

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
OPENING ACT

Texts on Sunday, September 16, 2012

*Psalm 8; Matthew 13: 1-17*

Today, we are exploring what Christian life has to say about education—not just for those following programs, but for everyone who wants to see seed sown in good soil. For those new to this sanctuary today, taking up the subject of education might sound odd. *What sort of holy worship is this that worries about education? Doesn't that belong in the school room or lecture hall or on the campaign trail?* The situation is this. Every Sunday this fall, we are looking at the intersection of two realities. One, how stuck we are as a nation, unable to act together to heal social wounds, while partisans hold what seem to be irreconcilable differences. And two, what possibilities faith can see in the midst of the muck; to affirm values at the heart of partisan differences—the wings of the dove—and to ask how Christian patterns can embolden us to deeper truths than parties can plumb.

So we are going to start with how stuck it is in education. Consider the Chicago teachers' strike. It may end soon, and we hope that is good, but the commentary on what those teachers were demanding shows us stuck! A writer for the conservative journal *National Review* sees teachers “. . . marching around refusing to work when millions of Americans are begging for a job . . . dismiss[ing] a 16% raise and (slightly) stricter performance standards . . . that any worker with a job would find utterly lenient.” But McMaster University professor Henry Giroux (author of *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*) says “the struggle in Chicago is as much about the fate of democracy as it is about the fate of public schooling in America . . . The teachers' strike is an important salvo in the war being waged against all things . . . associated with public values, all things democratic, and it is far from over.” Never mind for a minute who is right; that is stuck!

In a story about the current boom in farm productivity and income, I learned that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> c., mid-western farm communities saw the writing on the wall: Farm jobs would disappear as mechanization reduced the hands needed to bring food from the ground. Instead of hiding their heads in sands of despair, those farm communities invested in educating their young. That is, they taxed themselves in every necessary way to prepare their children to either leave the land ready to work in the city, or to become the smartest science-minded farmers ever found on earth. That's what *not-stuck* looked like—but they started in on that future 100 years ago. We're stuck.

A *New York Times* column by Charles Blow (Aug 24, 2012) brought a barrel of facts to bear on our situation. In huge numbers, our American children are sick, poor, and hungry—and we expect them to learn? Half of them have no access to pre-kindergarten programs—but no policy exists to improve these

numbers drastically. Once we boasted the world's largest class of high school graduates. Now we're busted with the world's largest underclass of high school dropouts. But both China and India, Blow reports, plan intensively to improve the education of their people. Before another generation passes, those nations will graduate students in numbers that far exceed the entire workforce of America. But we can't quit fighting over paying down another dime of taxes for our children's future. That's stuck!

When a nation is this stuck, the crisis is never merely political. Politics is a symptom or a means to an end of symptoms. But the crisis itself is always spiritual. By spiritual, I mean that the crisis has to do with grave indecision in our citizenry about what a human life really is; what the whole point of our being human is; who is Creator and who is the creature, and what is their right relationship. If you mean to claim the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, you need to let your faith fly out of the Sunday morning pocket up into the light of the Son. What else did we mean when we sang "He's got the whole world in his hands" than that we must all be led out and led up into the one Light? "Led out!" That is the root meaning of *educated*.

So let's fly up into the wide air of God's word. Let Psalm 8 sing out again. *God of mercy, God of might and mind, when I look up at the heavens, at the works of Your creation, What is woman that You rejoice in her? What is man, that You delight in him? Yet you have made us co-creators of the earth, guardians of the world.*" When you lie beneath the stars, when you accept the gift of your whole awareness in some silent space of the night and you step out of the press and worry of the day to settle a while in the mystery of your own being, is it not a marvel that, peering out from behind these eyes, you feel something infinite, something eternal, irreducible, precious, possible? We call this experience "loved by God" because we have no other words great enough for the wonder of being. Only a little less than Godmind looks out from your mind, says the Psalm. And there are seven billion of you. That's the song in Psalm 8. Can you feel what it has to do with education?

