

## 6. teachings of Jesus: wisdom tradition



“The whole wisdom tradition is that  
nobody gives you the answers.  
The search for God is a quest  
that you and others with you go on.”

—Stephen Patterson, “Saving Jesus”

Once upon a time, there was a man named Jonah. He was content sitting at the local coffeehouse sipping his latte, minding his own business, and being happy in the assurance that God loved him and accepted him (he was Jewish, after all. What’s not to like?). All was right with the world.

But then the voice of God said, “Jonah! Go to Nineveh and set those foreigners straight!” So he immediately got up—and went in the complete opposite direction! He went down to Tel Aviv and bought himself a ticket to Tarshish (a common euphemism for “as far away as possible”). And keeping in mind that Jews were not known as great seafarers, he set off by boat, a subtle indication of just how desperate he was to get away from God. Well, the sea kicks up, Jonah gets thrown overboard, swallowed by a great fish, and after three days is vomited up on the beach. For most folks, that’s about it. That’s the part of the story that makes the storybooks. But that’s not the point. In fact, if that’s all you know of Jonah, it probably would have been better that you didn’t have it cluttering up your brain at all.

The *real* story follows when you read what Harrell Beck calls the most beautiful words in the Bible: “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a *second* time.” Another chance. But Jonah was not happy about it. He had his suspicions about God and wasn’t afraid to voice them. He worried that he was just going to end up looking stupid. He was certain that he would go and warn the Ninevites of God’s impending punishment and then God would decide not to punish them—even though everybody knew these foreigners deserve every punishment that could be meted out against them.

Sure enough, Jonah calls them to repent—and they *DO!* Everybody puts on sackcloth and ashes, right down to the *cattle* (which is a lot funnier when told with a Yiddish accent!). God changes God's mind. Right there in the text it says that God repents and decides to forgive the Ninevites. This is Jonah's worst nightmare. He puts his reputation on the line and warns the people of certain doom and dagnabit, God forgives them: these, these—*foreigners!* So Jonah does what any self-respecting prophet would do, he goes up on a mountain and pouts.

### **Read Jonah 3.10-4.3**

“O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!” What a whiner! There's a little more to the story, but you get the idea. What is really going on here has nothing to do with whale vomit and *everything* to do with the grace of God poured out on everyone, regardless of race, faith, borders, or any other boundaries you can think of. This may not seem like a radical thing to *you*, but to those hearing Jonah for the first time, it was downright subversive.

Why? Because in Jonah's day, everybody believed that the world worked a certain way. In fact, most everybody believes the world works exactly that same way even today. It is so ingrained in us that we don't even know we believe it, but we do. We eat, breathe, and live it every single day. And here it is: “*You get what you deserve and you deserve what you get.*”

## The Sign of Jonah

At the core of the Biblical Book of Deuteronomy is what's called the “Deuteronomic Code”: The poor are poor and those who are suffering suffer because they've done something to offend God. Or their parents did something. Or their parents' parents. Their sad lot in life is a punishment from God. On the other hand, the rich are rich and the comfortable are well off because they're soooooo good. God loves them so much that, clearly, they are being rewarded.

This subconscious belief-system is the primary software operating in most of our psyches. It allows us to blow-off the poor because, obviously, they deserve their situation. Who are we to get between them and God's punishment? It allows us to feel self-righteous and smug in our relative wealth because our comfort is a clear sign that God likes us. It only gets tripped up when something tragic happens in our lives and the only thing we can think to ask is: “What did I do to deserve this?!?”

So, the book of Jonah is in the Bible as protest literature, criticizing this way of thinking. It was written to undermine the status quo. Jonah is not the *hero* of this story. He's the goat. He is a stand-in for all those people who believe that, because of their race, or status, or any other category, God loves them. And everybody else is on God's enemy list. Jonah is supposed to be a sad joke, and the proper response to his plight is that of pity for someone who is so narrow-minded that they just can't fathom the breadth of God's grace.

Well, if that's the case, then how do you explain Matthew 16.4? Jesus is confronted by those who want him to prove who he is and he responds with: "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it, *except the sign of Jonah.*" Then he left them and went away.

Huh? No signs except the sign of *Jonah*?!? Some interpreters point back to Matthew 12, where Matthew has Jesus predict his own death and resurrection, "Well, it's in Jesus' own words! The sign of Jonah is that both Jonah and Jesus were 'swallowed up in death' for three days and then (there's no good way to redeem the analogy) vomited up to new life...". Evidently, Matthew knows even less about Jonah than he knows about virgin birth. The sign of Jonah has *nothing* to do with death and resurrection and *everything* to do with short-circuiting the Deuteronomic Code of "You get what you deserve and you deserve what you get." Jesus' whole ministry and most of his teachings are aimed at overturning this whole idea.

## Beyond Conventional Wisdom

And how did he do it? With humor, story, irony, metaphor, and short sayings—all of which were used to make his audience think for themselves. It was a technique that was rabbinic, to be sure—but even more specifically, it was typical of wisdom teachers. The wisdom tradition is often associated with the mystical or spiritual aspects of various faith traditions. It helps people work through the "whys" of life without resorting to shallow, pat answers.

Wisdom literature is concerned about the *meaning* of life, mostly by an appeal to experience. As Bill Nelson has said, "Wisdom is more than intelligence (but includes it), more than knowledge (though it needs it), more than information (though it often depends upon it)."

Wisdom is not very concerned with traditional religious thought, because traditional religious thought is often the product of dualistic thinking: who's in, who's out; what's right, what's wrong; all or nothing; you're with me or against me; up or down; either/or— it's the root of family strife, racism, church squabbles, gridlock in Washington, and in all its glory, war.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr likes to distinguish dualistic and non-dualistic thinking. Rohr says that dualistic thinking has its place. After all, it made the

Enlightenment possible: science, economics, and modern democracy. But when it comes to comprehending the subtle degrees between, say, “tall” and “short,” “good” and “bad,” it breaks down. Jesus’ whole approach was to short-circuit dualistic thinking with questions, parables, and stories—all of which make people think, talk, and wrestle with ambiguity. Simply put: life is NOT black and white.

