

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Dayton, Ohio

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Sermon: A Prayer for Going Back to School

Focus: “But the Teacher, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”—Jesus to his disciples, John 14:26

All human beings, by nature, desire to know.—Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, i.

The Lord will be a teacher to us too, if we acknowledge our ignorance and are not reluctant to learn.—John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, Chapter Eight

First Scripture Lesson: Hosea 11:1-9

No getting around it, no other way to put it: Israel has failed. *Being God’s People 101*: Required for all more advanced courses in Holiness, Israel’s final grade “F.” Not even close. If there were such a grade as an F-, *that* would be their grade. They have paid no attention to God’s teaching, they have worshipped idols, most of the time they haven’t even bothered to show up. F. F. F.

But God is a teacher—the one, real, true, unfailing teacher. And no true teacher ever wants to see students fail. Oh, a teacher may on occasion give an F. But that is always only for the betterment of the student, and for higher educational purposes.

And even then, it hurts—I mean it hurts the teacher most of all. You can hear God’s hurt in the passage I’m about to read. In it, God first expresses heartbreak, then dismissal, but then unfailing love.

Teaching is essentially an act of love, a kind of active love. And God is the one, real, true, unfailing teacher. You can hear that in this passage too. Our First Scripture Lesson, from the Old Testament, the prophet Hosea, Chapter 11 verses 1-9:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to them like those

who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
The sword rages in their cities,
it consumes their oracle-priests,
and devours because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning away from me.
To the Most High they call,
but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come in wrath.

Second Scripture Lesson: Matthew 23:8-12; John 14 (selected verses)

Our Second Scripture Lesson is first from the Gospel of Matthew, and then from John's Gospel. To set the scene: we're between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, and everything is ratcheting up: Jesus' teaching is increasingly urgent; his conflict with the Pharisees, escalating; the plot against him, already brewing.

The disciples can sense the impending crisis—Jesus has already warned them of his coming arrest and crucifixion, and told them of his resurrection. But it's just too much for them to take in. What they fear, but what they can't say to themselves, much less say out loud, is that they're going to lose him. They are going to lose their beloved teacher and friend.

And then, in the middle of denouncing the Pharisees for their arrogance and hypocrisy, Jesus reminds his disciples what it means for them to be his disciples. They are not to be teachers, but always students—always.

In marked contrast to the Pharisees, who falsely assume the mantle of teacher, Jesus' disciples are always to be *his* students. Jesus himself is the one true teacher. Listen now for God's Word,

the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 23 verses 8-12, Jesus speaking to his disciples near the end of his earthly ministry:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

In other circumstances, being called Jesus' students, might be considered an honor and a privilege. But these are not other circumstances: Jesus is about to die, and in the worst imaginable way: how will the disciples live after that—who will be their teacher then? That, on the night of his arrest, is the question that Jesus addresses.

His answer? He will send the Holy Spirit to be their teacher. Listen now for God's Word to us, John Chapter 14, again Jesus speaking to his disciples:

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Teacher, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Sermon: A Prayer for Going Back to School

It's that time of year: back-to-school time: And so we have our "W.I.S.E. Ministry School Supply Drive going on ("WISE" stands for "Westminster Invests in Students and Education"). We need everything from pencils to folders to binders to small dry erase boards—it's all on p. 6 of your bulletins. Our students, teachers, volunteers, and schools would all very much appreciate your help.

It's back-to-school time. And so Dayton Public Schools is holding a "clap-in" on their first day of school, which is this coming Tuesday—you can go to a school, any school, right before school starts, stand outside, and cheer for—clap for—the students as they go in. Our Westminster WISE folks will gather at Eastmont Elementary at 8:40 am on Tuesday. Join us—I'm sure there's going to be a whole lot of whooping-in, hollering-in, and shouting-in too!

It's back-to-school time. And so I'm calling this sermon, "A Prayer for Going Back to School."

And I know, right now, what a lot of you parents are thinking—"What took you so long, Richard? We've been praying for that for more than two years now!" And it's not just parents; it's grandparents, family members, teachers and administrators, and the students themselves—the pandemic made us all want to get back to school, to get back to normal.

“A Prayer for Going Back to School”—a prayer, yes, of gratitude and of hope, but also a prayer probably with more than a little nervousness and worry in it. And so in light of that nervousness and worry, because I have it too, it’s worth our remembering, worth our talking about, God as our one, real, true teacher.

“Education is conversation.” If I had to put it three words, it would be those: “education is conversation.” Now I know: books, volumes, libraries have been written on education—not to mention all the conversations educators and others are having about it all the time. So even if you agree with me that conversation is at the heart of teaching and learning, how that applies to different subjects, settings, schools and students . . . Well, there’s a lot more to be said. But start here: education is conversation: we learn by listening and by being listened to.

If you’ve ever had the joy of being with a child during what the theorists call the intermediate to advanced stages of language acquisition about ages 2-5 . . . You know what I mean: the learning curve is straight up, and it’s not a curve, it’s a rocket ship. It’s a miracle.

