



“Teacher of the Year”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 25, 2011
Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16 (NRSV)***

Our church school parents, musicians, teachers, and I have been having some conversations this past summer about the relationship of music to spiritual formation. Today’s scripture lesson is an excellent illustration of our shared values around music and education.

Psalm 78, for example, is a hymn that affirms Israel’s commitment to pass on the old, old stories of faith to the next generation—and to do so, at least in part, through music.

Like the Ancient Israelites, the participants in our recent conversations about music and education have been clear about the closely knit relationship between music, religious education, and spiritual formation.

I think we all know what music is, but we may not all know what the difference is between religious education and spiritual formation, so I’ll explain. Religious education is the information, traditions and values that we pass on to our young people; while spiritual formation has to do with the habits or practices that each of us develops to make this information our own, and to define and act on our values.

II

Music, and the arts in general, are integral and essential to religious education and spiritual formation. They provide a medium through which we learn information, and they shape and form our faith by the rhythm and feeling that they instill in us. Think, for example, of the song we sang with the children after the Baptism today, “Jesus Loves Me.”

Many of us learned this song before we were old enough to read. It was one of many ways that we learned about God’s love, even before we could read the Bible or think many grand theological ideas.

I suspect, too, that “Jesus Loves Me,” brings back a flood of memories. Perhaps it takes you back to your childhood, or to raising your children, or to teaching Sunday School. It certainly does for me.

Whenever I hear “Jesus Loves Me,” I’m reminded of Sunday School, and life before Kindergarten. I remember my Grandma Nehring playing that song on the piano in her parlor, while the bread that we were making was baking in the oven.

I remember singing “Jesus Loves Me” in the children’s choir, standing next to my sister, wearing white cotton choir robes that made us look like angels, and swinging our arms back and forth, and not always acting like angels.

I remember my Grandma Thomsen humming “Jesus Loves Me” while we were helping to punch out paper-doll Jesus, Mary, and Joseph characters for her Sunday School class that we were too young to attend.

I remember Grandma Thomsen humming that hymn when her memory was so far gone that she could not remember the names of her grandchildren. And, I remember the organist playing at my grandparents’ church playing that song at her funeral, just before I stood up to lead the Call to Worship.

So, music is a medium through which we learn the stories of our faith, and it is a practice that can sustain us in times of great joy and tremendous sorrow, and in all the occasions in between. Similarly, what and how we learn—and in some cases even whether we learn—is determined by the people who would teach us the stories and songs of our faith.

III

Think for a moment about who your teachers have been over the years. Think particularly about who has taught you the faith—not just the books of the Bible or the words of a song, but who has taught you to walk the talk of faith, and to live an integrated faith-infused life. Who comes to mind? If somebody put you in charge of giving out “Teacher of the Year,” this year or in your past, to whom would you hand the trophy?

To get you thinking about your top pick, I’ll share some remembrances of my own. This is not an easy process for me, because I come from a long line of teachers.

My Grandma Thomsen only had an eighth grade education; but in the last year of her schooling, she was promoted to teacher of the country school in which she was educated. She also taught Sunday School for the nursery class, for 17 consecutive years.

My mother was a second grade teacher before she was married, and, later, when my sister and I were in high school, she worked as an assistant teacher in a nursery school.

Two of my aunts have also been teachers. One taught English at Iowa State University, and the other has mostly been a long-term substitute who has taught everything from shop to speech and Kindergarten to high school. She is on the speed dial of several school principals in central Iowa. This same aunt also raised three daughters, one of whom is a reading specialist in the Des Moines area.

My sister, Marlene, who literally was Teacher of the Year last year, is my top pick this year. She teaches Middle School English in Northwest Arkansas to students who are English Language Learners. Like so many of the teachers today, Marlene (“Mar”) is a modern missionary.

Mar knocks herself out creating interesting lesson plans to motivate her students, who Professor Yvette Jackson, from the Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City, calls “school-dependent children.”¹ School-dependent children are students who come from circumstances marked by deprivation, and whose futures are almost entirely dependent upon what they can learn in school before they graduate, drop out, or get kicked out.

The last time I talked with Marlene, she had lost count of how many of her students have parole officers, social workers, and school nurses following them.

