

“Learning Graces”

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Ministries of Work: Learning and Education

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Proverbs 9:9 ⁹ Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous and they will gain in learning.

Romans 12:5-7 ⁵ ...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching.

Luke 6:31 ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

This is the fourth and final service in a series this summer devoted to “Ministries of Work.” In each of these sermons I’ve tried to pull together something of what I learned talking with a group of members and friends of our congregations whose work in the world, what we call vocation, is in a particular area, lifting up their challenges, prayer requests, and example.

Those with whom I spoke or from whose stories I draw today come from a range of jobs that relate to schools from preschool to adult education, and include classroom teachers and lecturers, but also a paraprofessional, counselor, school secretary, curriculum developer, lunch lady, school bus greeter, and folks involved in church ministries of education, some currently active, others retired. I thank them all.

Since active learning is something of a watch word today, I feel like I really have to get the rest of you involved too, so I’d like to ask for a show of hands- this also will count for Phys Ed credit since once you’ve raised your hand I’d like you to keep it up, and wave it if you have an additional response to add, because I want to see if we can score 100%.

Please raise your hand if you’ve ever taught someone:

- To ride a bike
- Tie their shoes
- A recipe
- How to braid, knit, crochet, or use a sewing machine

Raise your hand if you’ve ever taught:

- A song or a cheer
- A card game
- A prayer or Bible verse
- A dance move

How about:

- To use chopsticks
- How to change a tire
- How to bait a hook

- Your dog a new trick

Did we get our 100%?

We all are teachers. That's something the educators with whom I spoke to prepare for today's service wanted you to know.

Yet, as our verse from Romans reminds us, teaching is a gift of grace. Though Paul wrote about life in the church, most of us I think would agree that in the wider world as well some have qualities of patience, empathy, and creativity that set them apart as teachers. Most of us probably can remember a favorite teacher- and a least favorite.

Gina Barreca's recent *Hartford Courant* op-ed "What Makes a Bad Teacher?," points up several of the challenges that can suck the life out of otherwise competent and caring educators: school administrations that don't work to support learning, parents with unreasonable demands or who don't- or can't- support students at home, unmotivated or hostile pupils, job insecurity, and inadequate compensation.

And so, we are invited by our crew of folks involved with education to pray gifts of grace upon teachers, staff, and students, on principals and department chairs and university Regents, on parents of students and on adult learners who need money for bills, for good governance at the levels of local School Boards and Federal Education Policy, and even, as we send out these Church World Service school bags into the world, for learners in the US as well as nations whose names we maybe studied but can't remember, but who also depend on us to care.

Each of us teaches, and all of us here today contribute to education through our prayers, votes, and contributions.

Our verses from Proverbs and Luke point us to two lessons that stood out for me from what our educators shared.

The first verse, Proverbs 9:9 comes from a chapter in which Wisdom and Folly are personified as two women: one who invites guests to a well-ordered home to "*live, and walk in the way of insight,*" and the other whose invitation is to a place of destruction and death. Verse 10 of the chapter reads, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*"

Now, I know many ethical and intelligent atheists and agnostics. But as a person of faith myself and from my understanding of the history of thought in the Western world, I give the Judeo-Christian tradition a lot of credit for the ethical ideals these friends of mine hold and the methods and institutions by which their intellects were and are nurtured.

And so though the teachers and others with whom I spoke may not often or ever use words like 'wisdom,' 'folly,' or even 'truth,' much less the phrase 'the fear of the Lord,' when they discuss their work in mainly-secular educational institutions, I hear echoes of biblical wisdom when they express their aspirations, principles, and gratitude; I perceive knowledge of the Holy One in:

- Their desire to reach every student
- Their frustration sometimes feeling like they want their students to succeed more than the students themselves do
- The high standards to which they hold students and the respect they show them- even as they allow them to experience the consequences of some of their choices
- Their disappointment in students who cheat, and their astonishment at parents who allow or even participate in academic dishonesty, even as they acknowledge the economic and social pressures that drive these behaviors
- Their joy when a class ‘works’ and they can see students ‘getting it,’ working together, discovering, becoming a true intellectual community
- And their excitement seeing students gain in self-confidence.

The lesson I would offer to us more widely from their example as educators is the idea of “reflective practice” in whatever we do. We are called, as John Dewey described a century ago, to “experience, interaction, and reflection.”

One of the teachers especially spoke of needing faith for the year that they are doing right by their students, even if it’s never possible to be all things to every student, and some always seem to slip through the cracks, to miss their success or have it postponed. This teacher described coming home at night and reviewing the day- was it enough? Can it ever be enough?

While we can become overwhelmed by “the paralysis of analysis”- and burnout by teachers as in every helping profession is a risk- engaging in interactions each day and then pausing to assess how we’ll do it again the next day, maybe the same, maybe differently, that is the kind of learning from which we never should graduate.

Each of us is called to assess our progress through life’s course of study by a common core not of academic benchmarks, but of humane values. And, I would add, we are able to follow this path without despair because of the greatest of gift of grace, the promise of forgiveness and new life in Christ.

Among these core values is one Christ taught explicitly as we read in Luke, and to which members of the education group with whom I spoke expressed in many different specific ways their commitment: “*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*”

I heard it as they talked about making sure students have enough to eat. About being able to offer a hug of support in previous years, but not anymore. About listening to kids who maybe lost their dog, or their Dad. About conveying positive messages: ‘you can do it!’ and their efforts on behalf of students who struggle.

I heard it when they talked about welcoming students from all over the world, and teaching literature, music, art, holidays, and historical perspectives that broaden rather than narrow learners’ understanding.

I heard “*Do to others*” as they talked about what they seemed to agree is the biggest concern these days: student mental health. About sometimes knowing from Guidance that a child has

particular issues they're dealing with, and sometimes not. About providing individual instruction, help with anger management, and even customized food options, whatever might help.

And I heard a beautiful example of how making a habit of "*Do to others*" can have reciprocal benefit when one retired teacher described having a special education teacher in their class who followed their content presentation with learning strategies all the students- not just the ones with identified learning disabilities- could use.

Especially today, when information is so readily available online, it may well be what is called the 'tacit curriculum' matters most. Content curriculum- the grammar, math, biology, etc. facts and the ability to apply them are what we think of when we think of education, but teachers also are aware of the messages they convey through their affect and actions, not through textbooks and on smartboards.

And so, the second challenge to us from our educators today is to consider what we teach by accident. Because even if we didn't/though we didn't get to 100% in that opening exercise where we raised our hands, it's 100% sure that we teach what it means to be a person of faith when we go out of here and through the world.

May the 'tacit curriculum' we teach be these things that our teachers and others listed as most important to convey:

- Faith
- Respect
- Compassion
- Understanding of others
- Confidence
- Manners
- Self-reliance
- Responsibility
- Patience
- And to treat others as we would like to be treated

Amen.