

“Teach Them Well”

A sermon preached by W. Dale Osborne on August 31, 2008

Lectionary Texts: Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-26

Monday is Labor Day, when America stops as much as it can to honor those who labor for a living. While there are many who could be honored on this day, I have chosen to focus on those who labor in the field of education. Like many others in various labor fields, they are not compensated nearly well enough for their sacrificial efforts in bringing education to millions of students.

There is a hauntingly poignant song from the musical “South Pacific” that deals with a way that teaching can be used for evil purposes. When Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the lyrics to this song in 1949, they were nearly run out of town by people in power who thought the lyrics promoted Communism. The playwrights were actually trying to promote compassion and tolerance among people of different races and ethnicities. When I had the good fortune to play a character in this musical in my high school’s 1977 production of “South Pacific”, I remember being angered by the lyrics. I also remember being saddened because the lyrics hit home for me when I carefully considered some of the teachings I had received in the 1960s and 70s. How many of you know the song, “You’ve Got To Be Carefully Taught” from South Pacific? Sing it with me if you remember the words ...

You've got to be taught To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught From year to year,
It's got to be drummed In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!
You've got to be carefully taught.

In today’s sermon, we will briefly examine three positive teachers and three fundamentally sound teachings found in our lectionary texts. First, we will look at the lyrical teachings from the poet in Psalm 26. Next we will lift up the philosophical and practical life guidelines offered by the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Rome. Finally, we will attempt to grasp the life-altering teachings of the prophetic Jesus as he is recorded in Matthew’s gospel. As we consider all three, I hope you will consider yourself as both a student and a teacher within the texts. I also

hope you will allow your mind to drift to the memories you hold dear concerning a teacher or a student who meant something special to you in your lifetime.

We begin with the poet who crafted the lines of Psalm 26. When I read this text and tried to absorb it as a teaching lesson from a poet to a student, I could not help but think of the wonderful American poet Maya Angelou who has taught for many years at Wake Forest University. What a great perspective it must be to be taught by a deeply poetic person whose heart is full of lyrical convictions. Because of the constraints of time, I will only lift up two verses from this psalm. They read, “Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you. I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.”

Most of the children in our congregation have started back to school recently. Some are in elementary, some in middle and some in high school. So children and youth, have any of you had a test or a quiz yet in school? Well, I hope you all scored well and felt prepared for the questions or problems you faced in the test. The poet in today’s psalm asks God to try him and test him as a human being. He wants God to try and test his heart and his mind. When you are in your academic school classrooms it is easy to understand that your mind is being tested. But do you understand that your heart is being tested as well? Can you imagine any way that your heart is being tested and you are being challenged to prove yourself each and every day in school? Think about it: have you ever been tempted to cheat or to lie in school because you wanted to get a good grade on a test? These are the times, among many others, when you have to look deep inside yourself and find that place of integrity, honesty and strength so that you can answer that temptation with a firm “No!” No, I do not need to cheat. No, I do not need to lie. No, I do not need to associate with people who cheat and lie in the school.

The poet said, “God, your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you. I do not sit with the worthless nor do I hang out with hypocrites. I despise the company of evil people and I will not sit with the wicked.” There are many opportunities for you to sit with evil or sit with wicked activities in your school. If someone is trash-talking another race or type of people, you do not have to sit with that. If people are talking up the great way that alcohol or drugs makes them feel in the lunchroom conversations, you do not have to sit with that! If a student tries to convince you to give them the questions from a recent test or quiz, you do not have to sit with that! You can take to heart the words of this ancient poet who encourages us to be strong in the face of adversity. Let the poet be your teacher when you are poised at the precipice of painful choices. Keep the love of God in your mind’s eye as you struggle with the significant choices a student must make.

Now let us move from the Old Testament poet to the New Testament philosopher teacher - Paul the Apostle. Paul studied the wisdom of Jesus and tried his best to impart gospel wisdom to fledgling churches throughout his known world. In today’s reading, Paul has penned an extremely thoughtful letter to the new church at Rome. Nearly 2000 years ago he taught them a correspondence course lesson in a philosophy of practical living that reminds us how truly powerful a teacher can be. Hear some of his words again and may they be absorbed into the collective consciousness of this congregation as we move towards the celebration of our 50th anniversary.

Let love be genuine; love one another with mutual affection. Be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality to strangers. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What a beautifully powerful lesson Paul is trying to deliver. You can tell by his phrasing and his emphasis that he cares deeply for the people he is teaching. Even though they are many miles away from him, Paul has great compassion for this little church in Rome. His teaching is filled with wise interpretations of how Paul believed God wants us to treat one another.

Next week at Binkley we will begin our new Church School year. Students from infancy to late adulthood will gather in the sanctuary and in classrooms to begin anew the formation of relationships and the development of greater knowledge concerning the Bible and their faith. The students will gather metaphorically and literally at the feet of servants who have chosen to be Church School teachers at Binkley. You all will have the chance to teach like Paul as you prepare class plans and offer up artistic and soul-searching lessons for your students. Thank you for taking on this incredibly valuable role in our church family. Thank you for extending hospitality to strangers who may grace your classroom door. Thank you for persevering in prayer as you lift up your students and seek God's blessings for your class. Thank you for letting love be genuine when you take the time to pour over a scripture text and let God speak to you through its words. Thank you for teaching like Paul. Remember always that Paul taught fervently through correspondence courses and face to face interactions with his students because he was ardent in spirit and willing to serve God in any way possible. Keep the lessons from Romans 12: 9-21 in your heart as you prepare to teach your students this year.

We have heard from the teachings of a poet and a philosopher, now we turn to the prophet Jesus, who taught by word and deed during his three year ministry on earth in bodily form. In the lesson from Matthew's gospel accounting Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry. The disciples have been following him faithfully, listening to him preach and assisting him in ministries to the hungry, the broken-hearted and the physically handicapped of the region surrounding the Jordan River. For the most part they have been eager students and capable assistants in spreading a gospel of God's compassionate love for the world. But in this instance, Jesus begins to speak of things to come in the near future. He offers painfully prophetic words that spike the disciples' ears and cause Peter to literally stand up in the classroom and tell his teacher to shut up. Peter's reaction was bold and spontaneous. He did not want to hear that the teacher whom he loved so dearly could be violently mistreated and caused to experience death at the hands of the ruling authorities. Think about your most favorite teacher in the world. Think about that teacher who time and time again poured out her heart and soul to you in an effort to offer you guidance for your life. How would you react if she told you a violent end was coming her way and there was nothing to be done to stop it? You could easily turn into a student like Peter who basically told his beloved teacher to shut up.

But Jesus took Peter's outburst and turned it into a very prophetic teaching opportunity. Reacting to Peter's words Jesus gave his disciples of 2000 years ago and his disciples in this Fellowship Hall today a deliberately strong and mystical lesson. Matthew writes, "...then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'

I must admit that those words have haunted and hounded me for a great portion of my life. That's the kind of teacher Jesus was. He could offer up a lesson that spins around in the hearts and minds of listeners who never even met him face to face. Because he said those words and because they were recorded in the gospel according to Matthew, I and many other followers of Christ like yourselves are tasked with figuring out several key faithful concepts or propositions. Do I want to follow the teachings of Jesus even though those teachings may lead me to forfeit my life for the sake of another person? Am I willing to deny myself, my wants, my perceived needs; am I then willing to determine my own cross to bear, lift it up, whatever the cost and follow Jesus the Christ? Am I willing to struggle hard enough to determine what kind of life I forfeit just because I want to gain the whole world? May God guide us as we seek to be disciples again and again.