



The Gift of Teachers

TEXT
Deuteronomy 6:20–25
Matthew 4:18–22

September 6, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Someone approached Maya Angelou and, in the course of conversation, told her, “I am a Christian.” Ms. Angelou responded, “A Christian. Already! That’s impressive.” I love that.

He said, “Come and follow me,” and they became disciples. The Greek word for “disciple” is *mathetas*, and it means “student, learner.” It is a good word for a sermon series called “Back to School.” Jesus would be their *rabbi*, which means “teacher”; and they would be his *mathetas*, his students. Therefore, one way to think of Christian faith is it’s a matter of going to school — or back to school. And because he said, “Follow me,” school for them would be on the road.

There are some things you can learn in a classroom and some things you can learn online. There are some lessons you learn only from experience, but faith is learned on the road. It’s a journey.

Lots of students began going back to school in recent weeks. Teachers have been preparing. Books have been purchased; school supplies collected. In two weeks, September 20, we will invite students to bring their backpacks to worship, and

we will have a “blessing of the backpacks.” And next Sunday, we will hear from our Signature Mission partner for 2016: De La Salle School. It’s a much-needed mission in our city. I am excited for us to learn what they do and how we can help.

But today, our focus is on teachers. When it comes to our faith, we all need teachers.

If I mention teachers and give you a moment, I wouldn’t be surprised if a particular teacher pops into your head — one who made a difference in your life.

One of my favorite movies about teachers is *Dead Poets Society*. Did you see it? It’s a wonderful commentary on the tension between order and creativity; between tradition and freedom. But it’s mostly about a teacher. Mr. Keating was a teacher who changed the lives of many of his students. He taught at a boys’ boarding school.

One of his students was “Mr. Anderson.” Mr. Anderson was timid and insecure; he was captured by his own lack of confidence. He was given an assignment to write a poem which he would read aloud to the class. He couldn’t do it. He wasn’t a poet — or so he thought. And then this happened. [View video clip from *Dead Poets Society*.]

In class, Mr. Keating pulls the poet out of Anderson. He amazes his classmates, who respond with applause.

A good teacher is not just one who conveys information. A good teacher helps us see ourselves — see our world with new eyes.

Ms. Hurst was my first life-changing teacher. She made me fall in love with history. Not everyone liked her, but I thought she was magical. She would ask the class, “Who thinks Abraham Lincoln was a good president?” I was quick to raise my hand.

“Tom Are,” she would say, as if baffled, “give me one reason why you think he was a good president.

“The Emancipation Proclamation,” I would say. “He freed the slaves.” And she would begin to argue with me about Lincoln. Did I know, for example, that Lincoln said he would free the slaves or not, whatever helped to save the Union? I didn’t know that. Did I know, for example ... and she would make a case that Lincoln was a terrible president.

She could convince you that anyone who voted for Lincoln was a fool. And just before I would say, “Well, I was obviously wrong about Lincoln,” she would take the other side — and

convince you that Lincoln was the greatest man since Jesus Christ. That was Ms. Hurst.

Now if you wanted answers to always be clear-cut and simple, like some math problems and most 30-minute TV shows, Ms. Hurst would drive you crazy. But if you could handle truth being complicated and partial and nuanced like most of life, you needed a teacher like her.

My kids will tell you that I majored in history — because back when I went to college, there wasn't that much history to learn yet. But the truth is, I majored in history because of Betty Hurst.

Jesus said, "Come and follow me." And he would teach them. He taught them through stories about ordinary things: seeds and weeds and wedding feasts. He would set the table and teach them that *who* you ate with mattered more than *what* you ate. He would take them on a boat ride and show them that life would bring no storm in which peace could not be found.

In the end, he would teach them that death is strong, and it will break your heart; but it is not as strong as God's love. So weep, but do not be afraid. He was their rabbi, their teacher; and they were his *mathetas*, students. He taught them things they would never forget — which is the only reason we know what he talked about.

It is my testimony that knowing what he talked about can change your life. I will teach a Bible study for men beginning Tuesday the 15th because I think knowing the scripture can

change your life. We will begin CORE Connections and Village University and Sunday morning gatherings and countless other Bible study groups because I think knowing what he talked about can change our lives.

But it is also common in our day to find folks who know very little about what Jesus said, but they think they know a lot.

When I was in high school, I dated a girl named Julie. She warned me one day, as we sat in the cafeteria, that I should refrain from eating apples. "Why shouldn't I eat an apple?" I inquired.

