

Trusting God and Ministering to All People as Christ Teaches Us in the Gospel

"As Christ Teaches Us"

The Third of Four Sermons on our Church Mission Statement

Deteronomy 4:1, 5-14

Luke 16:1-13

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

September 22, 2013

I suspect most of us have our minds made up on most things by now, however old we are. Chocolate or vanilla ice cream? You know what you like. Pepperoni or plain cheese on your pizza? You know where you stand. The Republicans in our midst will likely still be voting Republican a year from now. And the Democrats? You can count on it.

I dont think you sit around wondering whether you like Country Music, Beyonce or Bach. I suspect you know. Likewise, you know whether you're a Yankees or a Mets fan. Or something else. (I grew up in Chicago so I still root for the Cubs. Don't laugh.)

Leno or Letterman? Over easy or sunny side up? Original recipe or extra crispy? And whether the loose sheet of toilet paper should present itself nicely over the top of the roll, or whether it should be allowed to slide down behind the back of the roll along the wall in a most annoying fashion... We have our opinions, most of us, on all manner of things large and small! And the majority of our opinions aren't open for negotiation.

What does it mean, then, for us to call Christ our *teacher*? We say that our mission at Bloomfieod Presbyterian Church on the Green is "trusting God and ministering to all people as Christ teaches us..." And I wonder, are those four words, "as Christ teaches us," just throwaway words? Or is Christ, in fact, teaching us? Are our opinions and attitudes, in fact, open for negotiation? If Christ is teaching us, are we then doing the hard work--the soul work--of learning?

Read the Gospels, read especially the parables of Jesus, including today's puzzling parable of the unjust steward, and there is no doubt that Jesus *was* a great teacher. Even outside of the church Jesus is acknowledged and hailed for the great teacher that he was.

But our claim about Jesus is greater. We don't just say that he *was* a great teacher. We say--we believe--that he *is* teaching us. He is still teaching us.

Our Presbyterian tradition holds that Christ Jesus teaches us through Word and Sacrament. We also believe that he teaches us through experience, through community, through service & stewardship, through prayer and the arts, and through every field of inquiry that academia has to offer.

Moreover, we believe that he teaches us personally. It's as if each one of us is doing an independent study with Jesus. We learn at our own pace. He isn't standing before a cosmic lecture hall dispensing information. He is teaching us in the field, as it were. Engaging us with new learnings as we are able to consider them. In hospital terms, he is the attending, doing rounds with the interns, showing and telling the interns what do in the situations that present themselves.

If it is true that Christ is still teaching us, and I believe it IS true, then our job is to do what every good schoolteacher asks of her or his students every day. If Christ is teaching us then our job is to show up ready to learn. Even Jesus can't teach unwilling learners.

If we're Christians, then we're learners. [Make sign of letter L on forehead]. Go ahead. Let me see your letter L. Christ is teaching you. Are you letting him rock your world? Are you willing to unroll your opinions and spread out your feelings before him, putting them out there on the table, so to speak, so that he can rearrange things according to his wisdom?

Are you willing to walk in this door on a Sunday thinking one thing and walk out this door an hour later with your mind changed? Because that's what teaching is. Changing minds. That's what learning is: a changed mind.

Every good teacher remains alert during her lessons for what educators call the "learnable moment." Lesson plans with goals, indicators, objectives and learning activities are well and good--they are the backbone of education--but the heart of education takes place in those unanticipated learnable moments when a child's question leads to a spirited classroom debate, or a collective "aha..." Suddenly that drab and dreary chapter in the history book shakes itself off and speaks--actually speaks--to the students and their concerns. The lesson plan, objectives, and activities go out the window while learning of the highest order happens.

How do adults learn? Can we... learn what Christ would like to teach us?

