

When My Perfect Right May Be Perfectly Wrong

A sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January 28, 2018

Based on Mark 1:21-28 and I Cor. 8:1-13

Jesus was a teacher. They never called him “Reverend,” or “Pastor.” They never called him “Father.” Most simply called him, “Rabbi,” which means teacher.

Now, it’s true, if you compare sitting down and giving a lecture to people in a synagogue to some other things Jesus did, like stilling a storm, raising a young girl from the dead, curing a blind man, *teaching* may seem unimpressive. Even when Mark tells us that people who heard him were astonished because he taught them as someone with “authority,” well, that is only moderately impressive.

But the class is about to get more interesting. A man barges into the synagogue screaming, “what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth . . . I know who you are – the holy one of God.”

Jesus rebuked the spirit within that man, and he was healed. And people said something odd in reaction to that.

They said, “What is this? A new teaching! And with authority, even the unclean spirits are instructed by him.”

Now, Mark doesn’t tell us *what* Jesus taught. Rather he tells us how he taught. with authority. Authority over those things that hamstring a person, torment them, keep them from living an abundant life. Maybe also he had a sense of authority that made people think he had more to teach them about life than, you know, someone who’d written the latest best selling self-help book.

I think it’s interesting that the first miraculous work that Mark reports, the very first action Jesus performs in the very first written gospel, is the act of teaching. And it’s not about him merely imparting information. It’s about someone’s transformation, which is what the best teaching is always about.

Wm Butler Yeats said, “Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the starting of a fire.” It gets something going inside a person, something that is both wonderful and dangerous. It’s like people get reborn, and not just in a religious way. We’re talking here about something that has been called, soul making,

Joan Chittister, Benedictine nun has said, “A life of soul making goes through different stages in which we learn different things. ‘The harvest of youth is achievement. The harvest of middle age is perspective. The harvest of age is wisdom.’”

That second part, perspective, is where the best teachers do their work. We are bombarded with information these days. We don’t need any more information.

We need to find a place to stand where we can see the larger picture.
A reliable pattern.

In a world of FOX News and MSNBC, we long for teachers with authority larger than that of our own and with no private agendas, to help us sort things out for ourselves.

The best teachers, I believe, have the confidence necessary to make themselves vulnerable when called for; vulnerable enough to tell important truths about themselves. I mean, that's what we remember when we remember certain special teachers isn't it?

Most often it's not the subject matter they taught us, no, it's something about them that it took courage for them to share with us. That's where we learn the most important life lessons.

My favorite teacher of all time was Dr. Clarence Simpson from my undergraduate days. He was a tremendous speaker. He taught me when I didn't even know he was teaching. The trustees of the college implored him to be president on several occasions, but he saw his vocation as teaching. About once a year he would address the whole college on some topic. Many in the greater community came just for that, he was that respected.

In 1974 his talk was titled, "A Poor Man's Watergate." There was a lot of anger aimed at President Nixon in the air in those days, and I definitely shared it. Well, instead of piling anger on top of anger, Dr. Simpson told us about what he called his own Watergate – how he had been a professor at Wheaton College in Illinois in his younger days.

A Christian college, Wheaton had a statement of faith every professor had to subscribe to, to teach there. It wasn't enough to sign on to it once when you were hired; you had to sign it every year. It amounted to a fundamentalist Christian manifesto, and though Dr. Simpson was a devout Christian he was anything but a fundamentalist. But he signed it year after year after year.

He rationalized that he was doing it for the good of the students. He had to gain tenure, he said to himself. It was a Christian school. By being there he could offer a progressive perspective to the curriculum. Other professors in the English department signed without being fundamentalists either.

But even after making all those rationalizations, signing that document never got any easier for him and neither did the shame of it. Finally he decided it was time to move on. If the school couldn't change, he needed to. And that's how he came to my college, Whitworth – through a crisis of conscience.

Clarence Simpson reminded us that we, all of us, are good at rationalizing, just as President Nixon must have been good at rationalizing. His transparency diffused some of our self-righteous anger.

Maybe that made it a little easier for us to empathize when President Nixon resigned later on that summer.

Maybe it made us listen more closely when during his farewell speech in the East Room of the White House he said the following words. "Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win, unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself."

It amazed me when he said those words. And those words still amaze me today, and they humble me a little too. I am grateful to my professor for not just opening my mind, but also being willing to open his own heart as he taught us, and taught us what great teaching can amount to.

What the best teachers do is not give us lots of new information. They help us in fact, unload information that is bogging us down. That's what I like to do in the class I teach once in a while about reading the Bible on its own terms. I'm working to get us to get rid of lenses we've been using to read the Bible on other people's terms for way too long. I think that can be freeing.

Irma Zaleski has said – "True teaching is a 'winnowing,' a wind to blow the chaff from our minds and hearts. It is an unquenchable fire to burn away all in us that is false and unreal."

I believe that is a big part of my job as a teacher and preacher. To help us, myself included, let go of false information; stuff we have had to step over for decades sometimes that keeps us from seeing the forest for the trees. And that's what happens with the best teaching. You finally get to see the big picture.

As the Buddha said, "in order to find the truth, we must learn to let go of lies." This is the heart of all spiritual teaching. A teacher doesn't often tell us who we truly are, or who we must become, but points out who we are not.

Jesus did this himself when he said, "Not everyone who calls to me, 'Lord Lord,' is my follower." That's hard to hear, but I believe that he had been getting his followers ready to understand that a long time before he said it. He made them do the kind of serious inner-inventory crucial for serious living and real learning.

