

...And Some of the Words are Theirs

A Reflection for Christian Education Sunday, May 22, 2011

at Binkley Baptist Church

by John Burton-Crutchfield

Gospel Text: John 14:1-14

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

~Norman Maclean

Good Morning! Thank you for being here. I was afraid that I might be alone, given the prediction of one evangelical group that the rapture was to happen yesterday. I hope we haven't missed out on anything....

The quotation at the beginning of the bulletin [and above] is from Norman Maclean's novella, *A River Runs through It* (Maclean 1976, 104). The film adaptation of the story begins something like this, "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.... Our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others.... And though it is true that one day a week was given over wholly to religion, even then, he told us about Christ's disciples being fishermen. And we were left to assume, as my younger brother, Paul, and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly-fisherman" (*River* 1992).

The family lived in Montana at a junction of great trout rivers, and they considered the beautiful nature surrounding the Big Blackfoot to be the their own sacred playground. It was a source of soulful restoration and stirring of the imagination. The Rev. Maclean continues the story, "Long ago rain fell into mud and became rock, half-a-billion years ago. But even before that... beneath the rocks are the Words of God. Listen.' And if Paul and I listened very carefully all our lives, we might hear the words."

Rev. Maclean was a strict teacher, and the boys learned to fly cast "Presbyterian style," with the aid of a metronome. "He began each session with the same instruction, 'Casting is an art performance on a four-count rhythm between 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock.'" His writing instruction was harsh as well, with attention to an economy of words. He would not accept the boys writing assignments until their brevity and clarity met his high standards.

The lessons the boys learned dealt with the importance of discipline and practice. Here discipline led to the art of practice and the possibility of being ready to realize grace – to hear the words beneath the rocks.

This is a family story – a story of community. The boys learned by following the ways their parents prepared for them – lessons they carried with them throughout their lives.

The passage. The same is evident in the passage from John 14, which Linnea read for us earlier. This chapter, and the two that follow it, make up a section known as the farewell discourses of Jesus (Smith 1988, 1067). Here we see Jesus in conversation with his disciples – his faith family. He is alone with his small community preparing for the time of his ultimate departure from them.

Jesus tells them to take comfort – to believe in God – to Believe in him. Then he goes on to say, in verses 2-4, “In the house of my Father-Mother there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself; so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place I am going.”

But Thomas is troubled and worried about Jesus’ departure. He says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Verse 6 states, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me.’”

Jesus response to Thomas is an important verse to understand clearly because it has been used as a weapon in theological debates. Many have misused this text to condemn other religions – the interpretation implying that we Christians hold a monopoly on truth. But we must pay attention to the first 4 words of verse 6, which are often glossed over. “Jesus said to him” – that is, to Thomas – rather than just “Jesus said.” The “to him” often is omitted.

Jesus’ statement about being the way, the truth, and the life is an answer to a question by one of his followers about their personal journey. The response is for his community and about his community. The way of Jesus is for Christians. The point here is not whether those of other faiths are saved, but rather about how we believers are living out Jesus’ way, truth, and life – both individually and as a community of faith. Remember verse 2: “In the house of my Father-Mother there are many dwelling places.” In other words: in God’s big tent, there is room for many.

We, like the followers of Jesus in the 1st century, are called to walk the way of Christ. Like the disciples, we believers are challenged to show up... to practice our faith with commitment. We are called into relationship with one another, to shared experience, and to the individual pursuit of faith towards wholeness... all as an art “on a four-count rhythm between 10 o’clock and 2 o’clock.”

Similar to Christ’s disciples and the Maclean family, we at Binkley have our shared story and our individual stories. There are many reasons and circumstances that bring us to this place and keep us here. We inherit Jesus’ story, the Christian story, and the Binkley story – and we continue to create it, one shared experience at a time. The experiences of church school, fellowships and picnics, Wednesday night programs, centering prayer groups, Habitat building projects, the sounds of excited children during Vacation Bible School – all these events (like many others) make up our story and give us the context in which we learn, love, minister, and teach.

During the last 10 months I have had the rare privilege of serving this congregation as an Interim Minister of Christian Education. In this time, I have seen from a fresh viewpoint the work of the teachers and educational leaders that we hold up in celebration today. The dedication and generous care our educators provide is a practice of discipline. They shed light on the way Christ prepares for us through their teaching, their nurture, their love. They teach us through careful planning and sharing of themselves.

The help us follow good paths toward wholeness.

They help us find our truth.

They help us ready ourselves for God’s grace.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some

of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs (Maclean 1976, 104) – our teachers and educational leaders.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in Christ.”
Amen.

REFERENCE LIST

A River Runs through It. 1992. Dir. Robert Redford. Based on the story by Norman Maclean. Columbia Pictures.

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A Reflection on Teaching in the 2nd & 3rd Grade Class
By Laurie Heffner
For Binkley Baptist Church
May 22, 2011

Hi! I'm Laurie. Along with Ilona, Jill, & Kathy, I taught & assisted in the 2nd/3rd grade church school class. Here are some stories from & observations about the 2010/2011 church school year, from my perspective.

I'll start with scripture.

Isaiah 8: "Here I am with the children the Lord has given me. The Lord Almighty...has sent us as living messages to the people." This Old Testament reading is extended & expanded in Hebrews: 2: 13 & 14: "Here I am with the children God has given me. Since the children are flesh & blood, Jesus became like them and shared in their human nature."