About a month ago, Mar told me that she walked by the vice principal’s office and overheard her saying to one young man, “Son, you know what your problem is?” The student replied, “No.” The VP said, “Your problem is that Mrs. Schwerin (my sister) won’t give up on you. She is not going to throw you out of class, so you just better start paying attention and doing your assignments or you’re going to be bored out of your mind before the year is out.”

Like most of the teachers in our church, Marlene goes in early, stays late, works weekends, and teaches summer school—not because she needs the job, but because she’s seen the fruit that her labor has borne on commencement day.

Mar takes her livestock (yes, her horses and cattle) to summer school so that her students feel lucky to be in her class. She attends every girl’s quinceañera, and spends her own money on soccer cleats for the kids whose parents can’t afford them.

The school is always behind on scheduling translators for parents, and they never have enough interpreters at parent-teacher conferences, so my sister begs the bilingual people from church to work these conferences with her, so that her

¹ Yvette Jackson, *The Pedagogy of Confidence: Inspiring High Intellectual Performance in Urban Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

students' parents can learn how to better support their children's performance in school.

Mar makes house calls on the children who are getting behind in class, and whose parents are too shy or too exhausted from work to attend conferences. Most people accuse her of being idealist and a workaholic, but she finds the effort rewarding.

When her kids graduate high school—and many of them do—Mar's the first one down in front taking pictures of every ELL kid who walks across the stage. She gets two sets of prints from every roll. She gives one set to the graduates and the other set she posts on the wall of her classroom, so that when students walk in and sit down on the first day of school, the first thing she says, as she points to the graduation pictures, is: "Here's where we're headed in this class."

My sister is a force of nature and a true inspiration. She makes her kids believe in themselves and their futures, because she does. She has empathy for the kids, but she won't let them feel sorry for themselves. And she won't accept excuses for underperformances; because she knows that excuses didn't get her where she is today, and excuses didn't get her former students across the graduation stage.

Still, there are some challenges that are daunting, even for my sister. This past summer, she called me to tell me about a star student of hers who had just graduated. The student, she said, had excellent grades. She was a good citizen. She helped with her little brothers and sisters at home. She had all the right things going for her, and she should have been a shoe-in for college. But Marlene's student called to tell her that no college in the area would admit her, and she wasn't eligible for any financial aid, because she didn't have a social security number, and she wondered, would my sister hire her to clean her house because she really needed a job.

IV

Marlene's student really needed a job, but more than that, she really needed a college education, and a meaningful path to citizenship in our country.

Today, we at Eden United Church of Christ are participating in the "Dream Sabbath" sponsored by Church World Service, the PICO National Network, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Interfaith Immigration Coalition, and other faith-based organizations across the country.

Right now, thousands of young people, like some of my sister's students and some students in our community who were brought to the United States as children, want to go to college and pursue the American dream. But instead, they are vulnerable to being detained and deported by themselves to countries they can't remember.

The good news is that state and federal legislation known as “the DREAM Act” could stop this injustice. The DREAM Act gives students who have grown up and graduated high school in the United States an opportunity to earn legal status and be eligible to apply for citizenship through higher education or military service.

President Obama also has the executive authority to protect vulnerable populations, including DREAM Act eligible youth and parents of citizen-children, from detention and deportation. Last month, for example, the President ordered the Department of Homeland Security to review, on a case-by-case basis, students who are detained and under consideration for deportation.

Our Judeo-Christian faith teaches us about God’s mandate to welcome strangers and aliens, and to respect the dignity of all human beings so that everyone can reach their God-given potential. By our participation in the Dream Sabbath we embody this core Judeo-Christian teaching and faith value that we want to pass on to all of our children.

Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we affirm that every child is a child of God, born with inalienable rights to food, shelter, education, love, and safety. Through the singing of songs like “Jesus Loves Me,” and “I was There to Your Boring Cry,” we teach and celebrate these truths and values as a faith community.

So, pay attention to the lyrics of the hymns we sing today to help us act on our values, and come to the Compañeras/os Forum at 11:30 a.m. to learn more about the state and federal DREAM Acts, and to meet students from our community who are working hard to achieve their own rights and the rights of their peers to experience the American dream, and to fulfill God’s dream for them. Amen.