If we are not mad to sit in awe of the consciousness that is descending into each one of us, we know not how, then extraordinary, careful, joined stewardship of the development of all minds belongs to us as our first priority in thanks for the life we have been given. Was anything ever plainer than that a mind left to itself, untutored, uncared for, can never be released from the prison of its ordinary hungers into authentic freedom? Anyone who ever went to rebuild a house in ruins knows you check the foundation first, and abandon it if it's beyond repair. Education is the foundation for the whole house of society. Therefore, seeing to a good education for every soul is core to everything we could possibly mean by obeying the great commandment to love our neighbor as our self. And here is some good news: You and those whom you oppose politically can agree on the core value of education.

But the next question is, Educate for what? What should we be sure people are learning? Here the wings of the dove beat out of phase. Some hold that education must serve the interests of society by preparing people for the jobs that are out there. Others hold that the purpose of a person is not primarily to serve society, but rather, that a good society serves the development of a whole person. There is a great tension here, and the views do not snap neatly onto a political grid, left and right. Parents of liberal or conservative stripe both lodge fierce complaints against systems that fail to serve the unique needs of their own children. Equally, we all share in the hope that every person should be able to work in a way suited to their gifts and abilities. At the same time, we get it, that it is not the world's job to invent ways to pay people to do just anything they might want to do. Training for the way the world is matters. But the way the world is . . . is also awful. It is unjust and oppressive. Therefore, *merely* training people to serve the world as it is is itself unjust; for the world is not interested in having men and women develop much beyond their abilities to uphold the status quo. What an enigma is education! You have to decide what a human is for before you set up systems to help her become what she is.

In the fall of 1963, just a month before President Kennedy was assassinated, James Baldwin addressed an assembly of public school teachers here in New York City. I encourage you to find the whole text of "A Talk to Teachers." Here is an excerpt:

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really want is a citizenry which will simply obey [its] rules. Yet, if a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

In a previous sermon, we saw that in Jesus' day, society did not exist in the way we experience it today. There was no public education. There was no vote, no people power. There was no expectation of societal change and development. Nevertheless, how James Baldwin defined education, and after him, Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—these very practices of social- and self-examination Jesus had long before identified in his strange method of teaching. So unusual and so subversive were his means that although two thousand years of civilized power and churchy mud have been dumped on his teaching, nothing has ever snuffed out the revolutionary light of Jesus' methods.

Jesus taught by parables. In fact, "without a parable he told them nothing," writes Matthew at the end of the chapter we just heard. Often

people say to a preacher, *Make it plain!* But the Master didn't make it plain. He taught parables. Should we dumb down on him? The word "parable" comes from two Greek words—*para*, meaning "to the side" as in parallel; and "ball," meaning something thrown. If you like basketball, you get *parable*: it's something thrown to the side, it's a fake to the left and a pass to the right. It's not plain, it's a problem, it's a provocation—to get people tipped over, off balance, outside themselves.

Now, if you have been reading the gospels for a long time, you have been marinating in the sauce of this surprising approach to education. You may taste like it now, but you may not have read the label or know the ingredients. This is it. Jesus taught by parables because you can only learn who you really are and what you are really for from a point of view larger than who you *presently* are and what you are *presently* up to. Parables shake you out of your box.

Which soil are you in? Are you sitting on the road, with no intention to grow? Are you on the rocky ground, unprepared to grow? Are you set in among thorns, untended, like those children we send starving into schools, aiming only to take away what little they've got? Or are you in the good soil, full of intention, prepared, and cared for? And if so, what do you intend to do with your fruit, when it comes in? Which soil are you in? All of the above? Of course that's the right answer, students! Parables pose problems. Parables push you into possibilities. They show light and shadow—they help you see what is and what shall be—if you are willing to hear.

Listen. Here is a hard word which America needs to hear from those who walk by faith. Education is the opening act. To stay true to what a human being is really for, education must be like Jesus' education: It must train us—and it must trip us up, and upward. It must sustain us in what we need—but not detain us from moving where God would lead us out. Paolo Freire put the risk of education this way: "The more students work at storing [what society hands to] them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention as transformers of their world." (*Pedagogy*, p. 73)

In other words, a real education is the opening act, not just for the person but for the whole people—provided we are willing to go beyond the limits society so carefully sets to protect its patterns of power and wealth. Education must be revolutionary in the way that Jesus' word was revolutionary. The fearful turn from this. They need you, the faithful, to show the way. Friends, through education, we hold on to the hope of a whole new world. This is how we start the opening act.

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