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God Started It: Teaching

I remember having a conversation with a neighbor when we lived outside Philadelphia. This man was a high school math teacher and we were discussing how it is sometimes difficult for him to motivate his students to learn algebra. They would tell him that it had no practical value. They would ask him why they needed to learn it if they were never going to use it. When he first started teaching he said he attempted to refute their objections by saying that if the students went further into the math and science field, perhaps engineering of some sort, then they would use algebra sometimes. He had some examples of projects that were done using algebra. The objecting students would respond that they were never going to be doing what he told them about in his example. Now, after some years teaching, he said he doesn't argue about it anymore. He said that now he voices agreement with the students when they complain that the vast majority of them will never again use algebra after they pass the required amount for graduation. He may have been right to do that and he may have been wrong. If you think you have a better answer to his student's objections, I am sure that you do. But whether or not he was correct in his response is not the point of the story this morning. Rather I am thinking that here is a person whose entire career was being spent in teaching something that he did not think had practical value.

On the other hand, when God taught the ancient Israelites and then encouraged them to teach what they learned from God to others, it was in fact for a very practical reason. Actually, for the most practical reason of all; in order that the people might live. There is nothing much more practical than that. *So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. (Deuteronomy 4:1)* God taught the people what they needed in order to *live!*

Now the idea of life in the Bible means sometimes more than we might often use the term to mean. In the Bible the idea of life often means more than the breathing of air and the beating of the cardiac muscle and electrical impulses in the brain. Especially when Jesus uses the term and throughout the New Testament, to have life is to have a certain spiritual quality, and since we Christians must always interpret the Old Testament according to the teachings of the New, it is not a great leap for us to include spiritual quality to the meaning of the term when it is used in the Old. So, for Israel to keep the ordinances that God is teaching them through the Mosaic Law so that they may live and occupy the land would ensure for them not only their physical survival but life that is full and joyful as well. Such is the practicality of the teaching of God.

Nevertheless I get the idea sometimes that there are those who consider the teaching of God, from the Ten Commandments to the teachings of Jesus, to be but arbitrary rules and regulations. I wonder if to one degree or another we all don't think of the teachings of God sometimes in similar fashion to the way children and frustrated adolescents might think about the boundaries they are given by their parents. Children may obey their parents sometimes simply out of fear of the consequences if they do not, but when they do it may lead to resentment and to some form of the accusation, *it's not fair!* Good parents in healthy functional families try to explain to their children that the rules are established for the good of the children, could it be said even, so that the children may *live!* In time, it is hoped that children will come to understand that, and be thankful for it. But even the best of parents are ever only imperfect human beings. They can make mistakes in establishing behavioral guidelines for their children, and when in the long run it looks like they did, parents need to be forgiven by their children. Is it not as important in family life for children sometimes to forgive their parents as it is for parents to forgive their children? But God, the Perfect Parent, never needs our forgiveness. The love and wisdom of God are complete so that the teachings of God can always be trusted to be for our benefit.

In the gospel reading this morning we are told that Jesus taught as one having authority (Mark 1:22). Jesus did not need to qualify his statements with maybe, or could be, or it seems to me. When he was baptized by his cousin John, Jesus heard the voice from heaven say, *You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am pleased. (Mark 1:11)* He had the confidence of God about him after that and the way he taught showed it. God started teaching people through the law and the prophets so that people might live, and the Son of God continued it. This was *Paying it Forward* through teaching and ours is to go and do likewise. How many of us whose parents brought us to church with them and saw to it that we enrolled in Sunday School can still remember a Sunday School teacher who opened the Bible to us and whose love showed us that we could trust the wisdom of what he or she said. For me, one was Mrs. Miller my Junior High Sunday School teacher. Her smile always made me comfortable and class parties at her house were always good fun. Another was my mother who taught our senior high class. I will always be grateful that she welcomed my questions and allowed me to respectfully disagree with her as long as I allowed her to disagree with me. She taught me that faith was strong enough even to entertain doubts and her own faith was an example of power for living as I would see her sometimes at night kneeling in prayer at her bedside. Mrs. Miller and my mother paid it forward to me through teaching and if I am ever a good Christian it is because of them and others like them. God bless our Sunday School teachers for imparting the teachings of God to our children today so that they may *live!* Tell me where there is more important work to do than that.

Now a moment for all who have taken the mantle of teaching for a career, especially in our public schools, especially in those schools who students come to them the most in need not only of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also of love and wisdom for life. Consider with me now especially the teachers who are willing to take on the most challenging students in our most economically distressed neighborhoods, students whose parents struggle the most with their own weaknesses, students whose first

need when they arrive at school is for breakfast so that they can concentrate to hold a pencil and keep their eyes open to see the blackboard, who have no one at home who cares whether they do their homework or not, whose concern is surviving until they are eighteen as much as whether or not they will get a high school diploma, who rather than hearing from their parents that if they work hard and do well in school they can be anything that they want to be absorb instead the words stupid and bad and nuisance. The teachers that follow the high calling of Christ and literally sometimes wash the hands if not the feet of the least of these are the teaching heroes in our land. Yet dare to call them failing teachers in failing schools when their students do not measure up to the performance of the more fortunate. Shame on us for the disregard we show to some of the most dedicated and committed educators we have and then wonder why students themselves do not show their teachers proper respect! There are many thankless jobs in the world but paying it forward through public school teaching has to be one the most thankless of all today in America.

Yet, let us not end on a negative note but rather celebrate the greatest teacher of all, the Good Shepherd who said that he came that the sheep might have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)