*It was I who taught them to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.*

God bends down to feed us, and to talk to us and to listen to us. God is our one, real, true teacher.

But we parents, grandparents, teachers, siblings, aunts and uncles and friends all have our parts to play: we too bend down to talk and to listen to children—and we cheer them in. And in doing so, we know that alone, merely by our human powers, we could never make that rocket-ship miracle happen. God is the teacher, although, as I say, we all have our parts to play.

Education is conversation. It goes all the way back to Socrates, who, while always politely declining the title of teacher (God is our one, real, true teacher, after all) nonetheless always played his part through the back-and-forth of conversation. And it goes back farther than that—all the way to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Think about it: After Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit does God thunder condemnation at them? NO, God asks them a question, actually a series of questions:

“Where are you?”

“Who told you that you were naked?”

“Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

“What is this that you have done?”

Now I'm pretty sure that God knows the answers to these questions before he asks them—or at least has a pretty good idea. But God gives Adam and Eve a chance to speak for themselves, in other words, to learn. We learn by listening *and* by being listened to.

And there's no doubt about it: for the class, "Being God's People 101"—Adam and Eve get an F, an F- if that were possible. But God is a teacher—the one, real, true, unfailing teacher. And no true teacher ever wants to see students fail. Oh, a teacher may on occasion give an F. But it hurts—I mean, it hurts the teacher most of all.

So what does God do? Genesis 3: 21: *And the LORD God made garments of skins for Adam and for Eve, and clothed them.*

Fig leaves are well-known to be itchy, and sewn together fig leaves will not stay sewn together for long. In short and as shorts, fig leaves provide no protection, no comfort, no durability, and no beauty. So God makes clothes for them.

Yes, Adam and Eve must still leave the Garden: on occasion, a teacher may give an F—but always only for the betterment of the student, and for higher educational purposes. Adam and Eve leave the Garden clothed not in shame, but in grace. They can still learn.

God is our one, real, true teacher.

And this goes for us too; for example, when it comes to the Bible.

The Bible is not God telling us what to do, as much as it is God inviting us into a conversation—a conversation not just with God, but also with one another, and with innumerable others who have gone before and will come after us.

Prayer, I think is a similar invitation to conversation. And the promise—Jesus' promise—is that the Holy Spirit will be present with us throughout all these conversations.

And that's why I think we need to be honest in those conversations. We need to ask our hard questions, to say what we feel, and not what we think we ought to say, trusting that *then* the Holy Spirit will speak to us, teach us, perhaps through the words of a fellow student or a friend, perhaps through our being directed to another passage, or perhaps simply through a memory or a thought coming to us, or from within us, with all the beauty, the power and the dawning conviction of truth.

The Holy Spirit can teach us, speak to us, in all kinds of unexpected ways in all those conversations—even out of the mouths of babes.

Which of course bring us to predestination. That's right predestination, a teaching—not original or unique to Presbyterianism or John Calvin—but now eternally and notoriously associated with Presbyterianism and John Calvin—the doctrine that God decreed once and for all, before the foundations of the earth were formed, God decreed who will be among the elect, that is, destined for salvation and who would not, that is, destined for damnation.

And no, you don't have to "believe in" predestination to be a Presbyterian or to be an elder, deacon or minister in the Presbyterian Church. In fact, it's more than understandable if you find it abhorrent to the point of being incomprehensible, many good and noble souls have.

But education is conversation, and this includes conversations with the written word and traditional teachings. Which means that not only should we speak our minds (say what we feel), but we should also listen to the text or the doctrine speaking to us and addressing our concerns and questions.

Which often means we have to look for, consider how, and give voice to, how that written word or teaching would answer us and our objections—trusting that the Holy Spirit will be at work through the whole process.

Now, I've been blessed with some good human teachers who have helped me to converse with the writings of John Calvin and others before him, and in particular on the doctrine of predestination. And I have to tell you that if we give it a fair hearing, there's not only an internal logic, but also a comfort and even a beauty, to it. I can't rehearse it all here (but would love to do it with you sometime) but:

If you take the sovereignty of God, that is, the idea that God governs all things; and you see that sovereignty as a source of *our* comfort and *our* strength, because our salvation—not to mention all the blessings we have and indeed our very existence—is a gift from God and not dependent on our flawed, always halfway and always half-hearted efforts; and if you add to that the injunction that we should NEVER presume to judge others, particularly who is saved or not because that is up to God and a mystery to us, but instead, we should love and pray for all, including our enemies; forgetting the whole question of our own personal eternal fate to live in the joy of loving God and neighbor . . .

If you listen to the doctrine of predestination saying *that*, I think you can see—hear—it not only making sense, but providing comfort and even being beautiful. I know I can.

And then I think of God as teacher—and I jump ship. I just can't do it—I can't accept predestination. No true teacher ever wants to see students fail. I know, I know: maybe I'm giving one way of understanding God—God as teacher—to much prominence of place. The Bible gives us other ways of understanding God too—and that's a blessing. And maybe I'm being presumptuous—insufficiently appreciating God's mystery, "My ways are not your ways, says the Lord. I acknowledge all of that and I want to be willing to listen. But I have to say what I feel and what I feel is the power of God saying these words:

*My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,*

And I will not come in wrath.

