

TEACHING AND FREEDOM¹

We're celebrating teachers and teaching today. If you're a parent or leader, then you teach. If you are a public school teacher or one of our adult or youth teachers, obviously you teach. What I want to say about teaching, whether at Berta or upstairs with adults, is that teachers all stand on common ground. You see, when you teach you set a soul free. And, what I'd like to say today is that all education sets free.

When Jenny and I landed in Lilongwe, Malawi in east central Africa, we met our daughter, Kristen at the airport. Kristen had been in Africa many months, and within minutes of our reunion we ran into a problem at the rent-a-car desk. They hadn't gotten our reservation for a vehicle. In broken English, the clerk tried to explain an arrangement that might substitute for the plan we thought we had made. For my part, I was a little mad and nervous that I was signing my retirement away in a confusion of exchange rates, plus rental fees and taxes. Kristen quietly stepped in. She addressed the clerk in Tumbuka. With pencil and paper she painstakingly created a chart. Exchange rate between Malawi Kwacha and US dollar, tax percentage, daily rate, mileage overage fee, and so on. Clarity emerged. "No, sir, we finally were able to say, we cannot rent from you—way too expensive." Then he made a phone call. In

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on September 13, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

three minutes we had a new, affordable deal. In ten more minutes we drove off in a Toyota 4-wheel drive truck. Moral of the story: reading, writing, and arithmetic. If our kids don't have it, their lives are going to spent being taken advantage of in a thousand different ways.

Christian education has a similar result. In the mid-1960's the Second Vatican Council forever put an end to the Catholic practice of retaining the liturgy and the Bible in Latin. Suddenly, into the hands of millions was the Bible in their own language.

It changed the world. Through the 1970's and 80's there arose a theological movement called liberation theology that turned on one great idea, which Central American Christians have taught us. Jesus means freedom. The Bible is shot through with liberation from tyrants, from ignorance, from sin, and ultimately from death. What a difference it makes if people are able to read the scriptures on their own and take them at face value. So teach reading and you set a soul free. You even set a soul free to read the Bible which sets souls free.

How does Jesus put it? "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

Our lesson from Deuteronomy says it more subtly. These words are addressed to the Hebrew children who had been

liberated from Egypt and were on the threshold of the Promised Land. Their instructions were to live as God has taught. Memorize Moses' teaching. Teach it to the kids. Because—and here's the point—if you forget what you have been taught, you'll collapse as a society. Follow God's law and you will walk out of Egypt anew every day of your life.

There is a connection between knowing something and being free. The reverse is also true. Ignorance and oppression are closely linked. Do you know how tyrants stay in power? Do you know how oppression keeps its grip? Do you know how sin and death keeps a heart and soul quiet and locked up? They dumb us down. The political thinker George Orwell was on to this principle. In his futuristic novel 1984, he envisioned an onerous, all-powerful government that over-controlled every move and thought. One of the government's schemes was to banish words from the vocabulary. Bureaucrat censors would comb through books and newspapers and eliminate words so no one would ever use them again. You see, lots of words meant lots of ideas and criticism. And the Big Brother government wanted to deprive people of the intellectual capacity to criticize. So it trimmed down the language which was called Newspeak—the world's only language that had less words each year. You might want to

remember Newspeak the next time you teach vocabulary. Think vocabulary as a subversive act!

Now, we who are Christians need to be honest enough to admit that churches, religious dogma, and authority can be as oppressive as heavy-handed government, or scheming big business, or mental illness or addiction, or tribal loyalty, or onerous social mores. I remember a wise Christian teacher talking to us once about churches that become cult-like and get into people's heads and checkbooks. He said there is one antidote that restores Christianity to its wholesome saving place in our lives. What is it? The dangerous memory of Jesus. There is something about the life episodes, the remarks, and the example of Jesus Christ that fill the gospel accounts that keep pulling us back to what Christianity is all about. How often for me the distortions that can creep into theological dogma and churchianity and psychology are corrected by just remembering something Jesus said or did. But you have to know what Jesus said and did. We need to teach that material, and give to our kids and one another the dangerous memory of Jesus.

Now, someone here wants to push back. Doug, what world are you living in? It's tough out there. Parents can hardly get ten minutes with their kids before the cell phone announces a text message from a friend. Teachers compete with a stream of

interruptions like kids who are hungry or too upset from stuff at home. Text messages pre-empting students' attention. Curriculum pressures that dictate classroom activities so—you know—no one is left behind. Parents want to have that TALK with their daughter about...ah...relationships until the cell phone rings—it's her boyfriend. Facebook postings permit kids to evaluate their parents and teachers without pesky monitoring from parents and teachers. The Church camp counselor is sharing what Christ has done in his life, except one kid misses the point because she's following her friend Megan's tweets (to use Twitter-speak). Megan is eating a banana. We need to know that.

How do you teach in this environment? The answer—somehow. Maybe it helps to ponder what might be our greatest responsibility to our students as human beings. Let me suggest that it is to give them the very best knowledge, wisdom, and ethics that humankind has to offer. Better, the best knowledge, wisdom, and ethics that God has to offer.

I'm confident that wherever truth is lifted up, Jesus Christ is near. Oh, I know that Christian learning is a holy activity and not continuous with secular learning. Knowing how to factor a quadratic equation is not the same as knowing God. But all learning helps. I'm remembering the Wise Men in the

Christmas story. They knew a lot. It was their smarts and wisdom that not only got them to Jesus, but that made them want to go in the first place.

Here's another thing. If we don't teach, someone else will. If we don't read them the wonderful stories available in children's literature, our kid's literature will be email forwards. If we don't instruct in morals, the video store will. If we don't teach mathematics and later economics, our kids will learn their economics in the Title Pawn office. If we don't teach social studies, partisan campaign literature will. If we don't lift up Jesus Christ, a lesser Messiah will be on hand to fill the void.

Dare to teach! No less than Jesus says truth sets free. Oppression hates truth, hates ideas, and hates wisdom. But what you have to give—Christian educators and school teachers, and parents alike—what you have to give sets souls free.