It has been a joyfully kinetic year! The students have been people with active intellects, bodies, and spirits. They are children with many different interests and skills, but all with thoughtful, eager minds and hearts. It has been soul-satisfying to spend this time with each and all. I will remember: the baseball and soccer players, the ballet lovers, the maze-making, wry humorist, the Abe Lincolnesque, avid reader (but with a twinkle), the artists, the stuffed animal lovers, the no-assertiveness-training-necessary, charming (with substance) Peter portrayer, the lit-from-within nurturer of others and hugger of her teacher, the musicians (among them the player of imaginary piano), the scholars, the actors, the gigglers, the workers, the helpers, the seekers. This eclectic group of individuals would be delightful company for anyone, in any situation. Guiding these young humans has been a happy task. Learning with them and from them has been my inspiration!

Binkley is a very welcoming, inclusive, progressive church. "Wide is the gate" (in a good way) that opens to its members and visitors. That celebration of diversity is a key reason many of you chose this church to nurture yourselves, your children, your grandchildren, your friends. There is not a "but", but, there is an "and" to add to the last sentence. AND, teachers here are charged with instructing the students in the history, theology... stories of a Judeo-Christian sort. There is an old, southern expression, "You need to dance with the one what brung you." As open minded (and hearted) as Binkley teachers are, we know that our lessons need to have some basis in Christian tradition and scripture. Open mindedness and Christian beliefs are not antithetical at Binkley. Everyone can come to the ball. We've kept and refined the old steps, choreographed some new ones based on the traditional themes, and taken joy in creative, positive movements. We can all dance with/for the One who brought us.

Being with children for a whole school year gives teachers many opportunities to notice, praise, and reinforce individual skills the students have. One Sunday, while the students were working at the tables, I made a point of mentioning each one's

unique talent (s) while walking around the classroom. I would say, in between the verbal highlighting, “We all have skills” or “Everybody has skills.” I had just commented on one little boy’s artistic talent. He looked up at me and asked, “What kind of skills do you have, Laurie...old lady skills?” Then with a slight smile he added, “Everybody has skills!” I paused. I gave him my own slight smile back. I mentioned one of my talents (dwindling though they may be, at this advanced age!) Then, I told him that yes, I did need more skills than I thought I would to be an old lady. I asked him, and the others, if being second and third graders required special talents. They told me about the many abilities they needed to be well functioning eight and nine year olds, some unanticipated and hard to master. Church school teachers are charged with equipping the children with spiritual and emotional skills they will need for their life on this earth...and the courage to use them.

One Sunday, we studied the 23rd Psalm. We talked about a generous God, who is with us in our “fields of green grass” and “quiet pools of fresh water”, literal and figurative. On the concrete level, these children can be trusted to guard the earth. They are very eco-friendly! They are smart, and they are “green” (environmentally, not as neophytes.) We went deeper in the fertile earth, the pristine waters. Several of the students gave examples of emotional gifts they had been given. Then, we turned it around. Even though God is with us, life isn’t always “green pastures” and “still waters.” I asked them to tell me about “feeling deserts.” They gave some poignant examples. “If I had no Mom or Dad”, “If my dog died”, “If I could never play”, “If I had no legs.” Someone laughed at that. Without focusing on the laughter, I told them about my cousin, who was born with spina bifida. I said that, even though his legs never worked, he found ways to enjoy life, had an interesting job in a hospital, had lots of friends, and always made me happy. One little girl said, “He found an oasis. Maybe when we are in our deserts, we can find oases.” Educators talk about “the teachable moment.” That day, my wise, young friend taught me (and the others) about spiritual and emotional oases. It was a “learnable moment” for the other children and for me. It was one of many this year, with every child being, by word or deed, an excellent, inspiring teacher.

This year of teaching church school has given me so much! It has been a privilege to live with the flesh and blood children in the here and now. It has been an honor to help them develop many skills. I believe that these young people have the ability to focus on their “green pastures and still waters”, now and in the future. I hope that what we’ve talked about this year will enhance their skills to get through their lives’ deserts. It is my prayer that this faith and, perhaps, something we’ve learned together here will provide them with oases in the years to come!

I thank you for the children. Most of all, I thank the children.

The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act. This enculturation is in some way true across the spectrum of church life, both liberal and conservative. It may not be a new situation, but it is one that seems especially urgent and pressing at the present time. That enculturation is true not only of the institution of the church but also of us as persons. Our consciousness has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric.

This paragraph is from the first chapter of Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*, the first text used in the church school class I attended this year. The class was taught by Michael Palmer, Maria Palmer, and Charles Coble. What a team! Of course Christian Education encompasses more than church school, but as I reflect on my spiritual formation over the past year, this class is key.

Brueggemann describes authentic prophecy from Moses to Jesus, prophecy that criticizes and energizes. Continuing to quote him:

Moses was mainly concerned with the formation of a countercommunity with a counterconsciousness.

Royal reality rode roughshod over Moses' vision. The gift of freedom was taken over by the yearning for order. The human agenda of justice was utilized for security. The god of freedom and justice was co-opted ... and in place of passion comes satiation.

We are also children of the royal consciousness. All of us, in one way or another, have deep commitments to it. So the first question is: How can we have enough freedom to imagine and articulate a real historical newness in our situation? ... We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical or [economically] viable but whether it is imaginable. We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination have been so assaulted and co-opted by the royal consciousness that we have been robbed of the power to think an alternative thought.

The Prophetic Imagination is a book that influences the way I think about things, as are other books I've studied in church school classes: books by Matthew Fox, Dom Crosson, Marcus Borg, Jim Wallis, Sally McFague – the list goes on, and I haven't even mentioned the Biblical writers.

And not all the great classes I've participated in are based on books. There have been classes where I've practiced meditation and contemplation, heard personal theological narratives, and discussed social action.

I am thankful for the teachers, facilitators, and prophets who have led these classes. I'm even more thankful for those who taught my children's classes. And I'm thankful for all of you who are on this journey with me.