

TO OUR TEACHERS, WITH LOVE

In 1967 there came from Hollywood a film that touched me deeply. It starred Sidney Poitier and was called, "To Sir, With Love." It was the story of an earnest young teacher who was assigned to a tough inner-city school in London, England. The students were rough and unruly, brattish and sometimes brutal. They drove the teacher nearly to the point of despair. Yet he persevered, seeking to fill their rebellious minds with knowledge and manners. One thing, in that English setting, that he demanded was that they call him "Sir." After many trials and tribulations he began to win them over. At a dancing party he planned for them the most poignant moment occurred when they presented him with a gift with a note that began, "To Sir, With Love." Perhaps not all teaching experiences turn out that happily during these difficult days, but it is that title, "To Sir, With Love," which we paraphrase this morning. We paraphrase that to say, "To Our Teachers, With Love." Let me tell you why.

I am the son of a teacher. My father died at a very young age, leaving my mother with four small children. In order to feed her little family she struggled to acquire a two-year teaching certificate which got her a position in an inner city school in Decatur, Ill. There she taught the second grade for the next 25 years. The children in her school came from the most economically disadvantaged families in the city. In a very short time the Great Depression of 1929 ravaged our community as it did our entire nation. Many of the children in my mother's schoolroom were hungry, ill-clad and sick. But on not a few occasions my mother would take some shoeless child to a store for the purchase of shoes, out of her meager income. Many times I would go with her in the evenings to take food and clothing to the poor homes of some of her classroom children. During that Depression the school board could not pay its teachers in cash. Instead they were given script, which was only a promise to pay at some unspecified later time. Fortunately the coal dealer took that script in lieu of cash, as did one of the grocery stores. That meant that our house could be heated and food put on our table. In those days women did not receive equal pay. A single male teacher would receive a larger salary than a widow with four children. But somehow we made it through the Depression.

In the evening, worn out as she must have been, she gathered her children around her chair, and transformed us into realms of imagination by reading to us from classic literature. My mother was an excellent teacher and during those years she sought to continue her own education. She went to summer school, night school, and took correspondence courses. The result was that when I graduated from Millikin University, my mother was a member of my graduating class. Because of the alphabetical order, I came across the stage to receive my diploma, and she followed. My respect and admiration for public school teachers go very deep.

As we express our appreciation to our Batavia public school teachers, to all of our retired teachers and to those members of our congregation who teach elsewhere, I would like to say two things:

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First, we want you to know that we understand that the profession of teaching has thrust you into the most complex and difficult of times. Any one who doesn't know that teaching these days is incredibly difficult isn't very aware. Sometimes I wonder why anyone would want to be a teacher today, especially when most of you could make a lot more money doing something else.

In a society that has changed radically, it seems that all of our social and cultural maladies have been dumped in your classrooms and made to clutter your desks. In a time that has witnessed the tragic breakdown of the human family, teachers are expected to become surrogate fathers and mothers, policepersons, social workers, drug and behavior counselors, and corrections officers for our social disorders. At the same time, teachers are blamed for student dropouts, illiteracy, the inability of Johnny to read, drugs and alcohol abuse, gangs, pregnancies, violence, ethnic conflicts, and even suicides. In the great spiritual vacuums created by the turmoil of our times, you are expected to play the roles of healer and miracle worker.

Many years ago, before Southern Methodist University fell afoul of a football scandal, Dr. Willis Tate, then the president, received a delightful letter from the mother of one of his incoming freshman. A friend of mine attended a dinner where he heard Dr. Tate read this letter. It was a letter full of concern and anxiety about what was going to happen to her son in college. She informed Dr. Tate that she was holding him personally responsible to see that her boy got the right kind of room-mate. She wanted that room-mate to be a clean boy, the kind who did not wear beads or grow a beard. She wanted him to be a good student, because, frankly, he was a little weak in that department and would probably need some help with his studies. She wished that the room-mate would be the kind of a boy who would go to church and Sunday School every Sunday, so that her son would be encouraged in these good habits. Furthermore, she didn't want her son to room with someone who smoked, or drank, or used bad language. And, if at all possible, she wanted him to be someone who was not interested in girls, because that could lead to trouble. She concluded her letter, saying, "The reason all of this is so important is that this is the first time my boy has been away from home, except for the three years he spent in the Marines." (Clarence Forsberg, St. Paul UMC, Lincoln, Nebr. 9-15-68.)

