

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

September 13, 2009

Teaching Hope

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 2:1-15; James 3:1-5

These are exciting times at Community Presbyterian Church in our educational program. So you may be wondering why I chose to read this particular passage in the book of James, “Not many of you should become teachers”? That sounds like a downer; it may not help too much in attracting new teachers to our educational programs. But that phrase is not as bad as the one that follows it: “Not many of us should become teachers, brothers and sisters, for we know that those who teach will be judged more strictly.” Oh, my. That’s enough to make the very best teacher volunteer run for the hills.

I chose this particular passage from James as a corrective to what I think is a rather pernicious idea which says that the things we do in Christian education, indeed the things we do in all the ministries of the church, are simple tasks easy to throw together. They don’t require prayer or preparation or planning, and certainly no hard work. The things that we do can just be put together at the last minute, and happen by themselves.

Some years ago I heard a friend tell a story about one of his faculty colleagues at the theological school where he teaches. It seems that his friend was on an airplane flight and in the course of that flight the man next to him said, “Well, tell me. What do you do for a living?” And the faculty member from the theological school said, “Well, I am a scholar of Scripture and I teach courses in the Bible and in Biblical ethics at the theological seminary.” The man sitting next to him grimaced a little bit and then said, “Oh, well. I used to attend Sunday School when I was a child but I think I had enough of that. I really don’t see how you could spend your whole life working on those sort of things. After all we learn that little song, and I can’t quite remember it now, but it seemed to sum it up pretty well.”

The theological professor said, “Little song? You mean, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know’?” And the man said, “Yes. Yes, that’s the one.”

So, then, the theological professor said, “You’ll have to tell me what you do for a living.”

And the other man said, “Oh, well. I’m a professor too, and I teach astronomy.”

The theological professor said, “That’s very interesting. I’m glad to hear that. I used to study astronomy when I was a child and it seemed pretty easy to me.

In fact, once we got to that little song that we all learned, I figured that was all I needed to know.”

And the astronomy professor said, “Song? What song?”

The theological professor said, “You know. ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star’.”

There is a trend in Christian education and it’s been going on for some decades now. It’s the response to some rather strong cultural forces that have been pushing against us that find expression in attitudes that say: “What goes on at the ballfield is more important than what happens in church. What I can learn from the internet means a lot more to me than what I can learn with others in Christian education. What I can pick up from the newspaper has more meaning for my life than Christian fellowship. What’s going on in the shopping mall, well, I care about that more than what happens in worship.”

So, in the churches we have ceded a lot of our space, and we have begun to say: “We need to make things a little simpler here. We need to boil it all down. We need to reduce our message. And most of all we need to get it over with quickly so that our folks can come in here and then get back out there to all of the other important stuff going on somewhere else.” In the area of curriculum development there is material that is widely marketed now. It’s called, User-friendly Curriculum: No preparation required. Anyone can teach this stuff.

Now, think about what that means when we say, “Anyone can teach this stuff.” It means no qualifications have been met, no preparation has been made, no training has been offered, because anyone can teach this stuff. Is there any area of our life where we would tolerate, much less welcome, the practitioner of a craft who has made no preparation, has no training, and holds no qualifications. Why, then, would we want someone to teach the faith to us or our children whose only qualification is that they have been enticed into it by the promise, “Anyone can teach this stuff”?

James writes, “Not many of you should be teachers,” because it is a special calling. It is an exclusive group, and it is not for everyone. Qualifications are needed, preparation is required, training must be engaged in in order to share this story, because this is the singular story that gives us purpose. It describes how God has been active in human events both in the past and how God is active now. It is the story that gives us hope, for it describes the future that God intends. In order to be a Christian you must know this story.

Two weeks ago I offered a session in which I promised to tell the whole story of the Bible in a one-hour meeting. I expected that there might be 10 or 15 people in attendance. I think that we had close to 50! That is an indication of the hunger that we all have, the yearning within us, to know this story and to know it well, the great sweep of God’s inner action with people culminating in the life, the

death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the story that defines us, it corrects us, it inspires us. This is the story that gives us life.

