

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 8.26.2018



## The Gift of Teachers

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Matthew 4:18-22

Deuteronomy 6:20-25

When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.’

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Last week we started a new sermon series called “Back to School.” The idea is that we are always in the process of becoming Christians – always in the process of learning and growing into what it means to be followers of Jesus who his disciples called “rabbi.”

Last week our subject was arithmetic. Today we are talking about teachers.

The Scripture is from the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy was written to help teach God’s people the lessons they learned along their journey when God delivered them to freedom as they left Egypt for the Promised Land. Along that journey, God gave the people the law – the 10 commandments. The writer of Deuteronomy knows that unless people understand why those laws exist, it will be hard to live by them. That’s why you need good teachers.

Listen with me for the word of the Lord.

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A couple of weeks ago – in the afternoon – my kids were paying way more attention to looking out the window than they were to minding their father.

The house was filled with anticipation – not quite to the level of waiting for Santa Clause – but close. They were looking up the street, hoping to see the mailman.

Finally, he came. With him, he had four white envelopes that held the news my kids had been waiting for: the names of their teachers.

Do you remember getting those envelopes? I bet if I gave you a moment you could call to mind a few names of the teachers who made a difference in your life.

Erin Grunwall was a young, white woman who was accepted to teach English to at-risk students at Woodrow Wilson High School in Los Angeles, California in 1994 – a community still reeling from the Rodney King riots two years before. Her story was made into a movie. At first, the pairing of the class and the teacher was awkward. Grunwall didn't feel like she knew how to relate to a class full of students who were so different – in race and background – from her. The students didn't feel like they had anything worth learning from a teacher who couldn't identify with their experiences.

But gradually, Grunwall began to earn their trust. She invites them to both learn about history, but also share in the power of telling their own by writing in personal diaries. In the process, both the students and their teacher grow together and begin to change. Grunwall stays with the class of students as they age up through high school. With her student's permission, she compiles their diary entries into book form and names it the *Freedom Writers Diaries*. The book tells of a transformation – of those students and Grunwall – who learned to see beyond the place where they felt restricted and defined by their background and struggle – and were free to be agents of change in the world.

A good teacher does that: they help us see ourselves and the world with new eyes.

Dr. Leak was one of those teachers for me. I was a senior at East Mecklenburg High School. Secretly, I was hoping for a teacher who didn't give a lot of homework. That was my criteria of what made a teacher “good.” By that definition, Dr. Leak didn't qualify...I think we had 100 pages of reading our first week.

Dr. Leak taught AP World History. She did not have much patience for a bunch of seniors who were distracted and pre-occupied with college decisions and next steps. Before we stepped *into* the world, Dr. Leak thought we needed to learn *about* the world.

Dr. Leak was the first teacher that really allowed me to see that the past is connected to the present – and the future. She helped me see identify the themes of history. She nurtured in me an appreciation for how the people and nations of our world impact one another across the span of time – how important we are to one another, regardless of borders or leaders or self-interests.



I didn't come out Dr. Leak's class an expert. But I came out more curious, and more aware, and with more perspective about the world and my place in it than before she was my teacher. And for that, I am grateful.

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When Jesus passed his students along the side of the road, he didn't invite them into a classroom, he invited them along a journey. Follow me, he said, and they did.

On the way, Jesus talked about moving mountains with faith the size of a mustard seed. And, when people asked who was the greatest, he talked about the least. When people asked him who was included, he told stories about wedding feasts where the host would come out into the streets to welcome people in.

They asked him about the law of Moses, and – like a good teacher – Jesus made it plain: Listen: love your neighbor as yourself...on this hang all the law and the prophets.

In the end, he taught them that God's love is stronger than death. And that God's future can strengthen us to be faithful in the present.

He was a teacher – a rabbi – and the disciples were his students. He taught them things they would never forget, which is, as a friend of mine has said, “the only reason we know what he talked about.”

I believe that knowing what Jesus talked about can change our lives because it opens us to the reality of a world that we barely know.

And that is why, historically, Presbyterians have been so committed to education.

It's because we believe that good teaching – and active learning – lead to understanding and faithfulness.

It's not that we are so concerned about being “smart” – the point of education is not to puff ourselves up and compete with one another about who knows the most. We value education because it leads to discovery. And possibility. And positive change...which is the path that Jesus invites us to walk when he says “come, and follow.”

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As a church, we place a high value on education and on teaching.

If you only come here on Sunday, you may not know that throughout the week during the school year there are close to 300 children who benefit from learning from an incredible bunch of teachers in our schools. The Child Development Center and the Weekday School aren't just programs that are housed in our church – they are a vital part of our mission – a way we demonstrate what it means to be “For Christ in the Heart of Charlotte” – through



teaching, nurturing, and providing a safe and loving environment for children to begin understanding how to see the world.

On Sunday, September 9 we will launch another year of programming for children, youth, and adults. Lots of people – members and staff – have been busy these past few months planning curriculum, lining up speakers, developing ideas for retreats, and offering different platforms for learning. The point is not to entertain the members and friends of our congregation with an event or an experience – but to take seriously what Jesus asked his disciples to do when he appeared to them after his resurrection: to “teach” in order that people might understand what it is to walk in the path of faithfulness – to experience the gift of salvation – to discover what is so compelling about the good news of the gospel.

Tomorrow, the teachers of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools will open their classroom doors to 136,000 students in our community for the first day of public school. In our church, like lots of churches, we have some children who attend public school, and others who attend private. We love them all. We support them all. From the perspective of faith, every child – those who belong to this church, and those who do not – every child is “ours” in that they are created in the image of God, deserving of our love and commitment, worthy of an opportunity to learn in an environment where they can grow in their understanding and appreciation of the world.

If you look in your bulletin, there is an insert that tells two stories. One side tells the story of how seven Presbyterian churches in Charlotte have carried out their mandate to support the critical need for public education through a network of partnerships and collaborations. What I hope you will see as you read through that history is a faithful witness to what Christ calls his church to do and to be.

The other side of the insert tells a more personal story – personal for our church and personal to you. It’s the story of our partnership with Westerly Hills Academy – a public school we have been connected with for the past 18 years. The reason this story is personal to you is because this is the way your church has looked at children beyond those who are gathered in this space and called them “our kids.”

“Our kids” need help. Their teachers need help. And support. And advocacy. And resources. And that’s where we – you and I – can write our names into the story. You’ll see a litany of ways to get involved – or to get your kids involved – or your neighbors involved – in supporting one school so that the world can open up for those children in the way we want it to for every child.

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Tomorrow morning – for those who are having their first day of school – and for those who got started just a little while ago – the children of our community will walk into a classroom



with a teacher. The reason those teachers and those students are going to spend the next 180 days together is not to memorize a bunch of facts or produce homework. They are together to grow. They're the ones who will inherit this world that we inhabit – they'll make decisions, navigate problems, discover things we've considered.

Pray for them: with your words and your hands and feet.

And do not hesitate to give thanks for the faces and the commitments of those who are called to teach our kids something about this world that God loves so much.

