

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 3/9/08
Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:1-9, Matthew 22:34-40

“Faith Caught, Faith Taught”

From the text: first in Deuteronomy: “...do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.” And from Matthew: “One of [the Pharisees], an expert in the law, tested [Jesus]: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest [of God’s] commandment[s]?’”

Let’s begin our sermon this morning in a bit of quiet reflection. Picture right now in your mind’s eye a person who was an important spiritual teacher in your life, a teacher. A man or a woman who by what they said, or by how they lived, taught you something that helped shape you in the faith: morally, ethically, spiritually. They were a mentor and guide. A coach or pastor or friend, a parent or youth minister or Sunday School teacher. They taught you life lessons, moral truths, gave you wise counsel. They helped shape you into the child of God you are this day....OK: do you remember that teacher? They set your soul on fire and inspired you. Made you want to become more than you were and even revealed to you a bit of God right here on earth.

To teach: As Henry Brooks Adams said, “A [great] teacher affects eternity; she can never tell where her influence stops.” Last week in our Lenten preaching series on ritual we examined walking the walk of faith, faith in action, doing faith. But here’s an easily overlooked truth: before any of us had faith, someone had to teach us about faith. Someone showed us how to put our hands together and pray to God. Someone opened the Bible and introduced us to Jesus. Someone got us up on Sunday mornings and brought us to church. Someone saw us struggling morally and gently showed us the right thing to do. Someone listened to our questions of faith and empowered us to not be afraid of asking “Why?” Someone saw us wrestling with an addiction or grieving over a life loss and showed us the way to recovery and redemption. Someone brought us to a soup kitchen to serve or a Habitat worksite to build. Someone taught us.

So today, with apologies to David Letterman, I’d like to offer a “Top Ten” list of why teaching is central to our faith in Jesus Christ and to just being human.

Number 10: Before Jesus was prophet or Lord or miracle worker or shepherd, he was a teacher. That’s the Hebrew title his apostles used for him more than 40 times in the four gospels: “Rabboni”, rabbi, teacher. As in, “Teacher—which is the greatest of God’s commandments?” Jesus with Mary at his feet, teaching her about God. Jesus: teaching a sermon on the mount to hundreds. A teenage Jesus debating his elders in the Temple. Jesus as a storyteller: “There once was a man with two sons.....” The smart as a whip Jesus debating the Pharisees. Want a good teaching role model? Remember Jesus.

Number 9: When we teach, we learn. We remember why we love a subject, why it still matters to us. Last Sunday at my installation, the preacher was a young woman named Abby, whom I mentored along with four other new clergy, in a small group for three

years. I loved being with those new pastors. They showed that even after almost twenty years of ordained ministry this old dog could lean new tricks. They kept me on my toes. They called me out when I sounded like a dusty old man. They reminded me of my love for the church and being a pastor. Want to get excited again? Then teach, especially someone who needs a mentor!

Number 8: Teaching is fun! Tonight I and Francisco Stork and Jane Raithel will teach 18 eighth grade confirmands about Jesus. Eighteen junior high boys and girls: some say—how can you do it? I've taught and ministered to youth for almost 25 years and I still love it! Youth and their energy and passion for life, their newness, their innocence and mischievousness. It's never boring! So: have some fun and teach church school, be a youth group advisor. Teach: a classroom full of tender toddlers, questioning fourth graders, budding high schoolers. Thank God for their joy!

Number 7: The Christian faith is always just one generation removed from extinction. Again: our Christian faith is always just one generation removed from extinction. Faith is only transmitted from elders to children, from then to now, from today to tomorrow if and when the story is told and told well. That is our shared responsibility as church members and as baptized Christians. If we don't talk about Jesus, remember him, his memory, his legacy, he dies. Faith is not magically transmuted to those who are yet to come: faith always is taught.

Number 6: we teach those around us about faith, whether we think we do or not. The gospel is more than words—it is a lifestyle. Folks come to God when they see others live in God. Do we want our kids to be good? Then we've got to be good. Want them to go to church? We've got to go to church. The young and the new in faith learn as much by what we do, even more, than by what we say. Every parent knows this. Kids are like a sponge that soaks up everything they see us do and say. We always teach of God by who we are in God—so by our lives, what are we teaching to others this day?

Number 5: teaching matters because in our United Church of Christ tradition God doesn't ask us to check our brains at the door when we come to church. Blind faith is just that: blind: to intellect, to science, to doubt, to our very human curiosity. Too many faiths ask their believers to close their minds when it comes to God. Not the UCC. Here we honor both the answers and the questions.

Number 4: we teach of God because the world needs God. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Is there anywhere in this often broken world—Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Africa, in our homes, in our nation, in our hearts—that is not in desperate need of this simple lesson? When we are silent about our faith, that faith may not live. When we talk of God, God lives.

Number 3: someone, a very special teacher, opened us up to God. Pastor Ken. Our Mom or Dad. A church camp counselor. A loving church school teacher. Now my friends, it is our turn. Since we were taught, God now asks us to teach. There's no free pass in the march of faith: all of us are lifelong students and all of us are lifelong teachers. None of

us got to where we are in this life without being shown the way by good and loving teachers. Now it is our call to be good teachers too.

Number 2: faith at times may be personal but it is never ever private, or hidden, or secret, or invisible. Faith in God really only matters when it is lived out, shown out, and shared outwards. Teaching forces us to put flesh and bone to the idea of faith and then to give that to another. As the cliché goes, “If faith were a crime, could you be convicted?” Teaching convicts us in the faith of Christ.

And the number 1 reason the ritual of teaching our faith is important... (I really need a drum roll here!): teaching always happens in relationship, in community, all together. It’s tempting to look at the educational ministry that happens at Pilgrim Church: in Church School, in Youth Groups, in Confirmation, in Bible Study and Adult Education then imagine, well that’s up to the pros, to the staff, John, Jane, Cory, Joan, Susan. That’s false. The teaching ministry of the church is the ministry of the whole church. Teaching is always a corporate responsibility. We will rise or fall as a church not based on how big our budget is but instead on how actively involved every one of us is in the life of this special place. Church education is never a spectator sport. God needs all of us to be students and teachers, mentors and rookies, guides and travelers on the road of faith.

So: may our teaching God teach us to be teachers of the faith. Let all the people say, “Amen!”