

Goodness and Learning¹

I think we have a tradition developing for this day in September—Berta day and teacher recognition day rolled into one. If you're a teacher—and most of us are if we consider parents and others in that category—so if you're a teacher, you're on the pedestal today.

Jesus was a teacher. One of his most prominent titles was rabbi, which means teacher. Disciple means student. In our text this morning from early in Mark, we see that the first impression of Jesus was that he was a teacher. Teaching wasn't his most important work. His journey to Jerusalem and his death on the cross and rising from the tomb certainly had to be his greatest work. That was world changing. It was cosmos changing work. But teaching was a part and still is a part of his world changing mission. So when you teach, when each of us teaches (and I'm proud of the heritage of the Presbyterian Minister as teacher) when we teach, we enter into something that is world changing, world redeeming.

I want to say more specifically that learning is almost always part of goodness. I'm not saying that you have to have a master's degree before you can be honest or compassionate. But if you know nothing, if you don't read or can't think with some

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on September 12, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA. Additional sermons and more information about First Presbyterian Church may be found at www.fpclagrange.org.

abstraction, if you don't "know much about history," then you are going to be pretty much shaped by whatever drifts your way—beer commercials, street culture, your own most base cravings. In other words, an unregulated mediocrity will fill your thoughts which will likely result in a shabby, brutish existence without your even knowing it.

Even the most rudimentary learning supports moral living. Robert Fulghum kind of turned the lights on several years back when he gave us that wise little essay: "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Share, play fair, don't hit people, say you're sorry, and so on. There are people in this room who teach this stuff to wave after wave of kids who don't know it. Blessed are you!

Do you know the story of the first Sunday school? A British newspaper man, Robert Raikes, back in the late 1700's in Gloucester felt a concern for the working class kids who ran wild all over the neighborhood. They had no school. What Raikes did was to set up a working class, lay-taught, elementary school that met on Sunday mornings. He had his teachers teach kids to read. With that, they went on to read the Bible. He advertised his school in his newspaper. The movement caught on very quickly and became a huge influence on our modern Sunday School movement. He taught reading. Here's the deal. We in

the church are dependent on you in the schools to provide the fundamental skills of reading and thinking so we can provide Christian education.

We have a saying in the Presbyterian Church that is foundational to our being. "Truth is in order to goodness." That means when a person knows something, he or she is far more likely to be a fully flourishing virtuous human being. Think about teaching. You read to kids, you teach them to read for themselves. You teach history, social studies, and civics. In each instance you are pushing back the enclosure of a kid's immediate world—their own little world—to make them aware of other people. Other times. Other places. You read Caldicott Award Books to them. Just take the names of recent medal winners: Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad or The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain. Now, just hearing those titles gives us a clue to how they are going to nurture a sense of understanding in a kid who would otherwise never realize that there's a truly different way of being quite unlike his or hers and it is enriching just to know about it.

We're talking about reading to children and then teaching them to read so that they can open up some of these neat books that often have really winsome pictures and text and enter the

different worlds under their own steam. There's power in stories. I'm sure you've figured that out.

Jesus' was a story teller. His stories were short parables, all of which had a twist. You listen to a parable and you think, "Yeah, why can't a shepherd leave the 99 sheep and go off the rescue the one, or maybe the tax collector was more righteous than the Pharisee." Parables stretch our world. Then you think, maybe I didn't have the right take on God. Maybe he's a little more wonderful and eccentric and unpredictable than I'd assumed. I hope that you don't miss the power in what you do when you tell a story.

I'm not just talking about kids. An hour ago I was in an adult Sunday School Class. What were we learning about? The Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Cardinal Virtues. It helps me just to know the definitions of virtues. Prudence isn't a girl's name or being a prude. It's the exercise of good judgment, common sense, and even caution, especially in the conduct of practical matters. Sloth isn't a prehistoric mammal. It's spiritual or emotional apathy, it's being too indolent to receive the gift of salvation, and being physically and emotionally inactive. Just to hear the definitions helps. It helps me imagine new ways that I could be that I hadn't thought of. It turns lights on in your soul.

Now a caution is in order at this point. Knowledge is not salvation. More and more learning does not add up to a flawless, glorious society. Back in the 18th century a French Philosopher and Mathematician, the Marquis de Condorcet, thought that universal education and the development of the printing press would inevitably result in an ideal society. Well, history has pretty well refuted that optimism. We've got Google and 150 channel television and I don't think we're closing in on the ideal society.

But that doesn't mean that ignorance is the way to go. All human conflict, all hatred, all tyrants are well rooted in ignorance. Everywhere there's a book burning, everywhere there's censorship, everywhere someone is trying to figure out how to keep information flowing freely through the internet or cell phones, everywhere someone wants to keep a little girl out of school, everywhere bright people or experts are belittled, everywhere it's not very smart to be very smart, oppression is near at hand.

M. Scott Peck, the psychiatrist famous for his best seller, The Road Less Traveled, wrote a second book about evil. Scott Peck wanted to propose that something called evil existed in the world and messed up people's lives. Listen to what he titled

that book: The People of the Lie. Where there is evil, there is a lie.

You and we who are teachers—public school teachers, religious educators, parents, trainers in the business world, writers and journalists, all who labor to keep the torch of learning and truth lit, we are in the business of dispelling the lie. It's the lie that there is no God, it's the lie that the oppressor is god, it's the lie that the world is something less than a glorious place, it's the lie that there is some human being who is less worthwhile than another, it's the lie that we need to settle with any form of tyranny, it's the lie that that says it's not very smart to be very smart, it's the lie that holds that truth is not all that important. The reason you're a teacher—and you already know this—is so that the lie will never win.

And nowadays being a teacher is a tough job. But we need you. And children and students need you. Know that there are a bunch of Presbyterians who pray for you and are cheering you on. And in your worst moment this...Jesus was a teacher.