We laugh at that, but that is really something like the burden that is dropped heavily on the shoulders of public school teachers today. And with the same kind of unreality!

Years ago the famous humorist, Bennett Cerf, quoted in the Saturday Review this definition of a teacher:

A teacher is Courage with Kleenex in her pocket, Sympathy struggling with a snow suit, and Patience with papers to grade. A teacher really does not mind sniffles, squirmings, stomach-aches, spills, sloth, and sauciness. Neither does she disintegrate before tears, trifles, fights, futility, excuses, parents who spout, little boys who shout, and

little girls who pout. Most of all, a teacher is one who likes somebody else's children - and still has the strength left to go to the PTA meeting. Thank Heaven for teachers. (April 24, 1953, p.8)

I first saw that in 1953, and do you know what Bennett Cerf added? He said, "Amen, and how about seeing to it that they get a living wage."

A book published this last year which has had a most surprisingly high place on the Best Seller list is Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind. It is all about education and it has stirred vigorous discussion and controversy. Speaking of an earlier time when teaching was more respected, he describes the despair of many contemporary teachers: "This powerful tension, this literal lust for knowledge, was what a teacher could see in the eyes of those who flattered him by giving such evidence of their need for him. His own satisfaction was promised by having something with which to feel their hunger, an overflow to bestow on their emptiness. His joy was in hearing the ecstatic, 'Oh, yes!' as he dished up Shakespeare and Hegel to minister to their need." (p.135,136)

Allan Bloom speaks of teaching college students, but I am sure that primary and secondary teachers have the same experience. I know that one of the realities of present-day teaching is the realization that you are seeking to stimulate and motivate young minds that have been numbed by constant exposure to the television monster. Indeed, you have bright and highly motivated students who give you much gratification, but you surely despair when trying to reach into the minds of many other students who have the necessary intellectual gifts but not the will to learn. Many years ago I read an excellent book by Jacques Barzun. He called it Teacher in America. In this book he wrote: "Tutoring a single person - as someone has said - makes you understand what a dynamo feels like when it is discharging into a non-conductor." (p.27) I am sure that many teachers today, eager to share through teaching, often feel like dynamos discharging into non-conductors. Some students simply are not interested in learning. Under such conditions of this chilling non-responsiveness, it is a wonder that some of the dynamos do not short-out from overload.

The other day I heard Dr. Edward Cave point out that on August 31, 1987, the Batavia Public Schools entered the 21st century. On that day the kindergarten students who attended their first day of school will graduate from high school in the year 2000. These children, he pointed out, are in the process of becoming the adults of the 21st century. (Report to Our Community, 1986-87, Batavia Public Schools, Batavia Schools Excel) That is a thrilling venture to contemplate and I know that the excellence of our Batavia Schools will rise to that challenge. Still, I fear that if some of our kindergarten children in the 21st Century are chosen to help establish a human colony on Mars, if that community travels with some of the baggage of the racial, social and political disorders from earth, the most convenient target for blame will be our public schools!

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Let me now turn to the other thing I want to say to you. Knowing the heavy burdens that you bear on behalf of all of us, I want you to know of our profound gratitude for a service that I would call a ministry. In political terms, there is a whole body of ministers in some nations or states, entrusted with government. In some places they are called ministers of justice, ministers of transportation, ministers of finance, etc. In the case of public school teachers I think your ministry is deeper and more committed. All of my life I have cherished the title "minister," but I sincerely believe that your chosen vocation of service to human needs and growth is just as authentic and meaningful as mine.

I would like to think that someone, somewhere, has been grateful for my ministry as a servant of the church; and I want you to know that we here, today are expressing our heartfelt gratitude for your ministry to our children.