I read an article on the NY Times a year and a half or so ago about how big box stores like Target go about trying to influence people to change their shopping habits. These stores recognize that it is difficult to change people's loyalties and routines when it comes to shopping. The exception to this rule is in times of great change, and the holy grail as far as these retailers are concerned is when there is a new baby in the family. Suddenly life is upended, new products are needed, and everyone is sleep deprived. A learnable moment presents itself for the savvy marketer who sends diaper coupons in the mail and waits for the sound of the cash register to go, "*Kaching!*"

In the article I read, Target wanted to beat the other box stores to win this coveted category of consumer, so they set about trying to figure out if they could determine, from purchasing patterns, when a woman was three months pregnant. The second trimester,

the golden trimester, is when the nesting instinct sends us out to buy changing tables and diaper genies and such things. Target discovered that the best indicator of early pregnancy was the purchase of pre-natal vitamins. Whoever bought prenatal vitamins in September, for example, would start receiving ads and coupons for baby necessities in December. (Sometimes to the surprise and chagrin of certain people who hadn't yet told certain other people about the pregnancy!)

My point is that times of transition--even times of crisis--can double as learnable moments for us.

Today's OT reading from Deuteronomy found the Israelites preparing to enter the Promised Land. And it was precisely at this point of transition that the topic of teaching and learning is emphasized. "So now Israel," says Moses, "give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe..." (Deut. 4:1). And "make them known to your children's children" (Deut. 4:9b). Everything is about to change for the Israelites after wandering 40 years in the wilderness. It's the perfect time for Moses to do some teaching.

In Jesus' parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16, it is a crisis that creates the learnable moment. A steward cheats his master. The master finds out and demands an accounting. This is the crisis. The steward recognizes just how bad things have gotten and can see the direction this is going. He will end up in the dungeon or worse. So he acts shrewdly to change the direction of things. He revises the books, again, this time in favor of the master's debtors. This earns the master great popularity and so the steward gets a second chance.

Transitions. Crises. More often than not, these go hand in hand with learning. A car accident on a desert road in Jordan took my parents' lives in 1994 and from that trauma I am still learning from Christ about hope in the face of suffering. What have you learned, and what are you still working on learning, from the crisis moments in your life? Or from the transitions?

Transition is happening in and around us here at the Church on the Green. After a period of great uncertainty, the church is still settling in to a new chapter with a new leader (yours truly). The town is changing around us, rather quickly, and society at large is trending farther and farther away from institutional churches.

President Obama's former chief of staff, Rahm Emmanuel, is known for saying "never waste a good crisis." To paraphrase Rahm, let's not waste a good transition! What are we learning? What can we learn? What is Christ teaching us at this juncture in human history, on this corner of the town green? Are we willing to put our opinions on the table, and next to them, our feelings and thoughts, and invite Christ Jesus to teach us, to rearrange what we thought knew, and reprioritize what we thought we wanted, according to his wisdom?

What direction is our story heading? Can we--must we--act shrewdly to change the direction of things? Do we have the courage to learn?

One thing I have said throughout my ministry in various churches is:

Everything the church does teaches. Everything the church does teaches something.

How we worship--the way we sing (and I must say we sing very well as a congregation)--these things teach. They communicate something about who we are and how joyful we feel to belong to God in Christ Jesus.

The way we serve the community teaches. The way we visit our elderly and homebound members teaches. The way we conduct our business around town, and with our contractors, and our flea market vendors and our 12-step group members, all of this teaches. The public face of our buildings and how we spend our money and what we say or do not say regarding the pressing issues of our day--all of these teach.

Everything the church does teaches something, so let us be intentional about what we do. Let us make sure that we don't talk more about the trusses and the ombudsman than we do about serving Jesus Christ in a hurting world. Let us make sure that every action and interaction communicates what we are trying to say about who we are, a community of learners. A community of sinners loved by Christ and still learning what that means.

Let us be a church that says in word and in deed, "come, learn with us. Come learn with us what it means to serve Jesus Christ in a rapidly changing world."

You see, he is teaching us. And we are learning to learn.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling, Pastor

