

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2009
Lessons: Joel 2:1-6,12-18 and Luke 15:25-32

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Good teachers plan for them, improvise for them, and are always ready to pounce on them when they emerge from the students themselves unannounced and unexpected, interrupting the flow of a lesson with a sudden surge in the interest level of the class. The slouching sit up and learn forward. Sluggish minds drop their daydreams and snap to attention. This surge of interest produces what is called a “teachable moment.”

To the non-teacher, the learning that happens in such a teachable moment may seem off-topic, especially to the observer focused upon lesson *material* rather than students, the people doing the learning. The teachable moments, however, produce the understanding that enables students to make sense of all the on-topic material. Without that understanding of *how things fit together and why*, the students commit to memory only disconnected bits and pieces of information to be recalled for the test then forgotten, having never been understood.

Scripted teaching, by its nature, stifles teachable moments. Like drones, the teachers are to stay, not only on-topic, but on-page number 182 (or whatever), following the script. Student interest, while still desired, is repressed by the pressure of sticking to the timetable and following the script, despite the psychology which informs us that if the interest affect is not triggered, the student gives no real attention to what is happening, and nothing is learned.¹ But the process is not quite so tidy: memorize the “facts,” spew them onto the test, forget them, and move on. No, the human mind files information and experiences into categories; it frames issues, retaining data that fit or can be twisted to fit into the framework. So, some of those little facts for the test may be kept in a framework of misunderstanding.

In Christian education, this fact-supported misunderstanding happens when a person learns the prescribed Bible verses and standardized beliefs of the faith but is encouraged to put them into a framework that does not suit the faith because it does not come from the love and mercy of God. *Just learn the material, and don't ask so many questions. Learn it and believe it. That's all. There will be a test at the end of the confirmation class, and then there will be the greatest of all high-stakes tests when you stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*² And we wonder why we lose so many inquisitive, thoughtful people from the church. Too many churches reward legalism but punish faith. Why do I say that? Faith is not a set of beliefs *about* Jesus Christ, *about* God, *about* the Bible, and *about* a prefabricated

scheme of salvation. Faith is day by day trust in the living Christ. Faith keeps looking to the living God for hope because we trust God's love and mercy (or sometimes just want to, even though our trust is faltering). In this dynamic faith, the Bible is our teacher and guide, not a paper idol to which we sacrifice our intelligence, our knowledge of life, and our compassion for people who are struggling. Yes, the church has many doctrines and beliefs intended to support this living faith, but they are not intended to replace it by becoming objects of faith themselves.

Jesus tells parables to create teachable moments and turn some of those moments into life-changers. Have you noticed that his parable of the Prodigal Son lacks an ending? He never says whether the older brother overcomes his resentment and goes into the house to join the party and celebrate his younger brother's return to life. There is good reason for the end of the story to be missing. The crucial question is, *Will the older son stand firm in his alienation from his brother or will he let himself feel love?*

*Why should I celebrate his homecoming? He left me to do all the work.
Why have you killed the fattened calf for him, when you've never
offered me even a young goat to have a party with my friends?*

You see, this commendable older brother doesn't know who he is within the framework of the family. He's been too busy trying to be commendable to realize he is loved. Because he so doggedly seeks approval, he does not find his place in the family. All this time, he could have been praying for his younger brother who was lost, hoping with their father for his brother's return. Instead, he took the bitter attitude of, "Good riddance," and let his self-pity stew together with his self-congratulations into a poisonous mix of bitterness and moral superiority.

Why does Jesus tell the parable? Luke says Jesus has been criticized by the morally and religiously superior people for associating himself and the teachings of God with sinners. The parable offers his critics a teachable moment. If only they will, they can re-frame all they know about God and God's commandments into the valid framework of God's redemptive love and mercy. At present, they have God's commandments in the wrong framework, a framework of misunderstanding. They think the idea is to keep the commandments in order to earn God's approval. No, from the beginning, the commandments have been meant to guide their responses to God's love, to which they already belong in covenant. Like this older brother, they don't know who they are. They are trying to earn a seat at the family table, when they already belong there. But that was then, and this is now. What about you and me? Are we still seeking approval by being better than our sister or brother, or are we ready to welcome and embrace as we are welcomed and embraced? The older son needs to go into his own house and be welcomed home.

