

Pentecost 17/Proper 19 September 16, 2018. Mary K. Sandford.
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-8; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

How many of you can vividly remember a teacher? Did they inspire you? Did they encourage you? Or, did they bring you down in some way? Did they seem loving or nurturing? Or were they standoffish, distant, or even hostile? Almost universally, we humans carry with us the names and lessons of particular teachers who've influenced our lives.

Skilled teachers wield tremendous power. And – as reflected in today's scripture readings – the power of the spoken word can be used in positive or negative ways. The words of teachers can scar us for a lifetime or inspire us throughout our lives. Some teachers – insensitive to their students' vulnerability - use overly critical and judgmental words, shaming students when they make mistakes, while others, who listen and learn from their students, know when to comfort and encourage, and how to correct without shaming or blaming.

My own experiences as a student ran the gamut. At age five, I was expelled from kindergarten. My kindergarten teacher scolded me within an inch of my life for wearing cowboy boots to kindergarten. When I switched to shoes, she then shamed me when she discovered I couldn't tie them. She made me wear a sign "Can't tie shoes." Years later, through college and graduate school, and when I began to teach as a graduate student, my experiences with my teachers shifted dramatically. When I met my beloved mentor, Alice Brues, for the first time, somehow finding the nerve as a 20 year old to talk to her in her office, she commented on the fact that I was already getting gray hair. This led to our first conversation about our families and the inheritance of going prematurely graying. The best teachers know that getting to know students as individuals facilitates learning by helping to build relationships.

For all of us here and now, today, I'm speaking of teaching not so much as a vocation, but as a ministry of the Baptized. I sincerely believe that teaching is something that we here can and must do, and model for other people. Without a doubt this kind of teaching is more important now than it has ever been in our society, at least in my lifetime.

Why do I say this? I know all of you are aware that in our society today conversations and discussions all too often devolve into vitriolic exchanges. It doesn't matter whether we are exchanging ideas and opinions on social media (like Twitter and Facebook,), television, radio, or in-person gatherings, combative, fearful or openly hostile discussions are not at all uncommon. If we wish to fulfill the promises we make in our Baptismal covenant, if we wish to change the world or any organization within our society, then we must learn about teaching as a ministry. And it is one that all of us can play a role in as part of this Body of Christ.

So what does teaching as a ministry of the Baptized look like? What does it entail?

Whether you realize or not, we are all in effect teaching all the time. We are all teaching if for no other reason that our behavior influences others. This room is full of teachers. When I am with a group of people (like a Vestry meeting) I routinely follow a practice introduced by anthropologist Angeles Arrien and discussed in her book *The Four-Fold Way* (1993) where I look at the person sitting across from me, and think to myself, this person is my teacher. I reflect on what I can learn from the person sitting across from me. That means we all teach and learn from one another.

Bear in mind that I don't expect you to give me a lecture next time you see me. It's up to me to listen with an open mind and heart for the lesson. We tend to take on the behavior of people who've influenced us in the past. Not all of these influences were necessarily positive. So we need to be very aware of who has influenced us. We can be proud of the positive legacies we carry and let go of the not so good role models. This will help us model the behavior we would like to see in others.

If we do these things, if we commit to seeing others as our teachers – if we envision the person sitting across from us as our teacher, and we theirs, we are that much closer to finding ways to communicate that are grounded in love. Our scripture readings today highlight important aspects of teaching and the power of words.

Today's lesson from the Isaiah (50:4-9a) is one of Servant Songs in 2nd Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah. Found in Chapters 40-54, these passages date from the end of the Babylonian exile when Jews were allowed to return to Judah. This passage makes clear that the role as teacher includes offering support, or as it is written, "...how to sustain the weary with the word." We also see through this reading the importance of quiet, meditative listening for the messages to be taught.

James offers a timely cautionary tale about the destruction that can result when words are misused. He paints a very vivid picture of how harmful teachers can be if they fail to understand the power of words and their depth of influence on one another. He uses the powerful metaphor of a forest fire to describe the damage done by the wrong words.

In the well-known passage from Mark (8:27-38) Jesus pivots from his more familiar roles as a healer and minister to the poor and outcasts to that of a teacher. This is a turning point in the gospel.

Marcus Borg in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (2015) refers to Jesus as a "great teacher," specifically a teacher of wisdom who often used forms of "wisdom speech" that include aphorisms, parables and metaphor. As

we've seen many times, he was a skilled debater and would often turn arguments around in a way that left his adversaries looking, well, rather idiotic. Borg, also outlines other roles that Jesus played during his ministry. These include the role of a 1) spirit person, or one who has an experiential awareness of the reality of God, 2) a social prophet, similar to those in the Old Testament, known for his opposition to the dominant culture and economic inequality, 3) a Founder of a Social Movement that would ultimately evolve into a revitalization movement, also known for its opposition to the oppression of the dominant culture.

So, in our Gospel reading today, note how Jesus starts this discourse with his disciples by asking them a series of questions. He wants to make clear in the strongest possible terms that he does not want his disciples to tell people he is the Messiah. Remember that Messiah means "anointed one." And, the Jewish understanding was one who would become an earthly warrior king, one who would usher in a new Kingdom. However, Jesus is shifting the paradigm of what it means to be a Messiah. Using the cross as a metaphor he links his ministry to suffering (not for its own sake) but because of the unpopularity of the truths he is teaching and the people he is ministering to.

He instructs Peter that he is concerning himself not on "divine things" but on "human things." Here, I believe that he is asking his disciples to commit to a cause that is so much bigger than any one individual. He wants them to discover the divine within themselves. After speaking with his disciples he turns and looks into the crowd to invite them to follow him. The cost is to deny yourself...to lose your life in order to save it. He's speaking metaphorically about something that theologians, beginning with Thomas Merton and recently, Richard Rohr, have called losing the "false self" and discovering the "true self." It's an essential part of the spiritual journey.

In closing, I'm moved to share what I've recently learned from you as a member of this Body of Christ. During the time of Eileen's surgery and the complications that followed...to the normal recovery phase that she has thankfully now entered, through every bit of it, you showed us the myriad ways to care for a couple in the midst of a life threatening crisis. From sitting with her at the hospital to the meals you provided, through the notes of support you wrote to the rides to appointments, there has never been a more clear teaching of what it means to care and to love. We thank you. And on this Sunday morning, that's hope enough for me. And the people said....Amen!