

## A SERMON FOR GRACE CHURCH SCHOOL SUNDAY

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Students can help me out here. Every student knows what happens in a class when you get to the end of a quarter or semester or the end of a big section in a book. That's it. A test.

Every year Christians and Jews go through a cycle of readings on the Sabbath or Sunday, and, when they come to the end of the cycle, they naturally turn to thoughts of the final exam: in theological terms the last judgment. That is where we are today in the cycles of most Christian Churches.

The readings for this last Sunday of the Church's annual cycle share a theme, which has a lot to do with sheep. "We are his people and the sheep of his pasture," says Psalm 100. In the first reading, Ezekiel presents the Lord God as finally assuming the role of shepherd himself out of exasperation with the earthly shepherds who have served themselves instead of their flocks, and, like a caring shepherd, seeking out the lost and neglected sheep and bringing them to safe pasture. God rescues them. But, he also judges them: punishing the fat sheep who have bullied the lean sheep.

"Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep." There will be an accounting for shepherds and for sheep. "I will feed them (the fat sheep) with justice."

In the reading from Matthew, a chapter where many of Jesus' sayings about the end of time and the day of reckoning are gathered, the sheep are back – this time representing those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited the imprisoned. The bad guys are the goats.

Whether or not one chooses to take the idea of the last judgment literally, one can still appreciate the practical effect of such a teaching; everything, no matter how small, matters. 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

I think I could make a sermon that would connect the work of a school with the metaphor of sheep and shepherds. A teacher is sometimes like a shepherd, and students do at times resemble a flock of sheep. Whenever I have observed the early childhood teachers moving their flock from the kindergartens down to feed in the dining room, I have often thought that the school could profitably invest in some gentle sheep dogs. And I think I might adopt one line from Ezekiel for my motto as an eighth grade homeroom teacher: "I will judge between sheep and sheep."

But I want to spend the balance of my time talking about the story of Philip and the Ethiopian court official, because I thought it had something important to say about teaching.

Here is Philip, a minister newly ordained by the infant Christian community heading south to spread the word, the gospel of Jesus, and he meets an Ethiopian reading aloud to himself from the prophet Isaiah. He happens to be reading a passage that was key to the first Christians'

understanding of a crucified Messiah. But when Philip inquires whether he understands what he is reading, the Eunuch responds, “How can I unless someone guides me?” The book is not enough by itself. A living teacher is required. Saint Augustine comments beautifully on this passage.

“And we know that the eunuch who was reading Isaiah the prophet, and did not understand what he read, was not sent by the apostle to an angel, nor was it an angel who explained what he did not understand, nor was he inwardly illuminated by the grace of God without the interposition of man; on the contrary, at the suggestion of God, Philip, who did understand the prophet, came to him and sat with him, and in human words, and with a human tongue opened to him the scriptures.” (Preface to *De Doctrina Christiana*)

In the scripture, Philip has an amazingly successful lesson. He converts the already well-disposed eunuch on the spot, baptizes him, and moves on to his next class. To translate that story into something that provides more parallels to the teaching situations I know, one would have to imagine not one eunuch, but at least twenty. A third would have forgotten their scrolls. Another third would have to go to the bathroom in mid-lesson. Some would be distracted by looking at the scenery, or talking to their neighbors, and the fire drill would start just as the teacher was making the main point.

I can sense the New Testament scholars coming up behind me as I say this to tap me on the shoulder and say, “Sam, you can’t monkey this way with New Testament stories. They are not always literal descriptions, but well polished stories, stripped down, and trimmed to make a single point and placed to serve an over-riding scheme: in this case perhaps to illustrate the author, Luke’s theme of the successful spread of the Christian message.

But I plead with them to let me continue a bit longer, for I think my point is faithful to the sense of scripture.

In this more complicated situation, Philip might well be tempted to look for a way to communicate his message that would cause him less stress: send them back to study the scrolls for homework, and threaten a quiz tomorrow. Or perhaps, thinking like St. Augustine, ask, “Why not send an angel to convey the message?” or, “Why don’t you, God, implant the truth directly?” A modern, secular form of these thoughts might be, “There must be a video or an “app” that can do this.” Or, more radically, “Maybe we could simply implant a chip in their brains.”

Many years ago, when I first discovered that not all seventh and eighth graders were eager to master five declensions of Latin nouns and four conjugations of Latin verbs and all the rules of Latin grammar, I decided to undercut their ability to distract and disrupt a class by, in effect, eliminating the class. I broke the curriculum down into modules, and gave them to the students to work on individually and at their own pace. They had to complete a certain number each quarter in order to pass; the greater the number the higher the grade; and my role was to sit at my desk and be in turn a mentor and an examiner.

It was a complete failure. Gone was the theater of the classroom, the tug of war between students and teacher, the drama of personal interaction. They hated it. And, despite my relative freedom from the responsibility of shepherding a whole flock at once through the curriculum, so did I. It was no fun. There is a temptation in the face of the challenge of engaging every person in learning to substitute something impersonal: to think that a book, or a module, or some newer technology can replace the teacher. I gave in to that temptation.

There was a New Yorker cartoon quite a few years ago that showed a college lecture hall. On the lectern, instead of a professor, there was a tape recorder. In the students seats around the hall, were, of course, another hundred tape recorders, taping the taped lecture.

I am not suggesting that technology is bad or unhelpful. There would have been no scroll of Isaiah if some Steve Jobs in the seventeenth century BC hadn't invented the alphabet and replaced the clunky writing systems of Egyptians and Babylonians with one that made words easy to preserve, portable, and accessible to the many. Technology is helpful, but not sufficient. "How can I understand unless someone guides me?"

There was an article in the NY Times recently (Oct.10) reporting on studies relating to bilingualism in babies. In one experiment, infants in English speaking families between six and twelve months, a period critical to their ability to distinguish the sounds characteristic of each language, were exposed to twelve extended sessions of play with native Mandarin speakers. At the end of the experiment they were as good as Taiwanese infants of the same age at distinguishing the sounds of Mandarin. A control group of infants were given the same amount of exposure to Mandarin by means of audio and video tapes. They were no better at twelve months at distinguishing the sounds of Mandarin than those who received no exposure at all. It is our very nature to learn from each other. Teaching and learning is personal.

And so we have a school. Teaching is done in community, face to face, voice to ear, person to person. It is never a one-way transaction; every teacher knows that we learn as much from our students as we impart. In what is to us, perhaps, merely a fact of human psychology, St. Augustine saw the hand of the creator affording us an opportunity to love one another by teaching. Calvin picks up this point and says," Charity. . .would have no scope for pouring minds and hearts together. . .and blending them with one another if human beings were never to learn anything from each other."

The most cherished of the biblical descriptions of love is probably that found in the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I Cor. 13

In my years of teaching, very many here at this school, have seen a lot of patience, kindness and humility. I have seen rejoicing in the truth, and hope and perseverance in the face of the many challenges that confront teachers and learners every day. There has been abundant evidence supporting the idea that learning from each other affords an opportunity for love.

For Judaism and Christianity the idea that teaching is ultimately personal has a special resonance. In these traditions, God condescends to speak through human teachers: Moses, the prophets, and, in the season Christians are about to celebrate, Advent, believers are invited to contemplate the mystery of the incarnation. Emmanuel, "God with us."

In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. The Word was God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." God be with you.