Conflict is a part of any real education. Many times I've pointed out that someone once asked the Dalai Lama of Tibet, "Who have been your best spiritual teachers?" Without a pause he answered, "The communist Chinese."

The Dalai Lama knew well that they were his teachers because they had filled him with such hatred. With such a desire for revenge that he was in danger of losing his very heart. They taught him, without even trying, what real compassion is and is not, just as Richard Nixon taught me when I was full of rage at him.

Jesus was once cornered by a rich young man who had in him a burning question – “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said, *“You know the commandments: he listed them and the young man said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”*

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

The true dogmatist might take that literally and say that Jesus believed that everyone should sell everything. That rings hollow to me. No, he was getting at the fact that all of us have something we are not willing to give up (even the monks among us; even the Dalai Lama). We need to examine our hearts and find out what that is, and see if that is something singularly precious to us, or if giving it up could be a doorway that might open upon something even better.

Examining our hearts is always a crucial part of our education.

We heard a story about the apostle Paul this read morning. Paul was asking the “smart” folk in the Corinthian congregation a searching question. These were the people who flaunted their superior knowledge, people who believed that eating meat offered to idols in pagan temples was no big deal, even if it made some former pagan worshippers who had become Christians and joined their church very upset.

“Examine your hearts,” he was saying to the “superior” Christians. “It may be your perfect right to eat that meat,” he said, “but know the cost of it when you do it. Realize how you are causing some among your neighbors to stumble and be confused.”

Now, what he is saying to these superior ones *between the lines* is this: “The joy you are taking at looking down your noses at your new brothers and sisters makes you very small; don’t think we all can’t see that.”

Sometimes, especially when we are satisfied that we are brilliant, we need to hear a word from someone who lays us low, who challenges us to have second thoughts about our “brilliance.”

Paul was an amazing teacher, and he was such because it is clear that he was good at examining his own motives before he taught others. He told the Corinthians to jettison their superior “wisdom” because he had learned to jettison his own.

Theodore Roethke had this to say about education. He said, "In a dark time the eye begins to see."

A few years ago a remarkable teacher came on our radar screen for a moment; someone of the stature of Paul. His name was Randy Pausch, and he was dying of pancreatic cancer. Remember him? He delivered a "last lecture," saying things he wanted to say through the magnifying lens of his dying. It was recorded on video and it went viral and led to a book and interviews everywhere.

Pausch told of hearing the news from his doctor—"Randy, there's a mass on your pancreas," the doctor said, "and it's not fair

In an interview with Diane Sawyer, Pausch said, "I don't think it's unfair." He continued on, explaining: "It's like we are all standing on a dartboard, and you know, a very small percentage of us are gonna catch the dart labeled pancreatic cancer. And I was—I was unlucky, but it wasn't unfair."

Unfair. It's how we often want to characterize things when we, or a loved one, has gotten this kind of bad news or died a sudden death. But I'm afraid Pausch is right. Unfair is probably not the way to characterize it.

The dying may be painfully tragic, heart wrenching, brutal, ill timed, illogical, debilitating, paralyzing. And so we gather as people have throughout the generations to grieve and console one another. Yet as deep and as real as our grief may be, the fact of the matter is that although the dying may be unfair, death, in the end, isn't unfair.

Why? Because life is a gift. It is a gift that comes to us free and clear. At the beginning of it we are given no guarantees, no warranty, no agreements.

It would be unfair if we had been assured one thing will happen and another ugly thing doesn't. But that isn't the case here. By grasping that moment, Randy Pausch helped us all see the forest for the trees. He helped some of us jettison some ideas we had that don't work.

The Buddha once said – "Imagine that every person in the world is enlightened but you. Imagine they are all your teachers, each doing just the right things to help you learn patience, perfect wisdom, perfect compassion." Even Richard Nixon, or the communist Chinese. It can be anybody, larger than life, or your next door neighbor, as you will see in the true story I'll close with now called, "A Lesson in Love." It's by Alvin Rosser.

My first girlfriend was Doris Sherman. She was a real beauty, with dark curly hair and flashing black eyes. Her long tresses would flow and dance in the wind whenever I chased her on the playground during recess at the country school we attended. To my eyes Doris was the most attractive girl in my class of combined first and second graders, and I set about winning her heart in a feverish manner

of a smitten seven year old. The competition for Doris' hand was strong. But I was undaunted and finally I was rewarded for my persistence.

One balmy spring day I discovered a tin badge on the playground. It must have been an election badge (perhaps for FDR). With little hesitation I decided to offer this newfound treasure to Doris as a token of my love. As I proffered the badge on my outstretched palm, I could see that she was impressed. Her dark eyes sparkled and she quickly took it from my hand. Then came these memorable words. Looking me straight in the eye and whispering in solemn tones she said, "Alvin, if you want me to be your girl, from now on you must give everything you find to me."

I remember thinking it over. In 1935 a single penny was a small fortune to a boy of my age and circumstance. What if I found something really important, like a nickel? Could I hide it from Doris, or would I tell her I'd found a penny and keep a four cent profit for myself? Had Doris made this same arrangement with my many class rivals. She could become the richest girl in school.

Faced with all these questions, my regard for Doris suffered a slow decline. If she had asked for 50% we might still be an item. But her imperious demand for everything so early in our relationship nipped it in the bud.

So Doris, wherever you are and whatever you may be, I would like to thank you for my early lesson in love.

Amen