

# The Teacher, In Teaching

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**August 24, 2008 | Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 16)**

## Lectionary citations

Ex 1:8-2:10 with Ps 124

Rom 12:1-8

Matt 16:13-20

*He to whom the Church was to be entrusted, he, the pillar of the churches, the harbor of faith, was allowed to sin; Peter, the teacher of the world, was permitted to sin, so that having been forgiven himself he would be merciful to others. (John Chrysostom (c.347-407))*

As I was growing up, there was no one outside of my family I loved and admired more than my teachers. I respected and feared them, and I loved them for opening up new wonders to me almost every day. My favorite subjects were history and science, and I will admit that I was the “teacher’s pet” in some of those classes. When I did not get along with a teacher, well, there was not much worse that could happen! As I grew up, completed my education, and planned a career, I never seriously considered teaching. However, as soon as I had spent a few years out in the world of work, I started seeking out opportunities to teach as a supervisor, as a fitness instructor, and as a trainer of computer technicians. I realized that part of what I valued so much of about teachers came from the fact that they were not just willing to teach others. They themselves were learning new things every day. I wanted to be like them.

Today’s Epistle and Gospel emphasize the importance of teaching in the church. They deal with the difficult questions of “who will teach” and “what to teach.” Let us start with the question of who will teach the church. Paul lists teaching as one of the gifts given to members of the Church. These gifts are given by grace and benefit the entire Body of the Church. Paul’s

answer of who should teach is simple—those given the gift of teaching should teach in proportion to the measure of their faith. However, remember that these gifts, including teaching, are received through belonging to the body of Christ. Someone who receives the gift of teaching the Church may not bring to the church any of the training, experience, or ability that we usually expect a teacher to possess.

Peter is a wonderful example of someone chosen by God to teach the church despite a complete lack of qualifications. Peter was a fisherman. Peter was uneducated, but he was ready to learn. Peter listened, and when Jesus told complex and confusing stories, Peter was the one to say, "Explain the parable to us." Peter asked Jesus questions, such as "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?" and "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Peter is our representative in the Gospels when we struggle to understand what Jesus meant.

If a Church teacher is supposed to be perfect in faith, Peter was completely unqualified. The quote that I opened with naturally refers to Peter's famous dereliction, his three-time denial of being a follower of Jesus. Anyone hearing the Passion story for the first time must think that Peter's story is over. Peter ranks just above Judas as a betrayer of his Master. In the Gospel of Matthew, the last time we hear Peter's name is when the rooster crows, "Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly." That is the end of Peter in Matthew.

However, it was not the end of Peter in the life of the Church! We are beginning a study of the Book of Acts next week. That book starts with a bang—Pentecost. It was at Pentecost that the Holy Spirit transformed Peter into an inspiring preacher and teacher. Throughout his story in Acts, Peter teaches and continues to learn. He struggles with the difficult question of how to grow the Church to reach all people, not just Jews and converts to Judaism. Although Paul emerges as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Peter is given the pivotal role of baptizing the first undoubted Gentile convert, Cornelius the centurion of the Italian Regiment. To prepare Peter for this awesome task, God sends Peter a vision not just once, but three times. Peter goes to Cornelius' house and addresses a large crowd, saying,

*"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"*

When Peter learns that they want to receive the Gospel, he teaches them about Jesus, they receive the Holy Spirit, and Peter baptizes them. Peter received the gift of teaching, and he taught.

The World expects teachers to have certain qualifications and experience. The Church looks for those who God calls to teach. We must remember, however, that being called and gifted to teach is not magical. Peter still needed years of preparation, listening to Jesus and asking questions, before he was ready to be "teacher of the world." This is true of us when we are called to teach Sunday school, Bible study, confirmation, and when we are called to teach our friends and families about God's goodness. The gift of teaching is also the gift of becoming a learner.

What is it we need to learn and teach? The simple answer is Jesus. We teach Jesus through the living Word of God, the Bible. Stop and consider that for a second. We are asked to learn and teach wisdom beyond all human power, the Wisdom of God. When Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say I am?" Peter gave an answer that no one could have expected. This simple fisherman went well beyond the tentative and shallow suggestions of the crowd that Jesus was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter was a big man, but his answer was much bigger than he was. As Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." Next to this big answer, Jesus' "over-the-top" blessing of Peter as the leader of the unborn church seems appropriate. Are we ready to teach these "big answers" to our friends, neighbors, and children? Are we ready to listen to these big answers, the answers that come from God?

Teaching the Gospel has a superficial resemblance to other forms of teaching. We have a reference book, the Bible, we have study guides and curriculum, and we may even venture into scholarly works of history, archeology, and theology. We need to learn and teach what is called "Bible content"; names, places, dates, events. Nevertheless, teaching the facts of the Bible is only a means to an end. That end is salvation.

Paul puts it very well in today's Epistle, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The purpose of teaching the Bible is to transform the hearts of the teacher and the learner, to renew their minds and transform them so that we think and feel and act a little more like Jesus every day. Like Peter, we need to live

with Jesus from day to day, to listen to Jesus, and ask our questions. Again, as Paul points out, our minds are renewed through becoming a living sacrifice, giving our time, our energy, our abilities, our prayers, our lives to the teaching and learning of God's Holy Word. There is only one place in the Universe where this renewal can take place: in the living Body of Christ, the Church. We, "in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

All members of this congregation are called to learn about Jesus according to their gifts. On this Rally Day, we recognize those members of the Body of Christ who are gifted to teach. Support and encourage them. Most of all, come and see. As Jesus always said, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." Participate in our Christian Education programs as a learner and teacher, read God's Word, ask your questions, and consider the answers. Against all expectations, you may find that, "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." Amen.

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