

## **Lifelong Learning**

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Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16  
Proverbs 4:7-13  
Luke 18:15-17

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Who were the favorite teachers in your life? Who rubbed together the flints of knowledge for you- science, mathematics, literature, religion, history- and created sparks that ignited the waiting fibers in your mind? It is easy for me to call up the names and faces of my own mentors as I think back through the years:

-Mrs. Sirois, 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies and history teacher and master storyteller: she walked the classroom aisles recounting the political intrigues of English royalty in soap opera style; we couldn't wait to come back for the next installment and find out who King Henry VIII's new wife would be!

-Mr. Roberts, 9<sup>th</sup> grade geometry teacher and high school track coach: he made the logic of theorems a thing of beauty. It was the first time that I found myself enjoying the crisp, commonsense nature of postulates and the way mathematics could diagram and measure the world around me.

-Provost Ed Wilson, beloved administrator at Wake Forest University and teacher of popular poetry courses: it was in his classroom that I came to love the craft of words and the spiritual depth of poems by the likes of T.S. Eliot, William Blake, and Dylan Thomas.

-Dr. Claude Stewart, professor of process theology and theology of nature at Southeastern Baptist Seminary, a gentle genius who was later driven off the faculty after the fundamentalist takeover for his so-called "archliberal" leanings: he first opened my mind to the expansive and exciting world of thinking outside the box, even, and especially in the case of religious and theological studies.

At the beginning of every fall and new school year, I find myself remembering these and many others with appreciation and wistfulness. There is always a pull in my heart toward the classroom, because for me, as for many others, learning is a lifelong venture. Recently, I said farewell with good wishes mixed with some envy to my dear friend Barbara Zelter, who at the ripe age of 58, left the world of work and activism in North Carolina to

begin a seminary degree at Colgate Rochester in New York. She just sent me a wonderful photo of herself standing outside her door on her first day of classes. She is holding an old photo of herself from her first day of Kindergarten some 52 years earlier. Both the earlier and present-day Barbara's are wearing red shoes, eager to begin a new and colorful journey of the mind and spirit.

Today is another day of educational beginnings, one in which we launch out into a new church year of opportunities for learning and spiritual growth. Wisdom and education are important themes throughout Hebrew and Christian history. Although we learn about God in many ways- through nature, music, art, silence, solitude, the lives of others, one primary setting for spiritual teaching has always been within the folds of the community of faith.

Psalm 78, one of the longest in the Psalter, is a teaching psalm, in Hebrew, a *maskil*, which is a didactic poem or song that is recited in the presence of the worshipping community. The author sets out the teaching purpose of this psalm in the very first verse: "Listen, my people, to my teaching, and pay attention to what I say. I am going to use wise saying and explain mysteries from the past, things we have heard and known, things that our ancestors told us. We will not keep them from our children; we will tell the next generation about the Lord's power and great deeds and the wonderful things God has done." (Psalm 78:1-4).

Teaching is not only learning new things, it is also remembering, remembering the past so as to act in the future with wisdom gleaned from the lessons of history. Chris Beers, my former colleague at the NC Council of Churches, wrote a brief commentary on Psalm 78 and points out how this psalm and others like it served the vital liturgical function of teaching youth in ancient Israel what they needed to know about God. Chris writes, "For the ancient Israelites, it is clear that children and young people play a crucial role in society. In each generation, to them is given the task of learning, remembering, and retelling the character of their God." (*Acts of Faith, Resources for Prophetic Worship, Year A, Part 2, North Carolina Council of Churches, 2008, p. 46.*)

One of the primary roles of the church is to continue this important task of spiritual remembering and storytelling, helping our children, youth, and adults retell the character of God. Religious teaching is *maskil*, didactic

poetry, whether the listeners are a circle of children on a Sunday School floor or a group of adults with coffee cups discussing the latest book by Marcus Borg. Preaching is *maskil*, and so are the heart lessons of anthems and hymns. In all these functions, the church community comes together to pass on the goodness of past wisdom, as well as struggle to discern what God is saying now.

This religious teaching is not only for the purpose of reminding us about the character of God, a God of unconditional love and loyalty, but also to lay the groundwork for our response. In a complex world of ecological, social, and political upheaval, violence, poverty, and inequity, our spiritual education can be the springboard for helping us jump back repeatedly into the arena of daily life with the energy and passion to make things better.

In the reading this morning from Luke, Jesus, the one who is called “Rabbi” or “teacher”, rebukes his disciples for scolding those parents who wanted to bring children to Jesus for his blessing. Children may be seen as “the least of these” by some in Jesus’ time and by many in our own times, but it is to the least of these that the Kingdom of Heaven is promised. In fact, Jesus reminds his listeners to reverse roles and let children teach adults how best to receive the spiritual gift of God’s invisible kingdom with openness, humility, and excitement.

