

“The Serious Business of Teaching and Learning”

The prophet Isaiah announces: ***“The LORD GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.”***

When God wanted to help His people understand, He sent them prophets. One of the major roles of the prophets was to teach. They were to teach the people what God’s covenant with them required. They were to teach them to recognize how far short of those requirements they had fallen. They were to teach them about God’s wrath and God’s mercy. They were to teach them how to effect changes so that God’s wrath would be quelled and God’s mercy would flow. The role of the prophet was more than mere denouncer or soothsayer. First and foremost, it was the role of teacher. That role, Isaiah reminds his listeners, was intended ***“to sustain the weary with a word.”***

St. Mark records, ***“[Jesus] began to teach [the disciples] that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”*** Please note that Jesus did not just state this plan. Even though Mark goes on immediately to emphasize that Jesus ***“said all this quite openly,”*** He did not just announce his impending death (or what have come to be known as “the Passion Predictions”); He *taught* them — there’s something emphatic in that verb.

Jesus wanted His disciples not just to hear Him state what was coming; He wanted them to understand. In typical fashion they did not; indeed they could not. What Jesus was trying to teach them was like trying to get a Caveman to learn how to negotiate an internet web site. They had no grounding in what Jesus was saying. It would be like if I were to stand here this morning and announce: ***“Beginning today and every Sunday hereafter, we are going to start each worship service with a for-memory recitation of the Fourth Sura of the Koran.”*** Well you might look at each other like I had finally gone over the deep end; but examine that

announcement slightly: How many of you know what the Koran is? Who knows what a Sura is? Who knows the contents of the Fourth Sura? Who knows it to recite for memory? Why in the world would Christians even want to recite anything from the Koran?

This was the disciples' dilemma — sure, they knew the words and phrases: “Son of Man” “elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,” and “suffer.” But taken together, this idea that the Holy One sent from God would somehow fall onto harsh times, or rejection by the Jewish leaders, or anything BUT have glory and honor and success — this was alien to them. So alien, that Jesus knew to announce it was not enough; they had to be taught.

There are many kinds of teaching.

There is instruction. Sometimes we call that “book learning” (in some circles said with a sneer on one's lips). Instruction can encompass anything from multiplication tables to atomic bomb assembly. “How to” manuals are instruction manuals. So are recipes.

Instruction can be helpful; but it has limitations. Years ago, when we were trying to sell our house in Euclid to move to Macedonia, there were several code violations on our home. One of them involved some copper plumbing. I had never dealt with copper plumbing before. So I read some books and magazine articles on how to do sweat jointing. Still, I was not comfortable to proceed with the task. Then one Sunday afternoon, I happened to turn on an episode of *This Old House*, and *Voila!*, they were showing how to sweat joint! I was three inches from the screen, so I would not miss a thing. The next day, I went out and bought the necessary supplies and completed the task. The Master Plumbers around town should not lose any sleep over my “expertise” with a can of flux, a spool of solder, and a propane torch.

My point was that instruction did not get me to where I needed to be. Maybe others can read the manual and get the job done; I need a different kind of teaching — I need to be shown.

It's called "modeling" — it's a very powerful kind of teaching. Modeling basically says "*Watch me.*" It works well for techniques . . . but it also is one of the best ways to teach the tenets of faith and values. It has been said that faith "*is not so much taught as caught.*" There is wisdom in that, because the way that faith-life is modeled is often far more important than what is said about faith. Indeed, if there is a disconnect between what is said and how it is lived, every time the model will be what is remembered. Sometimes it is just easier and more efficient to show somebody how to do something (like sweat a joint); often it is not at all easier.

One time I was midtown near the Cleveland Clinic. I had my collar on. I was at the corner waiting for the light to change, heeding the "Don't Walk" signal. There was almost no traffic, so when a fellow came up to where I was standing and immediately ventured out across the street, he said to me, "*Watcha waiting for?*" I was waiting for the light to change; for the "walk" symbol to appear. Could I have just proceeded? Yes. But the fact that I had on a symbol that many recognize as a sign of my profession and therefore my faith, character, and integrity — I would wait. I would model obedience to the law.

Well, "*hooray for goody-two-shoes!*" I'll admit, had I been in jeans and a T-shirt, I might have walked looking straight at the red hand telling me to halt. But I was not just being me on that corner; I was representing you, the faith, my Lord. I felt I ought to model what that meant. Not that the simple act of waiting patiently for a light to change is the sum and substance of the Christian faith. But the more we can model for one another what that faith impels us to do with our lives, the deeper we can help our children, our grandchildren, our neighbors, our friends, fellow-members, co-workers, classmates — yes and even strangers on the street corner — to understand what it means to follow Christ.

But it will take more than the occasional good act. The deeper level of modeling is called mentoring — and it comes with a deeper calling. Instruction requires that at least one person know and understand what

has to be done and how to do it. Let's say the task is to learn the capitals of the fifty states; I happen to know the capitals of all fifty states, so I can teach you their names. I may decide, however, that my simply reciting that Maine's capital is Augusta and New Hampshire's is Concord, run down the eastern seaboard, across the Midwest, out over the plains, and on the west coast — that might inform you; it probably will not instruct you. So I am going to make you look at a map. I will *instruct* you that on this map, each of the state capitals is in bold print and has a star next to it, and have you “discover” what each state's capital is. By that way, those are just two different forms of instruction.

For me to model this, I could sit next to you, take the map and set it between us and with my finger trace the map until I found a star and a bold print name and say, “*Look at that! That is Carson City, the capital of Nevada.*” I can instruct you because, when it comes to state capitals I may be better-informed than you (please note that I did not say “smarter” but “better informed”). I may model something for you because I know how to do it, or I know a better, faster, cheaper, more efficient, or safer way to do it than you do.

