**“Teach and Be Taught”**

January 26, 2025 Text: Isaiah 50:4-9a

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Introduction to Scripture

Our reading for today comes from the prophet known as Second Isaiah, who is writing at the time of the captivity in Babylon. After the fall of Jerusalem, much of the population had been carried off into exile by their Babylonian enemy, and is living in exile. It is the sixth century before Christ.

Why do teachers teach? We were speaking with a fellow responsible for public education in our neighboring state, Rhode Island, which had passed its counterpart to what we in Massachusetts have known as the MCAS test. Everyone was throwing out their old curricula and teaching to the new test, because they and their schools were going to be graded on how their students performed on the standardized test.

Everything depended on the results of those tests: a high school diploma for the student, favorable evaluations for the teacher, accolades for the principal.

Why do teachers teach? Sometimes the answer is as simple and as complicated as, *so students can internalize enough information to pass the test.*

Isaiah sees the task of the teacher differently. The job of the teacher is not simply to dispense information – although that is, of course, part of any education. No, a teacher also “knows how to sustain the weary with a word”. A teacher teaches to “encourage a tired people.” A teacher labors long hours to help people run the course in the hard circumstances of life.

The task of teaching is not just about information input and output, an intellectual force-feeding followed by the disgorgement of the relevant data – it is about people, about sustaining people. The task of teaching, according to Isaiah, is bound up with fortifying students for the long haul of life, to give them a hand up when the travails of life weigh them down, to use a “word” to strengthen them for the loads they must bear through life.

You know the truth of this, you know, from your own experience, that good teachers do this. By good, I mean those teachers who got through to you, and not only gave you information, but who touched you in ways that have lasted down the years. They did this by encouragement, by telling you that you mattered when you did not think you did, by telling you that no, you were not dumb, you just had to find some work-arounds on things you have found hard, by assuring you were going to do something remarkable with your life when you just could not dare to believe it.

In theological terms, a good teacher recognizes and communicates the infinite worth and dignity of all persons because they are created in God’s image, and in so doing lights a fire in their student’s mind that endures and endures long after the specifics of the subject matter have been forgotten. Long after you could figure out where two trains, one leaving New York City at noon and traveling 60 miles per hour, and one leaving Philadelphia at the same time, but travelling 45 miles an hour, would meet. Long after your Latin knowledge ebbed to the point where *amo ams amat* and *veni vidi vinci* were all you had left. Ong after your knowledge of French has dwindled to “Parlez vous francais.”

I am thinking of teachers like Mr. Rainey, my fifth grade teacher. He must have been fresh out of college, and he was the first person I ever knew to wear contact lenses – the early, hard kind, he was always blinking. Anyway, since time immemorial at my school all three of the fifth grade classrooms had spent six weeks memorizing the Gettysburg Address. I dreaded this, as I have never been any good at memorization.

But Mr. Rainey had us do something different – instead of getting started on the old “Four score and seven years ago” thing, we were going to put together scrapbooks, fifty pages long, with each page devoted to each of the fifty states, complete with pictures and essays about the state. To get the information and pictures that we needed, back long before the internet came along, we had to write away to the 50 state chambers of commerce, which was neat because we got lots of mail, which was pretty new to us all. Mr. Rainey sparked in me a love of geography, and a desire for travel, which persist to this day.

Like Mr. Burke, my high school Latin teacher, a hopelessly square bachelor who made a dead language come alive, and woke in me an historical imagination.

Like Judy Brian, the church school director when I was first brought onto the Board of Christian Education back when we lived in Needham, who patiently accompanied me as I strove to become a church school teacher, and later, as I discerned my call to ordained ministry, allowed me to minister alongside her as a seminarian at the church she served in Lexington.

Like our own Rick Serodio, a member here at West Parish. Several decades ago Rick saw the need to start a Special Olympics program over in Sandwich, and so started the Sandwich Sailors Community Special Olympics program. One of the earliest tasks on his long to-do list was to find student volunteers to help staff the program, and one of the school moms brought her 6th grader, Caroline, who quickly became involved as a three-sport Special Olympics volunteer. Fast forward to a couple weeks ago, when Caroline set a card to Rick, which I share with his permission:

“Dear Coach Rick, I wanted to write you this letter today to tell you how much of an inspiration you are to me. Seeing how you interacted with the kids at Special Olympics and the patience you had with them is truly incredible. I am now a college freshman at Stonehill College with a double major in Special Education and psychology and I am loving every single minute. I attribute your mentorship to guiding me to where I am today.”

Mr. Rainey, Mr. Burke, Judy Brain, Rick Serodio, all given the tongue of a teacher, that they might sustain the weary with a word, encourage a tired people, light a fire in the minds of their students that will light their way throughout life. They were and are all good teachers.

And yet Isaiah reminds us that there is more to teaching than giving to others, than using the tongue to impart instruction; a good teacher, he tells us, also has ears, ears to listens as those who are taught. A good teacher is always learning in the process of teaching.

This I learned the truth of when I first began to teach church school back in Needham. I had the mixed blessing of being paired with an intellectually brilliant man, a dean at the Harvard School of Public Health, and so I had the assurance that he would likely have the answers to any Biblical questions those middle schoolers would throw at us. But that meant that if I were to find a niche on our teaching team, I had to do something that was not so intellectually-based, and so I decided that I would be responsible for the liturgical, more emotive side of the class, including prayer and worship. Something which I, a coolly logical lawyer, the son of a by-the-numbers engineer, knew very little about!

But in the teaching, I learned.

If the lesson was on the calling of the first disciples by the Sea of Galilee, I would dress up as a fisherman, complete with foul weather gear and a fishing pole, to lead us in closing worship.

If the lesson was Elijah fleeing Ahab and Jezebel, I would find the props and costumes so we could act it out.

Knowing that prayer was difficult for the kids, as it was for me, I would find ways into prayer that worked for all of us.

In the teaching, I was learning; that I might exercise the tongue of a teacher, with ears to listen as those who are taught.

Today we have designated as Teacher Appreciation Day, and we honor all those who are with us today who have made teaching their profession, whether it be in the Family School, in preschool elsewhere, in public and private schools and universities -- and yet the truth of the matter is that we are **all** teachers, each in our own right. If you are a parent, you are constantly teaching your children. If you are a grandparent, each time you visit your grandchildren you are teaching them, teaching them about love, about family, about the importance of relationships that reach across the generations. If you are a supervisor at work, you are teaching those whom you supervise, if you are a friend with a compassionate ear, you are teaching about the value of listening and empathy. We are *all* teachers.

The question is not, then, *are* you a teacher? The question is, what teaching gifts do *you* have to offer? For God has given you the tongue of a teacher, and God has opened your ears that you might learn, that you might sustain the weary with a word, that you might encourage a tired people.

You are a teacher. Class is now in session. Amen.

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