

A Teachable Moment

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 1:21-28

February 1, 2015

Epiphany 4B

Who was your favorite teacher? Was it a kindergarten teacher who made you feel welcome? A grade school teacher who had a special interest in you? A middle school teacher who helped you get through some rough times? A high school teacher who helped you understand a difficult subject? A college, university or graduate teacher who took you to new depths of understanding? Or maybe your favorite teacher didn't work in a school at all, but was a grandpa who taught you the ways of nature, and lots more, when you went hunting or fishing together, or another relative, or a Sunday school teacher, or a scout leader, or a mentor at work who taught you how to do your job. Maybe today over Sunday dinner you can swap stories about some of your favorite teachers.

The teachings of Jesus, especially the parables, look at the familiar in a new way and come up with a new understanding of something deeper. Good teachers can do that—they can help us understand things in a new way. One of my good professors was a church history professor named Sidney Mead. One analogy that he used was of a monkey in a cage looking at some bananas in the next cage, which were just out of reach. In the cage with the monkey were two sticks. The monkey tried to reach out with each stick, but the bananas were just out of reach. Finally, the monkey went "Ugh!" as he realized that the two sticks could snap together to extend the stick, and with the longer stick he could reach the bananas. Ever since then I've used the phrase "ugh experience" to describe those moments of insight, where suddenly you have it figured out, and something in life that didn't make sense does now.

One thing that has always made a difference to me in how I felt about a teacher is if they had integrity—if they walked the walk, so to speak. Their attitudes, their actions, held together. Another is love—for their subject matter, but also for their students. They care for their students and go out of the way to help them do their best. And sometimes a teacher's love for English, or Math, or the Bible, or whatever, will ignite a similar love in the student.

Jesus was a teacher—a rabbi. We don't know if he had any rabbinical training or not. But did he ever have something important to teach! He wanted people to learn about a whole new way of approaching God. He wanted people to learn and accept the good news that God's love was going to break through into history, and transform humanity. In the season of Epiphany, we hear about Jesus calling his disciples. To be a disciple means to be a student, an

apprentice, or a follower. It means to be under the discipline of another, to learn. We call ourselves Disciples of Christ, and if we are to live up to that name, that means we have to be students of Christ, learning from him all our lives. It also means we have to be apprentices to Christ, trying as we can to put in practice what he taught us. I'm pleased that this church has two good active adult Bible study classes during the Sunday school hour, and a Wednesday evening gathering, where we can also stretch our faith. And you try to find ways to be apprentices to Christ in Christian service—your response to the diaper drive is just one sign of that. But we never completely live up to the name "Disciples of Christ"—rather, it's something we grow into all our lives long. We never arrive—we're always on the journey.

That's appropriate, isn't it, because Jesus and his disciples were always wandering about the landscape, learning as they went. "Look," Jesus would say. "See how God clothed that beautiful flower?" He'd be by the lakeshore and say, "Come with me, and you'll fish for people." He would take the simplest things—coins, bread dough rising, a sparrow, a fishing net, things like that—and help his disciples have "ugh" experiences. Oh, yeah! I never thought about it like that!

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus has gathered his disciples, his followers, and like good Jews, they go to the synagogue in Capernaum, a small city on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The synagogue was a local center of both worship and education. Jews gathered to learn more and more about their covenant with God, and how it was to work out in their daily lives. They had a custom there, where if a visiting rabbi came, they would invite him to read and interpret the laws and the prophets. So Jesus taught. Now most of the time, when learned rabbis taught, they cited references. In some ways, it was like lawyers in court, saying, "In Smith vs. Brown, 1978, the court ruled..." Or it was like when someone is working on a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation today, they need to quote all the right sources to prove their point, to show that they have studied all the other arguments about their topic, and know their field. You can learn a lot that way, but it wasn't Jesus' style. He taught with authority—his own authority—authority based upon his own relationship with God. The Message translates it like this: "They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars." He knew the scriptures—the Hebrew scriptures we call the Old Testament—backward and forward. They were his faith vocabulary. As a boy, he had wonderful theological discussions with the scholars of the law in the Temple at Jerusalem. Now as an adult, he was teaching in such a way that the old words of faith seemed newly alive—on fire with new meaning. The power of God

radiated through the scriptures as he spoke. No wonder the crowds were astounded.

Where does this authority come from? John, the Gospel writer, reminds us that Jesus is the Word of God taking on human flesh. We call the Bible God's Word, but the Bible is really our authoritative and reliable witness to Jesus Christ, who is ultimately God's word. Jesus brings God's word to our hearts like he did to those gathered in Capernaum. How marvelous it must have been to hear those wonderful words of life.

But as all teachers know, real life has a way of interrupting our best lesson plans. Sometimes we can use these interruptions themselves as teachable moments. In Capernaum, a man possessed with a demon began shouting. In the Message, we hear it this way: "What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you're up to! You're the Holy One of God, and you've come to destroy us!" Jesus shut him up: "Quiet! Get out of him!" The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

We don't talk much about demons, but we do know the power of the demons of mental illness, depression, urges to violence and abuse, uncontrolled anger, self-hatred, and how hard they are to heal, to move past. Jesus claimed a higher power, and drove out the darkness from this suffering man. And it was more than an interruption. It was a continuation of his teaching—an exclamation mark! Here was the word—the good news of God's love—in action!

There's a poem by Thomas Troeger that speaks to this healing. It's also a hymn, but I'm going to read it, not sing it.

Silence, frenzied, unclean spirit!" cried God's healing Holy One.
Cease your ranting! Flesh can't bear it; flee as night before the sun."
At Christ's words the demon trembled, from its victim madly rushed,
While the crowd that was assembled stood in wonder, stunned and hushed.

Lord, the demons still are thriving in the gray cells of the mind.
Tyrant voices, shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind,
Doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason's sight,
Guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright.

Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit in our mind and in our heart;
Speak you word that when we hear it, all our demons shall depart.
Clear our thoughts and calm our feeling; still the fractured, warring soul.

By the power of your healing, make us faithful, true and whole.

(unquote)ⁱ

The gospel tells us that Jesus Christ is still with us, and that we are called to accept and to share that good news, to drive out evil with goodness, to drive out hatred with love. We continue to teach the gospel and to learn from it, because in it we find peace and healing. Let God be with us in our teaching and our learning. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

¹ Thomas Troeger, "Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit!", © 1984, Oxford Press. In Chalice Hymnal, #186.