God is a teacher—the one, real, true, unfailing teacher.

But putting predestination aside, if God is our true teacher, we—all of us—still have our parts to play. Which brings me back to back-to-school time and our WISE ministry.

I was talking to Jenne Gross, our Mission Associate, who leads WISE, and I asked her about *her* prayer for going back to school.

“What I pray for, Richard” (she said to me), “is for the kids to have a year of normalcy. So many of them have lost ground not only academically, but also emotionally and socially. That’s why it’s so important that our volunteers be there.”

And Jenne told me she herself was a little nervous: this year, for the first time, Dayton Public Schools is requiring all volunteers to have an annual background check and go down to their office to be fingerprinted at a cost of \$50 per person. She’s worried that the cost and inconvenience would deter people from volunteering.

“I wish I could show people what a difference they make,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as you show that you care. All it takes is one person, one time, to show that they care.”

And then she told me about Elesha, who, 25 years ago, at age 4, started in Westminster’s tutoring program; she and her siblings were involved with Westminster while they were growing up, including with our choir. And now Elesha is working on her college degree, and has also just graduated from the Dayton Police Academy. And thanks to Westminster Presbyterian Women working through the Tornado Survivors Pathway to Home Ownership, Elesha owns her own home, the first person in her family to do so.

Candy Powers, of the Westminster Presbyterian Women, is writing an article about Elesha for the next issue of *The Chimes*—which should be in your mailboxes in the next few weeks—and when I talked to Candy on the phone last week she said, “So many people and groups in our church have been involved with Elesha and the Moore family—it takes a village.”

As Jesus said, we are all students—his students, and we’re in His school for our whole lives. And as students we all have our roles to play, our callings—the Holy Spirit can work through us in so many ways: including by volunteering for WISE, or by contributing to the School Supply Drive, by coming to the Clap-in this Tuesday, or by volunteering for our own Sunday morning children’s classes as shepherds or teachers (you get to see those eyes light up as the learning curves go straight up), and by offering our support and our prayers, especially our prayers.

As Jenne said, “It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as you show that you care”. So a Prayer for Going Back to School—but not quite yet

Teaching is essentially an act of love, a kind of active love. And God is the one, real, true, unfailing teacher. But as we play our parts, we can be vehicles of God's love. So one personal story to show how I experienced this love and why it means so much to me.

It was eight years ago, just about this time of year; it was hot. My father had just died. So there we were in my mom's assisted living room: she was in her chair, my two older sisters and I were perched on the edge of her bed, and Jonathan Miller, my parents' dear pastor, had just walked in.

I knew why he was there: to talk about the funeral: not just so we could pick hymns, but more so that we could tell him our family stories, and laugh and cry together. As a pastor, this helps with your funeral homily, yes, but more than that, it helps the family grieve and heal together. So, I knew why he was there—or at least I thought I did.

But Jonathan surprised me. "You know," he said, "usually I ask the families to tell me their stories, and I will, but first I want to tell you a story about your dad. It was when he was tutoring down in Camden.

Stop there for a moment: if you know Philadelphia/New Jersey, you know about Camden. If not, think East St. Louis or Gary, Indiana—its residents among the poorest of the poor.

Jonathan went on: "Your dad was tutoring this boy, he must have been a fourth or fifth grader, helping him with his homework—it must have been math homework. Anyway, this boy was getting more and more frustrated, and after a while he said, 'Man this doesn't matter—nobody cares, nobody cares if I do my homework.' And then he threw his pencil down on the table."

Freeze Frame: At that very instant, my sisters and I, each of us in our 50's, each of us out of school for many years, and our father for goodness sakes no longer with us—and none of that mattered one bit: we each had the exact same visceral involuntary reaction—disbelief, horror, and fear:

"NOOOO! Not that! You can say almost anything else, but NOT that! You are going to get his lecture on 'The Importance of Education'". His three-part lecture series on "The Importance of Education," complete with follow-up questions that we got every year before school started.

Believe me, to this day, after all these years, I can recite *every word* of *all* three lectures. I know this, because just last week I was driving my son back to college, and guess what came out of my mouth? That's right: Every. Word. Of. All. Three. Lectures. Complete. With follow up questions.

And then Jonathan finished his story: "So you know what your father did?" My sisters and I exchanged looks: we were too afraid to say. "He said, 'Young Man, now you listen to me (how many times did I hear that?): I care. I care if you do your homework. I care very much.' And then he handed him his pencil, 'Now, let's get back to it.'"

As Jenne said, "All it takes is one person, one time, to show that they care."

So here's my prayer for going back to school: may every student, every one of us know that someone cares, cares very much, and that God cares most of all. God is our teacher—the one, real, true, unfailing teacher. And we are all students. Now, let's get back to it.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.