In Mark 9 we see another example of Jesus lifting up the importance of the child. As his disciples argue among themselves about who is the greatest, Jesus sits down, takes a child in his arms, and tells them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” and “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

If Jesus calls us to show hospitality to the littlest and least, then we must look critically at our society to see how it treats children, the littlest who often get the least. And on a day like today, when we think about spiritual education, it is also appropriate to consider our public schools and how the church can be involved in ensuring that all children receive the benefit of a good education.

Rev. Molly Shivers, Pastor of Clover Garden United Methodist Church here in Chapel Hill, also serves on the NC Council of Churches’ Task Force on Public Education. She recalls walking to Estes Hills Elementary School on the first day of school and being comforted by the

welcoming smile of her new teacher. Now a parent, she has a different perspective and worries about the children who are getting left behind while adults argue, like Jesus' disciples. She writes,

*I see local school board meetings that rival tabloid television in rhetoric. I see principals and superintendents statewide fight to attract and retain quality teachers. I see the achievement gap continue to widen in a divided Chapel Hill. I see middle schools and high schools consistently hiring security guards. I see funds for music and arts education shrinking. I see overwhelmed special resources and special education teachers. I see the uneasy panacea of end-of-grade testing rule the day while children continue to get left behind. (**Acts of Faith, Resources for Prophetic Worship**, Year B, Part 2, North Carolina Council of Churches, 2006, p. 28.)*

There are many issues relating to public education, but I'd like to highlight three as we consider how churches can help support the littlest and the least. The first is funding. State and federal budgets are moral documents. They show our priorities as a state and a nation. What they say about us and the value that we place on education is not flattering. At the national level, the U.S. allocates most of our tax dollar pie toward military spending. The amount our nation apportions for military expenditures is more than any other country in the world, and in fact, is more than the amount spent by the next 15 countries combined. The Pentagon receives more than half of the discretionary funds in the federal budget, a whopping 463 billion dollars. By contrast, the amount of the federal budget allocated to K-12 education is only 38 billion, 8% of the Pentagon's portion. ([www.cbpp.org/4-14-08tax.htm](http://www.cbpp.org/4-14-08tax.htm), [www.truemajority.org/csba/priorities.php](http://www.truemajority.org/csba/priorities.php))

In North Carolina, our state budget reveals the same trend of inadequate spending on education. In 2006, North Carolina ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> among the states in per capita spending on public schools, and 40<sup>th</sup> in spending per pupil. ("*Education Rhetoric and Education Funding Reality*", Christ Fitzsimon, [www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms](http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms).) This explains why teachers face low pay, inadequate resources, and overcrowded classrooms, which causes nearly a third of new teachers to quit within their first three years ([www.greatpublicschools.org](http://www.greatpublicschools.org)). How can people of faith contribute to a conversation on budget imbalances, the importance of education, and the retention of good teachers?

Another issue that should be a major concern for North Carolinians is the state's high drop-out rate. Over one-third of high school students fail to graduate four years after starting school. Minority students have only a 50-50 chance of graduating from high school on time.

([www.ncjustice.org/media/library/660\\_ncfacts2005.pdf](http://www.ncjustice.org/media/library/660_ncfacts2005.pdf))

I just received a letter this week from the State Board of Education, signed by our own Howard Lee who is the Chairman, which lets churches know that the coming week, September 7-13 has been proclaimed, "Graduation Awareness Week". The letter asks congregations to partner with the Board of Education in strategies that will help improve graduation rates. Churches are urged to consider starting mentoring programs to help students in the local community who do not have caring adults surrounding them. Our friends at Barbee's Chapel have started such an initiative, one which is also designed to help close the achievement gap between white and minority students.

The achievement gap is the final issue I want to mention in the context of the role of the church in public education. Although recent years have seen slight improvements, there is still significant difference in the percentages of white and black students performing below grade level. In 2005, only 12 percent of white students performed below grade level, while 34 percent of black students, one in three, tested below grade level.

([www.ncjusticecenter.org/assets/library/703-ncachievementgapreport.pdf](http://www.ncjusticecenter.org/assets/library/703-ncachievementgapreport.pdf).)

This is a complex problem with tragic consequences. Public education that does not adequately take into account the social, economic, and cultural factors that influence learning, is not serving all children, all the littlest and least. But people of faith should not focus only on what happens in the schools. Substandard housing, lack of adequate health care, poverty, racism, violence, and addiction, these are all contributing strands to a web which holds back many children from succeeding. They are factors which the whole community, including concerned congregations, must address together.

Psalm 78 reminds us that wisdom comes from remembering and retelling the story of the movement of God's spirit among God's people. God "leads us, cares for us, loves us, and teaches us". (*Tom Tate, Acts of Faith, Year A, Part 2, 2008, p. 47*). We are lifelong learners who continue to discern the voice of the God who is still speaking. As the church, we have

the privilege and responsibility to pass on our foundational spiritual stories to the next generation. And as a faith community, we also have Jesus' example to lift up the littlest ones, making sure that every child has an opportunity to learn, both within the church and in our public schools. May we work toward the day when every student can celebrate the first day of school with pride, excitement, and red shoes!