God sent prophets to create teachable moments. In Joel's moment of time, the routine of Israel's economic and religious life has been interrupted suddenly and terrifyingly by the prospect of an invasion of locusts. The hordes of insect invaders are an army the people have no way to combat, an army that will wipe out the crops, plunging the land into famine. Countless people can be expected to die of starvation. The children's physical and mental growth, if they survive, will be stunted. There is neither escape nor effective counter attack.

If Joel delivered only a smug message, "I told you so," supposedly from God, he would be of no help to his people and no service to God. Prophecy is nothing like crystal ball gazing or tea leaf reading. It's purpose is not to predict the future but to change it. Joel sounds God's warning to produce the changes God longs for. The people heed the warning and turn back to God. No longer will they merely go through the motions of religion, offering God no life-changing trust, no hearts open to compassion, no will for seeking justice or even kindness. They have been meeting their religious obligations, turning their offerings into duty and their faith into superstition. Now, suddenly, it's time to get real.

Jesus asked people to see what time it was. They were not wearing watches, and he had no interest in clock time. He wanted them to open their eyes and see God's teachable moments. *From what's happening now, what can I learn of God's desire for human healing and wholeness? What can I learn of faith, of hope, or of love? Can I see in a new way how to piece together the Bible verses and beliefs into an understanding that makes sense in terms of God's redemptive love?* I say it that way because if our beliefs and practices do not make sense *in terms of God's redemptive love*, then they do not make sense to Jesus Christ at all. Not at all.

Questioned about the greatest of God's commandments, Jesus answered: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first and great commandment, and a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Torah and the Prophets.*³ He has given us the framework for understanding the ways of God. Jesus has not made faith simplistic because life is not simple, but he has given us what we need for faith to make sense. Now, we can stop looking at life as something to get through and endure or else to exploit and take for ourselves, and start looking at life for teachable moments given to us by God. I'm not saying we should step back from living to view our own lives as though we were spectators rather than participants. I'm asking what God is calling to our attention so we can respond with faith's interest, hope's excitement, and love's compassion and service. Where are God's teachable moments? Will we drop our daydreams, sit up, and listen so we learn, grow, and share? Amen.

Notes:

1. Donald L. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Development of the Self*. On page 73, Nathanson says, “Whatever causes an optimal increase in the intensity and rate of activity of anything going on in the brain will trigger the affect interest.” On page 74, “The affect interest makes us more interested in whatever is going on” On page 77, “*Anything characterized as a problem with attention must somehow involve the affect system*” (italics his).
2. I have learned from a number of teachers and professors that tests are divided into summative assessments and formative assessments. Currently, as a nation, we are fixated upon summative assessments under the label of “accountability,” because this kind of test attempts to measure student achievement on a scale for comparison. It’s a judgment. Christianity has also fixated on summative assessment, called “final judgment,” at which point we reason it is too late to learn. The other kind, formative assessment, helps teacher and student know what needs to be done next so learning can progress.
3. Matthew 22:34-40. The Torah and the Prophets were the two parts of the Hebrew scriptures canonized as official by the rabbis at that time. The third part of the canonized scriptures of the Hebrew Bible would be the Writings. I used the Hebrew word Torah rather than “law” because torah means teaching, but the teaching of life such as parents give their children and a faith community its daughters and sons. Torah is not the teaching of this or that but the teaching of life as God’s people. When I teach confirmation classes, I “hang” the entire course from these two pegs, the two commandments Jesus takes from the Hebrew scriptures to summarize and frame all God wants from us. Both faith and sin are then understood in terms of these two commandments.