

“The Call to Teach”

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Proverbs 31:10-31 Mark 9:30-37

What’s the most important job in a church? Many people would say the pastor. In this church I get to influence you with my sermons and teaching. And I run the monthly meetings of elders who oversee the committees and make major decisions for the church. In a church with no pastor, or a weak pastor, it’s often the clerk of session who is at the center of power. Or it could be a treasurer, or a chair of the worship committee or property committee. What’s the most important job in a church? Or, as Jesus’ disciples asked among themselves, who *is* the greatest?

Today we recognized our Sunday School teachers as they begin a new school year. We are blessed this year with a fine group of teachers. But often it’s hard to find enough people who are willing to teach, and rarely do any of them ever volunteer. Why is that? One answer is simple: you have to be a certain kind of person to teach children. You have to have good instincts with people, and genuinely like and understand young people and not “talk down” to them. And you have to get here early every Sunday. Actually, the choir comes here early too. But they don’t have to prepare a lesson or talk about faith and answer questions. Teaching can be scary. What if a child asks a question and you don’t know the answer? What if you are struggling to believe yourself and not sure you understand what you’re supposed to be talking about?

These are all real reasons why a good teacher is hard to find. But the deeper reason is most of us don’t realize how important the job is. Sure, everyone likes to see children in church. It’s a sign that our congregation is vital and growing. But children don’t keep coming for the babysitting services. They come because there are people here like Suzanne Broffman and all the other teachers and helpers, who love them and take the time to talk about their questions and point them to God. Children are a sign of vitality and hope for the future. But the only way they will have an impact on our future is if we value them as individuals and teach them. Still, the people who feel they have the time or energy for that are few.

This is not just a church problem. Our society as a whole doesn’t value children enough. Our public school teachers are underpaid and classes are over-crowded. And now that the economy is improving, we have a shortage of good teachers again.

I love children and I spent the first half of my ministry working specifically with families and children. But when I was in seminary, I didn’t take any Christian Education classes. I thought the role of Christian Educator would be the easy path, being what women tended to do in the church in the 1950’s and 60’s when I was growing up. I wanted to go straight to the important stuff, dealing with adults and changing the world. So I avoided anything that had to do with children.

This happens among church members too. Many people start with teaching, and then move on to one of the “bigger and better” committees, or join the deacons or elders. And once they hit one of those committees, rarely do they return to teaching. I can think of one person who was an elder first, before she started to teach, and that’s Vicky Li. But did you ever think that teaching kindergarteners or a class of middle school students

could be the most important job the church could offer, even more important than teaching adults, or preaching, or chairing a committee?

In the lesson that Linda read from Mark this morning, Jesus caught the disciples in an embarrassing conversation. They were discussing which one of them was the greatest. Jesus didn't take this lightly and give them a quick response. Instead he sat down and called the disciples to him. He wanted their undivided attention, because this point was at the heart of all his teaching. He said, "If anyone would be first, he or she must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them and said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me, but the One who sent me."

Children are the little ones, the often overlooked ones, who need special attention and patience. They wonder at the world and ask basic questions like, "Can miracles really happen? And why did God let my grandmother die?" Children make us face real questions of life and death in a straightforward way. It takes a spirit of simplicity to truly receive a child. And in a competitive world, those are not the qualities we are taught to value. But to Jesus, those qualities were the most important: simplicity and humble service. We don't gain importance in the Kingdom of God by being rich or famous or powerful. We become great by being a servant, by helping others, and looking out for the least important people, the ones nobody else wants to pay attention to.

Today in this country we have Christians who refuse to issue marriage licenses to gay couples. They have drawn crowds of demonstrators, who want to protect their religious freedom to refuse help to people they consider to be living in sin. Because of this publicity, this is what many non-Christians think it means to follow Jesus. But fortunately we have other models for Christian life. In response to the immigration crisis in Europe, Pope Francis has called on every Catholic parish to take in one refugee family. I read on Friday that the Vatican itself is providing two apartments in their guest house for two refugee families. Fighting for the freedom to say no to gay couples, versus welcoming refugees and caring for them? Which would Jesus do?

Jesus' taught the way of love and humble service. But not everybody "gets it;" not even Jesus' disciples "got it." In today's gospel lesson, Jesus told his disciples for the second time that he would be killed. But they just could not take it in. How could God allow the Messiah, the one who was supposed to save them, be humiliated and killed? Wasn't the Son of Man supposed to come in power and make things right with the world?

Jesus was trying to show them a different way, a different understanding of how God works in the world. God is not a great and powerful manipulator or law enforcer. We see God in Jesus, who chose to walk among us as a servant. Jesus never forced anyone to follow him or to do what was right. Instead he turned the other cheek and chose the path of love and service. God never forces people to choose the right way, even when they are doing something evil, even when they are about to crucify his own beloved son. God's power is the power of love, the power of truth, of mercy, of grace, and of service to the least people in the world, to care for the people who everyone else rejects or thinks are unimportant, like refugees, like lesbian, gay or transgender people, like little children who are too young to contribute any resources or make big decisions. The people who are great in God's Kingdom are not those who have special talents or have the most money or power. The greatest people are those who pay attention to and care for those who have the most need for love and care.

Now, a servant is not a powerless person who does whatever anyone tells them to do. Many women are trained their whole lives to let others make the decisions, to disregard their own needs and desires, even to submit to men who abuse them, in the hope that they will win them over. But there's a difference between being a servant and being a doormat. A servant is someone who freely chooses to help another. A doormat is someone whom others take advantage of. Jesus had integrity and his own kind of power. No one pushed him around. Yet he said, "I come as one who serves." (Lk.)

Pete read from Proverbs today, a passage that describes a good and capable wife. Wives back then were like servants with no status. Yet the wife that is lifted up as the ideal in Proverbs is no meek or selfless person. She is industrious; she manages a household of servants, buys a field, and trades goods with merchants. It says she "girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong." She has dignity. Yet in all this she has the attitude of a servant, in the best sense of the word: she works long hours to provide for her family, she does her husband good and not harm, she is trustworthy, she is generous and gives to the poor, she is kind and wise.

Today Pope Francis probably has the most power of any Christian in the world. Yet he has changed the tone of the Catholic hierarchy by living a life of humble service. He has refused to live in the huge and luxurious Apostolic Palace, and instead stays in a two-room suite in the Vatican guest house. He eats his meals in the communal dining room with everyone else. He doesn't wear fancy red shoes, expensive jewelry, or ride in a bullet-proof limousine, as other Popes have. Instead he rides in an open jeep, and drives his security service crazy by getting out to greet the crowds, or insisting on walking. He holds mass for the grounds keepers, domestic staff and other low-level workers. On Maundy Thursday he washed the feet of prisoners. He has turned the attention of the church back to serving the poor and caring for the powerless and those whom others reject.

Our Sunday School teachers have also chosen the way of service, to teach the children and welcome them in the name of God. They get very little recognition from adults for this, and no money. They do it because they care for the children. And according to today's gospel lesson, they are the greatest among us. Of course not everyone is called to teach, and there are many other people in this congregation who quietly serve behind the scenes in their own way. But of all the jobs and committees of the church, caring for the children brings us closest to God. It requires a lot, but it gives a lot in return, because as Jesus said, whoever receives a child in the name of Christ, receives Christ, and whoever receives Christ, receives God.

This is the path to greatness... not money, power or fame, but humble acts of love and service to God's littlest people. And in this giving there is peace and joy. May God lead us all as we serve the little ones who are dear to God's heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.