She said, "Well, you remember Adam and Eve? She ate that apple, and everything fell apart. I think if it caused that much trouble for Adam and Eve, then we shouldn't eat apples either." I thought, "Girl, you need a teacher."

I didn't tell her that I thought sin was just a bit bigger than blowing a fruit diet. And I didn't bother to tell her that if she had actually read the story, she would know that it never mentions an apple. The apple got added later by tradition. I didn't tell her that until the next week, when she broke up with me. That's when I told her that there was no apple in the story. I told her that since the Bible didn't mention it was an apple specifically, to be safe, maybe she should give up all fruit. (Not my most faithful moment!)

My point is, it is easy to think we know what Jesus taught and not really know what Jesus taught. That's why we need teachers. A good teacher is not

just one who provides good information, as important as that is, and it is important. But a good teacher will help us see truth that has been there all along, and we had no eyes to see it.

I was reminded of that again this week. Kim Davis is in jail because she says that, on God's authority, she cannot follow the law of the land. I say, "Good for her!" There are times when God's will and American will are not the same, and I admire someone who is clear about following God's will in his or her life.

Having said that, I think she is wrong regarding God's will. I believe she has an elementary understanding of the scriptures, and she could benefit from a teacher. (That's a matter of interpretation, and I just don't share hers). But even more so, I don't find it faithful to force my faith on my neighbor. That's religious tyranny. When she requires her neighbor to live according to her personal ethic, she is not the victim; she is the tyrant.

But it's not Ms. Davis that bothered me so much as it is her supporters — waving their Bibles and screaming in a fashion where I worry someone is going to have a stroke. They have spewed judgment on the couples who have come asking that their love be blessed. They should watch tapes of themselves. Besides just looking ridiculous, maybe they would see something is amiss when your devotion to God results in apparent hatred for your neighbor. I think they could benefit from a teacher.

But I was even more troubled this week by the prime minister

of Hungary. He has a very complicated situation on his hands. He was speaking of the refugees fleeing Syria. He said that they had to be careful to protect the “Christian character of Europe” from the likes of these mostly Muslim refugees. I wish he had said Western character, rather than Christian character. That’s what he really meant. Too many speak of Christianity as if it is the same as being Western, which would have no doubt been a surprise to Jesus, among others.

And furthermore, Christianity is not something we protect. It is something we give away. There may be reasons you keep desperate, poor and broken people who are fleeing violence — people who, by every assessment, would qualify as the least of these. There may be reasons you lie to them about where buses are going and huddle them into camps, but those reasons are not Christian. The prime minister has failed, it seems to me, to recognize that he has already thrown away the very faith he claims to protect.

Sometimes I see the way Christians act, and it just makes me shake my head. I say that because you may have the same experience every week during the sermon. “What is he talking about?”

I’m sharing this because, in those moments, I have come to realize that is why I really need to have a teacher. I’m serious. Oh, it’s easy for me to see these folks and recognize that they need a teacher; but Jesus didn’t say to James and John,

“You get those guys over there to follow me.” He said, “*You follow me.*”

When the world seems to be in chaos, what I am called to do is to take the next step in my journey of faith — because I am the only one who can be Christian with my life.

It is worth noting that Rabbi Jesus began to teach, and he didn’t say, “Matthew, write this down.” What he said was “Follow me.” Because when it comes to faith, it is a journey.

There are two things about that journey. It never ends. This journey is not just about learning something. It is about becoming who God wants you to be. Maya Angelou responded, “You are a Christian? Already?”

I am a Christian, and I am desperately trying to become one. This journey never ends. And I am the only one who can take the next step in my faith journey. I am the only one who can be Christian with my life. So of course, in your faith, you are the only one who can take the next step for you.

Ms. Hurst taught me to love history.

But it was Bob who taught me — because of who he was, he taught me that humility is beautiful and powerful.

And it was Linda who taught me that people don’t want to be impressed by how intelligent or talented you are; they want to be confident that you love them.

It was my dad who taught me to tell the truth — and to remember that that is never as easy as it seems. And he taught me, no matter the circumstance,

to give away at least 10 percent of my income.

It was Jack who taught me to read the Bible very carefully; but it was Carol who taught me to trust it.

I wish I had time to tell you what you have taught me — how you have been my teachers. Maybe I will another time. That will be a long sermon.

But the most important thing is to say once again this week that I have learned again how I need to go back to school. So I leave you with two questions: “Who are your teachers?” and “What is the next step you need to take as you seek to follow?”

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.