Ross Synder, a distinguished theologian at the Chicago Theological Seminary once declared that "Learning" takes place when "something is being incarnated in personal-social life." He pointed out that electronics and print devices can pass along information, but incarnating takes place when a person is part of a community where interaction with "belief-ful persons is going on." (Christian Advocate, Jan. 7, 1971, p.13) Dr. Snyder was speaking primarily of Christian education, but that same kind of incarnating occurs when a public school teacher interacts with students who are led to believe in a wondrous world of nature, literature, science, and art. That is your ministry, and true learning takes place because you incarnate truth.

Most historians would agree that the greatest period in television and radio history was pioneered by the late Edward R. Murrow. He influenced me profoundly. In a biography of Murrow, Alexander Kendrick shares this about Murrow:

Idea Lou Anderson was a speech instructor at Washington State U. who taught Ed how to speak with that remarkably orchestrated voice and style. A transplanted Southerner, she spent most of her life in a wheelchair, the victim of poliomyelitis. She was Ed's mentor and the inspiration for his interest in poetry, debating, drama and the world out there . . . In writing of Miss Anderson to his fiance, Ed said: "She knows me better than any person in the world. The part of me that is decent, that wants to do something . . . is the part she created . . . I owe the ability to live to her, and to her you owe the things you like in me. She calls me her masterpiece." (from Prime Time: the Life of Edward R. Murrow, quoted also in Saturday Review, Sept. 27, 1969, p.22)

I know that many of you teachers have fashioned such masterpieces.

Recently I learned of a prize that is given annually to an outstanding Latin student at the University of California, Riverside. Let me give you the official name of that award: The Lydia Jeane Stafney Prize in Latin. That Prize in far off California is named for Lydia Jeane

Stafney who taught Latin in the Batavia High School for many years. It is so named because of the inspiration and excitement she had brought to David Glidden, one of her Batavia students, who now teaches philosophy at the University of California, Riverside. It was he who named that Prize for her.

Let me cite you other examples of how the influence of great teachers has been noted. The street that runs in front of the J.B. Nelson School here in Batavia has been named William Wood. That street sign indicates the incarnating presence of an outstanding teacher, William Wood, who over a 36 year period taught and served as principal in Batavia's elementary schools. The schools named for Alice Gustafson, Louise White, H.C. Storm, J.B. Nelson, and Grace McWayne, all express deep and lasting gratitude for teachers who have forever enriched the lives of countless persons who have passed through our system of schools.

We can only imagine the influences you have had on the lives of hosts of students. Because of you, horizons have been widened, life-decisions have been made, the windows of a wonderful world have been opened, beauty, truth, goodness and justice have been caught as in a vision. Your vocation is, indeed, a ministry to growing human spirits. Seymour Halford, my colleague, let me read his dissertation for his doctor of ministry degree. In that dissertation I found a quotation from the great poet, Carl Sandburg. Sandburg defined poetry in this way: "Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable." (from Harvest Poems, 1910-160, p. 77) There is a sense in which the work of the teacher verges upon the poetic. You not only provide your students with the language to grasp the realities of the known, but you also "shoot your syllables at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable." That is what education is all about, that is its quintessence.

Jacques Barzun, to whom I alluded earlier, also wrote that "Ideally, a teacher should speak with the tongue of an angel and look like one." (Ibid.44) Many students may not dig angelic talk, and when you get home after an exhausting day and look in the mirror, you may not see an angel. But to me you are all ministering angels.

We are directing this day "To Our Teachers, With Love." The word love suffers from much abuse and misuse. We hope that it does not sound superficial and phony in this context. We do not speak it with mere sentimentality and slickness. We do it with sincerity, for we love you because of what you do for our children and our community. We honor you because in our heritage as a church we have always honored education and teaching. It is significant to us that in our heritage our two most towering figures were most frequently called "teacher." I refer to Moses of the Wilderness and Jesus of Nazareth.

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delivered November 15, 1987
Batavia United Methodist Church
Batavia, Illinois