The Life of a Teacher

Do you remember who your favorite teacher in school was? What was it that makes them stand out in your mind? One of my favorite teachers was Mrs. Prince, my third grade teacher. She wasn’t all that impressive to look at – a small, wiry woman with curly hair beginning to go gray and pointy glasses. But she made a library in our classroom with all kinds of books and brought a microscope for our class to use. She was committed to helping each kid learn as much as they could, and to creating a learning community where each kid helps another. I remember being paired with Dwayne. Dwayne was big and strong, which I was not, but he needed help with reading and I could help with that. If you ask me what I learned that year, I would be hard pressed to tell you specifics. But I know I learned a lot, and I learned as much about how to learn and how to treat others as I learned about multiplication and set theory. And I knew beyond a doubt that Mrs. Prince cared about me and every other kid in the class and wanted us to learn.

Our reading from Isaiah starts today with the words “The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” That phrase “the tongue of a teacher” caught my attention, even though it turns out it’s not the best translation of the Hebrew. What does it mean to have the tongue of a teacher? And is that really the most important part of teaching? Words are where teaching often starts, as a teacher tells a story or imparts a fact or describes a process. But that’s not all it takes to be a teacher.

Jesus was, among other things, a master teacher, and today’s gospel reading is a master class in teaching. He starts by asking a question that is pretty easy to answer to get his students engaged. “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples, like good students, blurt out all the right answers. “John the Baptist.” “Elijah” “A prophet.” Then he moves on to a question that’s a little harder, with a little more emotional freight behind it. “Who do you say that I am?” Dead silence. No one wants to be first. Then Peter, always wanting to be the star pupil, pipes up. “You are the Messiah.” “Good answer,Simon!”, Jesus says. “God must have told you that one!” You can almost see Simon Peter doing the dance. “Oh yeah, I got it! Uh-huh!” Peter and the other disciples think the lesson for the day is over. But it’s then, Mark tells us, Jesus really begins to teach.

He gives them the information part of the lesson, how he will suffer, and be rejected by all the authorities and be killed, and after three days, rise. To us, that sounds like a part of the story we all know. To those who were hearing him, it was a total reversal of everything they had ever believed about the Messiah. In saying what he did, Jesus wasn’t just predicting the future. He was also reinterpreting what it meant to be the Messiah, drawing not on the passages of Hebrew scripture that described the Messiah as a glorious heavenly king who would restore Israel’s glory days, but on a different set of scriptures all together, scriptures like the one we read today about God’s servant, who would be rejected, beaten and mocked. The best teachers show us how to understand things in a new way.

But Peter, puffed up from his previous right answer, tries to set the record right. That’s not what he’s always been taught. The right answer in his school was that the Messiah would come as a victorious warrior, a glorious king. Jesus is having none of it. “Get behind me, tempter!” he says. He knows he’s right.

His teaching continues and gets closer to home. It’s no longer about what others say about some distant Messiah. It’s not even just about what Jesus knows and teaches about himself. Now it’s about how those who follow him should lead their lives.  ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” You can imagine some uncomfortable rustling in their seats from the disciples. They want to follow Jesus as long as he’s on a winning road, they’re even willing to follow him as the going gets tough. But all the way to the cross? That might be a step too far.

Thus ends Jesus’ lesson for the day. But it doesn’t end his teaching. Some of you will be familiar with this pyramid. It represents the retention rates of different modes of learning. It’s not perfect, and it’s been debated, but it’s more or less true. Just sitting and listening to someone is the least effective form of learning. Reinforcing it with an audio-visual, as I am now, increases what you retain. Discussing it moves what you are learning even farther into the realm of what you know and understand. It’s when it gets to the level of practicing it and teaching it to others that a learning really becomes yours.

That is as true of Christian discipleship as it is of any other area of learning.

So Jesus left off his formal lesson on that day in Caesarea Philippi, but he didn’t stop his teaching. His teaching went on for the rest of his life, as he ate meals with all kinds of people, as he welcomed children and women, as he reached across boundaries to heal lepers and Gentiles. He taught as he sent his disciples out on mission trips and listened when they came back. It went on in that last week of his life, as he continued to teach in the temple, but also as he stood in silence before Pilate and Herod, and as he went to the cross. He taught them not only what it means to be the Messiah, but to be a servant-leader, living your life in self-giving love. It’s not only the tongue of a teacher that makes the difference, but the life of the teacher as well.

I learned that from some of my professors at seminary. These were men -they were mostly men in those days – who were absolutely brilliant, among the best in their field. Dr. Dowie, who was the primary author of the Confession of 1967 was one of them, Bruce Metzger, the primary editor of the translation of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was another. But what struck me about these professors was not their exalted standing, but their faith, a faith they lived out with commitment to their Lord, caring for the students in their community, and most of all their humility in the vocation to which they had been called. The one who did it best was Dr. Story, who taught the intensive beginning Hebrew and Greek language courses, some of the most difficult classes at the seminary. He was slight and unassuming. He didn’t have the academic resume of some of his colleagues. But no one who had him ever forgot him for the way he had of lifting up struggling students, for doing whatever it would take to help them succeed, for gently sharing his faith as he opened the scriptures to us in a new way, for offering us and many others the hospitality of his home when we needed a place of rest and comfort. He embodied what he taught. He lived the life of a teacher.

Some of you are teachers by profession. Others run in fear at the very thought of teaching. But in our lives as disciples of Christ, we are all called to be teachers, not with our words alone, but as Jesus taught us, with our lives. I think of those disciples all those years ago who actually got to follow Jesus around up and down around the hills of Galilee and to Jerusalem and heard what Jesus taught and practiced sharing the gospel under his guidance. They stumbled and made mistakes. That’s how they learned. But then, in the days after Pentecost, they became the teachers, not only as they preached the new gospel of Jesus Christ, but as they showed by their lives – and for some of them, by their deaths – how Jesus taught them to live. Here, in the church, is where we get a lot of our practice teaching the way of Jesus. That means sometimes we do make mistakes and fall short as we learn. Then as we practice and get better at it, we become teachers, sometimes formally, more often not. You are the book by which many people learn what Christian life is like.

So day by day, we learn and we teach. God gives us the tongue of a teacher. As Isaiah says, “morning by morning, he wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.” Then, having learned from God’s word, from the life of our Lord, from those who by their lives have showed us the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, we become the teachers ourselves. May each one of you be blessed as you live the life of a teacher in the way of Jesus Christ.