Consider what Brandon Scott has to say about folks who aren’t comfortable with ambiguity. He says they’re

“...really stuck. They’ve got a lot of things they can’t do: they can’t read poetry, they can’t read novels, and they can’t watch TV. They can’t read the gospels. They’ve really cut themselves off. They’re really reduced to reading lawyers’ texts. A lawyer is a person who thinks ambiguity is a bad thing, so you try to define the contract or the will so that nobody can break it. Well, even legal texts are ambiguous—that’s why you have to go to court and solve them. So it doesn’t work. Part of the problem is, if you really think things have simple meanings, then we have to have interchangeable brains so that we have exactly the same experience; exactly the same meaning. That doesn’t happen.”

So here comes Jesus, purveyor of wisdom, into the world of “You get what you deserve and you deserve what you get” with these one-liners, these zingers, like “God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust.” What? We have a God who doesn’t discriminate? Jesus asks, “Why should we be surprised by this?” Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor?” He what? It’s outrageous!! In Greek it’s even worse: “Blessed are the beggars,” the destitute. How could that possibly be? Aren’t riches and wealth a reward for living a righteous life? What on earth does he mean? It gets under your skin. It irritates you. And maybe you come to, “Ahhh, they’re the oppressed ones. At least they’re not guilty of oppression. They’re innocent. They’re not the ones doing the oppression.” And maybe someone else is arguing back, “That doesn’t make sense!” But in that process, something wonderful happens: thinking! People are engaged with other people on matters that are important.

2000 years later, we’re still engaged with this Jesus, this voice of subversive wisdom that undercuts the status quo, that moves beyond conventional wisdom towards a new focus: centering into the spirit of God.

What’s it going to be?

Perhaps you remember the old saw, “*There are two kinds of people in the world: Those who think there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don’t.*” Well, since most of us are dualistic thinkers, it finally comes down to two ways of approaching the spiritual life: being motivated by guilt and fear OR motivated by love and life. The status quo, the Deuteronomic Code, is all about guilt and fear. Jesus’ message of divine wisdom and grace upon grace is about love and life.

In the final analysis, the question remains: whom are you going to follow? Jonah or Jesus? What's it going to be? Rules? Walls? Rigidity? Pouting? Or Grace upon grace?

What's being suggested is not easy. It's not popular within what passes for "respectable" Christianity in our culture. It's challenging, it's risky, and it butts up against most people's happy little categories of right and wrong, good and bad, us versus them.

But if you're paying attention, you have to admit that Jesus was never on about promoting happy little categories. Jesus was a purveyor of wisdom. His stories, sayings, and teachings say it over and over again: It's not about victory. It's not about punishment. It's not about rewards. It's not about what you deserve or what you get. Looking on reality with compassion, love, inclusivity, forgiveness—recognizing everything as created by God, infinite in dignity, to be honored. Sadly, the God of many or most is not an unconditional lover. Jesus taught otherwise. The wisdom tradition is about learning what questions to ask, engaging the issues that deeply affect people, and being open to new possibilities. It's a journey that you travel with trusted companions your whole life long. And as Jesus taught and lived, it's about a surprising and transforming grace that humbles the powerful and empowers the humble.

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## **Discussion Questions** (following each DVD chapter)

### **Chapter 1**

Make a list of some of the techniques commonly used by Wisdom teachers.

Describe some of the ways Jesus' teaching style reflects his Jewish culture.

### **Chapter 2**

How are the books of Jonah and Job examples of a critique or "send up" of the Deuteronomic code?

What does Borg mean when he says that “the path of Jesus is the way that leads beyond convention”?

In what ways are the words “subversive,” “alternative,” and “quest” a threat to conventional wisdom’s vision of a domesticated Jesus?

### **Chapter 3**

How is a parable different from a sermon?

What do you think Scott means by his suggestion that parables are meant to allow you to “imaginatively re-experience reality”?

According to Crossan, how is it that the Parable of the Mustard Seed suggests that it might just be safer to keep God out of one’s affairs?

### **Chapter 4**

Describe the difference between “personal individual justice” and “systemic and structural justice.”

What are the implications of people of faith being aware of the notion of “systemic and structural justice”?

How does fixating on the “virtue of individuals” legitimate the social structure?

What are some of the characteristics of justice as “God’s own will for us as we live together?”

### **Chapter 5**

Describe how a simple aphorism can work as a catalyst in thinking about complex ideas.

Why can’t “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” possibly be historical?

How are some of Jesus’ sayings discussed by Levine different than how you may have interpreted them in the past?

How is the story of the Good Samaritan an example of the kind of radical wisdom being taught by Jesus?

### **Chapter 6**

Why is the Parable of the Leaven so radical for Scott?

Scott suggests that there are two ways to approach the spiritual life: guilt and fear as the motivator, or love and life as the motivator. Explain.

How did the writing of the creeds change the fundamental tenets of Christianity?

If it's not about victory, and not about punishment, and not about rewards—if it's not about what you deserve or what you get, what's it about then?

### **Additional Questions**

One element of the Deuteronomic code is that riches and wealth are a reward from God for living a righteous life. What contrasting values do Jesus' wisdom teachings present?

Matthew 5.45 has Jesus say: "God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." In what ways does this sentiment fit into the wisdom tradition?

### ***Saving Jesus Redux* Theme Question:**

What element or learning from this session do you think will be most important in "Saving Jesus" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?