

Teaching With Power

Teaching and Teachers are Important

Teachers and teaching have been with us since the world began. Early humans taught their children how to survive — how to hunt, to plant and harvest, to provide shelter and protection, how to raise a family. Parents - whether we acknowledge it or not - are still the primary teachers of children. Without a good education, and good teaching, life is very hard.

From its inception, this country has placed high value on education. It is the law: children must attend school. I recall a wall-sized poster that hung in the entry of the Junior H.S. I attended. It said, "Education is the foundation of democracy." It is the uninformed and unlettered who can easily be manipulated by politicians; while well-informed people, who have learned how to learn, can better govern themselves. Good learning is essential and it depends on good teaching.

So what possible relevance does Jesus, a somewhat archaic Galilean teacher some 2,000 years ago, have for us today? Years ago his hearers were amazed at what he had to say and remarked that he taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes and Pharisees – the ones who were generally regarded as the good teachers. Even amidst the avalanche of information today and the plethora of educational institutions and teachers, I believe his teaching still has the ring of authority about it.

The Best Teachers Can Relate to Real Life

You may remember the old definition of a lecture as the process wherein the information in the professor's notes is transferred to the student's notebooks without going through the minds of either! That's what happens when teaching is simply commentary. If we're not careful, we who teach can become, like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, mere technicians of information. He loved people and wanted to help them, so he spoke as plainly as possible. Jesus used simple stories from everyday experience to illustrate the deepest truths. He was more concerned for the message of the Kingdom than for his reputation. He went out into the countryside, marketplaces and synagogues, where real people lived, to share his wisdom. No wonder, then, that "the common people heard him gladly."

When Jesus speaks, you know he is sincere, and not just mouthing the party line. He asks us to join him in doing likewise. Parents don't we know that our children will follow what we do and who we are, before they follow what we say? As one of our members said, "Kids have a keen b. s. radar." Likewise, our neighbors are hungry for a glimpse of God - and they are looking for evidence of God in our lives. They want to see that we practice what we profess. Most of us are afraid to talk to a friend, co-worker, or neighbor about what God has done in our lives. We're afraid because we don't think we have the words or the knowledge. But that's not so. Your witness is most powerful when you put it into words that you and others can understand; words that have real connection to your living.

The difficult questions of life are not satisfied by textbook answers, but by your experience and testimony. Jesus took the risk, entered into the situation, and spoke to the present need. So can we. Jesus' teaching called for commitment, not just comment; still does. Talk is one thing, but commitment to the subject matter of the talk is quite another. Each believer here today is teaching something to their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers by their words and lifestyle. Our lessons will have meaning when we say this is how it is put into practice, or here is where I stake my life. Jesus bet his life on his teachings; so do his followers. [Like Martin Luther, we can say, "Here I stand. I can do no other!"]

Deeds Teach as Much as Words

Those of you who are teachers know this old saying, “The student still remembers the teacher, long after he or she has forgotten the lesson.” It is true. In addition to information, the teacher imparts his or her character and conviction. The good teacher makes connection with students and brings them to a point where they can see for themselves how the information makes a difference in living.

Jesus’ teaching had authority because he regarded his hearers with concern and sought to do something with and for them. I am reminded of a cartoon I once saw. The first panel of the cartoon showed a professor lecturing to a full classroom. The next picture shows a classroom full of students, but no professor. In his place was a tape recorder, giving his words of wisdom for the day. In the next panel, the professor’s recorder is again giving out his lecture, but this time in place of a roomful of students, we have a roomful of students’ tape recorders impersonally recording the impersonal lecture! [Imagine how it would be if my sermons were recorded, to be shown here on Sunday, while I went skiing!]

His personal presence and action were an integral part of His teaching. Most rabbis in those days simply taught and students chose to follow them. Jesus was different. He took action to seek out his disciples. Of course, his actions were a reflection of the character of God, who, caring so much for humanity, took the initiative to bring us into relationship with him.

[College and university students of today have suffered considerably from lack of exposure to top-notch teachers who personally care about them. Students often enroll to study under renowned authorities, only to discover they rarely, if ever, see them. They are left with an unknown graduate assistant, or they listen to the outstanding authority along with 600 others in the once-a-week lecture series. There is something to be said for the small, liberal arts college, where students have direct access to their professors. Other scholars show contempt for their learners by being as obscure as possible. They teach in riddles and play games to make learning unnecessarily difficult. Have you met those defensive and insecure professors?]

Jesus taught with authority because He did something with his teaching! He had a cure for the demons, not just consolation. Upon seeing Jesus, the possessed man shrieked, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). Jesus simply named the demon, establishing power over him, and ordered him out of the man. Thus the man was at peace.

What has that to do with us? Let me explain it this way. Some of you will remember that in fifth grade you read a book by William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*. It tells the story of a band of small boys who are the sole survivors of a shipwreck on a remote island. In their effort to survive, they soon develop a society, rather primitive in form. Evil soon becomes an experienced reality. An old decaying pig’s head, surrounded with worms and flies, becomes for them a deity, a god, a “Lord of the Flies,” which being retranslated means “Beelzebub,” the “Prince of Darkness and Decay.”

In their fear and perverted imagination, the stranded boys began to believe the Lord of the Flies was demanding a sacrifice — a sacrifice of one of the boys whom they regarded as a troublemaker, because he was not a believer in their god of the underworld. The boys projected their fears to this boy, who tried to keep a balanced head and common sense.

Thus in their fear and obsession, they start their hunt for the boy to sacrifice him to their demon-god. The frightening chase finally leads out to the beach. Running for his life, and losing, this poor boy runs abruptly into a strong, clean, well-built man. The rescue party had arrived, and the demons were halted. By the authority of sanity and civilization, the demons were repelled, and the demonized boy was saved, as were the other boys.

Humankind, living on this space island, has done its share of sacrificing to demons — the demons of war, hate, revenge, perverted sex, unbridled lust for power, uncontrolled greed, distorted ambition, just everyday narcissism. Like that boy in the story, many of us have been running desperately along the beaches of the world, hoping against hope for the arrival of a rescue party.

Christians can announce that that rescue party has arrived in the person Jesus. Balanced, integrated, imbued with power, he brings peace out of our demonic frenzy. He casts out the demons, calling them by name — fear, guilt, envy, jealousy, lust, negativism, slander, deceit, revenge, and greed. Uncontrolled, these demons will destroy life on this beautiful island in space. Other teachings may have authority, but not the authority of Jesus' new teaching. Other intellectual disciplines give us self-knowledge. But the more clearly we see ourselves, says Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier. the more we realize our powerlessness to realize our true aspirations. "Then it is no longer of healing alone that man stands in need, but of salvation; of the assurance that the world and he have been redeemed," says Tournier.¹ Jesus brings that salvation, wholeness, health, and fulfillment. The reason is clear, because it's not just his teaching he brings, but himself as well. It's a beautiful thing when someone gladly receives Christ. The personal demons get cast out and a new man or woman can join Him in making a new world. His teaching has authority because He teaches with commitment, not just comment; concern, not contempt; cure, not just consolation. He's the real thing.

Word and Deed Come Together in Holy Communion

Jesus left us this Sacrament, that is both word and sign, for the very reason that our teaching must be in our living and our living must be in our teaching. In Holy Communion real bread and real juice combine with our prayers to bring Him to be among us, living with us, encouraging us to proclaim Him and live in Him. So receive Him, so that through him our teaching can be genuine because we live it.

¹Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1957), 110-111.