But in mentoring, we may both be total neophytes, beginners who know nothing but are willing to learn. Mentoring is great when it comes to realms of ideas, values, and beliefs. It doesn't mean that one knows and the other is ignorant; it means that both are on the same journey and seek to take it together to see what can be learned. Margaret Guenther calls this “Holy Listening” and she uses a term other than mentoring: Spiritual Direction. Often a mentor is seen as a wiser, older, more experienced forerunner on the path I choose to take; but this is not necessarily what has to be. Two people who simply choose to walk together, by listening with the ears that the Holy Spirit provides, can help one another discover what each needs to learn.

I think I have mentioned my Spiritual Director before: Pastor Chris Cahill (yes, my Spiritual Director is also named “Chris”); what Pastor Cahill often did for me (we no longer meet regularly) is to ask me questions. He

almost never tried to give me answers, but he asked questions that gave me pause, made me think, sometimes made me upset (that's okay), and usually got right at the heart of what I need to consider. Chris Cahill is no smarter than I (well, at least I don't think so); I actually have more experience in ministry (if years are the sole measurement); what he has are some really good questions and our mutual commitment to meet together and explore what this journey of faith can mean to each other.

The last form of teaching is the hardest, because it is not a form of teaching; but it is a form of learning . . . and that is experience. Some will argue that experience is “the best teacher.” I'm not so sure. If there is a burner element on your electric stove that is glowing red, you may instruct a child not to touch it. Some children you may need to bring a little closer to the action, but not so close they could be hurt, and let them feel the heat. Other children might be aided by a question like, “*What do you think would happen if you were to touch that red coil?*” Then there is that one child who cannot be convinced by anything except his own experience, who will reach out and touch (more quickly if you say he cannot), and you will be on your way to the Emergency Room (once again).

Is experience the best teacher? That depends on what you hoped would be learned. If safety was your goal, then experience failed. If pain was the goal, experience drove that lesson home real good.

So why this discourse on epistemology (whether you knew it or not, that's what I've been talking about)? Because the task of teaching and learning is a serious one; but it is one that the church has not always considered serious business. Dr. Harry Wendt, author of The Divine Drama and Crossways programs, says, “*Jesus taught adults and played with children; the church for twenty-plus centuries has been doing just the reverse.*” John Westerhoff, author of Will Our Children Have Faith?, suggests that one of the best ways to get a child to pay attention to what you want her to learn is to set her down on the floor with a bunch of toys, let her begin to play, and then talk to another adult about what you hope

this child will learn. Neil Postman, who has written several books of education, argues that teaching is a “subversive activity” — a teacher is usually taking what has been “learned” (or at least “received”) and calling it into question. The poet, Emily Dickinson, advised: *“Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.”*

However we go about it, we need to become more intentional about what we as a congregation need to teach one another about being the church. The Disciples spent three years with Jesus, but until the outpouring of the Holy Spirit they had no clue as to what Jesus’ mission and ministry was all about. Indeed, as we hear in today’s Gospel, they were ready — admittedly out of ignorance, but ready just the same — to derail His mission.

Remember what Jesus elsewhere promised them: ***“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”*** [John 16:13-14] Had Jesus not taught them — instructed them, modeled for them, mentored them — they could have never been open enough to receive what the Spirit offered.

It is time for the church to stop playing with adults, and really focus on what we need to learn to be the Body of Christ in this place. Because the other side of teaching is learning. Some people absorb instruction. When I sit next to such people in a class, I marvel at the proficient note-taking. I take lousy notes. But then, I tend to recall what was said. Some people get a great deal out of reading; others need to have explained to them what they read. Some people finding discussion boring and a waste of time. Others are absolutely energized by the give-and-take of viewpoints and ideas. Some people totally live by the slogan: *“We remember 10% of what we hear; we retain about 20% of what we see; we hold on to about 25% of what we see and hear; and we retain more than 60% of what we see, hear and do.”* So they want to DO THINGS! [By the way, did you know that 46% of statistics that are quoted in speeches are made

up on the spot?]

But here is the problem with adult learners — we think we already know. We don't want to be confused by facts — we know! We confuse our opinions with knowledge — we know! So maybe we don't have all we need to know — but we know! As my high school art teacher, Mr. Dolan, used to say: *“Many folks say, ‘I don't know art, but I know what I like.’ What they really mean is, ‘I don't know art, and I like what I know.’”*

When it comes to faith, lots of us like what we know . . . but do we know what we need to know . . . do we know much at all? Here's the thing with studying God's Word: you can grasp the central message in a heartbeat: *“God loves you, comes to you, dies for you, rescues you; forgives and reshapes you, and calls you to live for Him”* (twenty-two words, give me a little more time, I can probably get it down to fifteen). But you can spend a lifetime studying this Word, and never plumb the depths. I know, I have been doing it professionally for forty-plus years.

James tells us today: *“Not many of you should become teachers, ...”* but he goes to demonstrate that all of us need to be learners. We need to learn how to bridle the tongue. We need to learn how to care for one another. We need to learn ways to reach out with Christ's love. We need to learn how to draw closer to God. We need to learn how to bring others closer with Him, as well. None of this comes “naturally” and we do not already know all this stuff — *“Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.”*

No, we must learn. From each other . . . from the Word . . . from the Lord. By instruction . . . by the modeling of others . . . by mentors . . . by experience . . . From cradle to grave we must learn, and learn, and keep on learning.

That, it seems to me, is the first and most important thing we need to learn: it is that we need to learn.

Amen.