This doesn't mean that our goal here in church is to create experts in Biblical trivia. You can know this story but still be unaffected by it. I have a friend who is something of an agnostic. One day she told me that she had attended Sunday School quite a bit as a child. I said, "Really?" and I guess I said it with too much surprise because then she said, "Oh, yes. I went to Sunday School quite a bit and I was the champion of the sword drill."

The sword drill is a game where the teacher yells out a particular Bible passage, such as "John 3:22," and the students have to open their Bibles as quickly as they can to that particular passage. If you can open directly to that passage and not have to flip through the Bible at all, you are really the champion. Apparently as a child my friend perfected this skill. Unfortunately I don't think she lingered there; I don't think she actually read the words. She didn't learn the story well. And perhaps that is because she did not have a good or a capable teacher to guide her.

The role of the teacher of faith is important, and it is unique. It requires more than someone who can just pick up a book, or open a curriculum package. The teacher of faith must be someone who has been affected by the Christian story themselves. This story has changed them, so they know the power it has to change

others. This means that the preparation differs quite a bit from a teacher of science or literature. In those fields certain knowledge must be learned, certain skills must be acquired, and then the teachers can pass these along to the students. For the teacher of faith, the process demands quite a bit more. They must discover in a given lesson, or in a particular story, not simply who is acting, or what that person said, they must also discern what this story expects of them, how it challenges them and corrects their limited world view. In other words, the teacher of faith knows that every time they prepare to teach there is a chance that they will be transformed, that they will experience a new conversion. They will have to change something that they have been doing, they will have to give up something they've been holding onto; and they may discover a new joy that they had not anticipated before. It has happened to them in the past; they know it will happen to them again, being converted, being transformed by this story. What is true for the teacher is also true for each of us. Whenever we encounter the story of faith, or more precisely when that story encounters us, we will be changed, we will be challenged, and we will be inspired.

That is why we do Christian Education in the church: we want to see transformation. We want lives to be changed and we want it to begin right here. We want deep and passionate commitment to form in the intersection between teacher and student, instruction and learning, gospel shared and life lived.

I've been thinking about some way to illustrate this dynamic, between student and teacher, between the gospel story and the lives it touches. It occurred to me when I was riding on a CTA train. There are all of these warnings in the car which say, "Don't get out of the car under any circumstances." And all these signs that show people getting electrocuted down on the track. So you know it's a dangerous thing to do. But realistically if nothing ever touches that live rail beneath the train, the train will never move, the lights will never come on, the doors will never open. Something has to touch that third rail. This, then, is the role of the teacher. The teacher is willing to reach out and to touch the very power of God and then to connect with the one who needs this power in their life. It's a risky business I must say, but it's also a wonderful thing to see happen as lives are illumined, as lives are changed.

I also believe that is how we might describe the teaching and the ministry of Jesus himself. He never read a page out of user-friendly curriculum. Rather, Jesus took the costly step, the risky step, of bending before those in need of God's love. He touched them, gently, lovingly, movingly, as he also touched the power that is greater than us all. Then their lives were illumined.

I've talked at length now about the role of the teacher, the dedication it requires, the commitment it summons, the hard work that's always a big part of it. One more thing needs to be said, and I'll bet you can guess where I'm going.

There's one more thing that the teacher needs: the teacher needs students, those who are willing to learn. And that of course is where you come in. Will you bring your eagerness for learning? Will you bring it here? Will you bring your desire to grow in the knowledge of God? Will you bring that here too? Will you bring your hunger to have a deeper relationship with God and those around you? Will you bring that hunger here too?

And parents. Will you bring your children? Because our teachers are ready to engage in some dangerous but exciting work. Our leaders have worked hard, and all is prepared.

James says, "Not many of you should become teachers" but all of us should be students, students of God's grace.

Amen.