xxii} To try to straighten out the "mug"- "milk" confusion, Anne had taken Helen out to the pump-house and made Helen hold her mug under the spout while Anne pumped: "As the cold water gushed forth, filling the mug, I spelled 'w-a-t-e-r' in Helen's free hand. The word coming so close upon the sensation of cold water rushing over her hand seemed to startle her. She dropped the mug and stood as one transfixed. A new light came into her face. She spelled 'water' several times. Then she dropped on the ground and asked for its name and pointed to the pump and the trellis, and suddenly

turning round she asked for my name... All the way back to the house she was highly excited, and learned the name of every object she touched, so that in a few hours she had added thirty new words to her vocabulary."^{xxiii}

Helen herself wrote about this important day years later in her autobiography, The Story of My Life: "As the cool water gushed over one hand, [my teacher] spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly...Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten -- a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me...That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free...[F]or the first time [I] longed for a new day to come."^{xxiv}

This is my second point about mentors: They open doors for us to worlds previously unseen and unknown; they are our eyes and ears into the future. John the Baptist does this for Jesus by presenting an apocalyptic picture of a judgment day to come, which could be prepared for by all who accepted his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.^{xxv} Jesus was baptized by John, and then took John's good news and transformed it into Jesus' good news: an envisioning of a new reality, the in-breaking Kingdom of God, which required moral actions of love and justice, of the kind of which John had spoken, in order to be saved on Judgment Day.^{xxvi} Therefore, Mark reports that after leaving John, Jesus begins his ministry with the words, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."^{xxvii} Luke reports Jesus' first words these, quoting the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go

free."^{xxviii} Jesus then becomes mentor in turn to his own disciples and ultimately to the church and to humanity as a whole. It's worth also noting that Helen Keller, having been mentored by Anne Sullivan, and after graduating cum laude from Radcliffe, devotes the rest of her life to helping the blind and the deaf-blind herself.^{xxix} May each of us appreciate how our own eyes and ears have been opened by good mentoring, and continue that tradition by helping others in our own ways as we are able.

Finally, my third point is that a rich mentoring relationship means we continue to have someone to check in with, and someone to check on us, to see how we're progressing. There's a poignant exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus when John is in prison, awaiting death by the command of King Herod. Hearing about the impact of one he mentored throughout the Galilee region, and no doubt with some pride, John wants to check on how Jesus is doing and what he's become. He has a more apocalyptic reason as well. John therefore sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"^{xxx}

One might expect to Jesus simply to respond by saying, "Yes, I'm the one," or "I'm the Messiah finally come to Israel." Instead, Jesus responds with the humility that John seems to have taught. Jesus simply provides facts for his mentor to judge, and perhaps for John also to give him some feedback on. Jesus says to the messengers, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."^{xxxi} Who knows how John might have responded, or how their relationship might have developed, if John had not soon thereafter been beheaded by Herod. Jesus' name continued

to be associated with his mentor after John's death, however. Rumors flew around Galilee that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead, and Herod believed it.^{xxxii}

I wish for each of us that we might have lives of rich mentoring relationships -- both being mentored and serving as ourselves. The relationship of Jesus and John is a great model. Hopefully as Christians we all feel continually mentored by Jesus as our Lord and Savior. But hopefully we also have human mentors to whom we can turn, and hopefully we feel called in turn to serve loyally as mentors to others who can use our own particular level of knowledge and experience to help them grow and thrive. Many churches have a "discipling" system which formalizes this relationship, so that one always simultaneously has a disciple and is a disciple, teaching and learning about what it means to be a Christian.

At the very least may we never imagine that we are self-made, since we always stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. May we appreciate how mentors open doors to worlds previously unseen and unknown, acting as our eyes and ears in anticipating the future. And finally, may we keep checking in with our mentors and those we mentor to measure our progress in this adventure called life.

NOTES

i. Luke 3:11.

ii. Luke 3: 13-14.

iii. Luke 3:3.

iv. Mark 10:18.

v. Luke 3:16.

vi. Luke 3:18. See also Jesus' words in Luke 16:16 ("The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed.") and compare Matthew 11:13-15.

vii. Luke 3: 10-18.

viii. Luke 3:4; See also Mark 1:3 and Matthew 3:3.

ix. Marcus J. Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 27.

x. W. Barnes Tatum, John the Baptist and Jesus: A Report of the Jesus Seminar (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1994), p. 151.

xi. Matthew 11:11 and Luke 7:28.

xii. John 1: 37-42.

xiii. John 1: 37-51; See also The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 426.

xiv. Mark 2:18, John 5:33, Acts 18: 24-26, 19:1-7. See Tatum, John, 152-153, 156.

xv. Raymond C. Miller, Twentieth-Century Pessimism and the American Dream (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1961).

xvi. James Washington, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 5, 31, 82.

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- xvii. See A.N. Wilson, Jesus: A Life (New York: Fawcett, 1992), pp. 105-106.
- xviii. See, for example, Matthew 28:19.
- xix. Wilson, Jesus, p. 108; See, for example, John 1:22-27 and Luke 22:66-70.
- xx. William J. Bennett, "Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan" in The Book of Virtues (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 312-313.
- xxi. Anne Sullivan, letter of March 20, 1887, as quoted in Bennett, Book of Virtues, p. 316.
- xxii. Sullivan, letter of April 5, 1887, in Bennett, Book of Virtues, p. 316.
- xxiii. Ibid., pp 316-317.
- xxiv. Helen Keller, The Story of My Life, as quoted in Bennett, Book of Virtues, p. 315.
- xxv. Tatum, John, p. 157.
- xxvi. Wilson, Jesus, pp. 105-106; See Matthew 25:31-46.
- xxvii. Mark 1:14-15.
- xxviii. Luke 4:18.
- xxix. Bennett, Book of Virtues, p. 313.
- xxx. Matthew 11:3.
- xxxi. Matthew 11:4-6.
- xxxii. Mark 6:14-16; see also Luke 9:7-9.