



Why Do You Teach?

| *The many reasons we teach.*

“Why do you teach Sunday school?”

This deceptively simple question was asked of me a few years ago, at a time when I was teaching the senior high class of our church. I have been thinking about it ever since, and asking others for their answers as well. I would invite you to consider the question for yourself, but even better, perhaps you and the other teachers in your congregation can get together to share your thoughts (Sunday school superintendents, take note). As I have listened to the replies shared in such groups, from those teaching for the first time and from those seasoned by forty or more years, I have never been disappointed. New teachers learn from the experiences of others; the experienced find renewal and energy from those who see teaching with fresh eyes. Those of us somewhere in between the two are inspired by both.

The question was posed to a group of us as part of a conference called “The Spiritual Life of Sunday School Teachers,” where I was a workshop leader. Instead of the ordinary professional or academic introductions, the leaders were asked to introduce themselves by answering the question, “Why do you teach Sunday school?” We were then to provide time for others to think about and share their own answers. As we were given the chance to listen to one another’s replies, several themes emerged.

One had to do with the kind of spirituality that seems to be at work in teaching. What stood out was how many of the everyday notions we tend to associate with spirituality—solitude, order, clarity, solemnity, quiet—were surprisingly sparse or missing altogether. The kind of spirituality that involves teaching Sunday school,

apparently, is of the messier, louder, slightly confusing order, especially for those working with children or youth.

Even so, at the same time a common refrain emerged over and over again in the conversations. It was: “Teaching nourishes my spiritual life.” How so? For some it was through the good things that happen—times that went really well, or occasions that led to important individual or church decisions. For others, some struggle or frustration paved the way to a deeper lesson than

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whatever the topic or plan had been. For some it was the regular study and preparation for teaching; others named insights into the Bible or connections between faith and life emerging through a class discussion. Roles were often reversed—teachers learning from students and students becoming teachers. Very often, it became clear, the cultivation of spirituality through teaching had to do with the relationships that form between people. And I suspect, judging from all the nods and

affirmations shared, all of these and more were at work in nearly everyone. This is just a sampling.

A final common element may have more to do with discussions than spirituality or teaching per se, at least on the surface. That is, everyone had a story to tell. Initial thoughts, fragmented ideas, sentences that struggled and stammered to articulate something meaningful, eventually gave way to stories. “I remember this kid who . . .” “One time I came in all prepared and . . .” “I couldn’t believe the time that . . .” Sunday school teachers, whether they think of themselves as storytellers or not, like their stories. Sunday school stories, Bible stories, stories of our own teachers, stories about people we will never forget—all forming the plot of an ongoing story of faith simply through their telling.

What follows is my own answer from that day, which turns into a story of course, and I offer it simply to get you started thinking, if not talking with others, about why you teach.

Teaching Gives Me Hope

I am not sure, but I believe I have crossed a threshold in the world of Sunday school. While I have been involved in it one way or another, as a student or as a teacher, nearly all of my life, I may now have been teaching longer than I have been a student. But in the end I’m not sure it matters anyway since, in the world of Sunday school, the lines often blur.

In terms of teaching though, my young adult life involved a lot of work and teaching with teens. But when we had children, I found myself gravitating more and more to the adult classes of wherever we were. When they were young, especially, I was around kids so much that I yearned for the company of other adults. As a teacher of other adults, I would learn so much just preparing for the Sunday lesson, but I learned even more—and this is the great joy of teaching for me—from others in the class. Teaching with adults is wonderful. I learn so much.

But for the last several years I have been teaching the high school class at our church. A ragtag bunch, I must admit, that meets in the basement of the church where our voices compete to be heard over an old dehumidifier, and there never seems to be quite enough good light. But because of these youth, now, I would say my motivations for teaching Sunday school have shifted a bit.

Why do I teach Sunday school? In a word, hope. Now I would say that I teach as an act of hope. I teach for hope.

There is so much that is discouraging in our world. And when I look at young people who are caught somewhere between childhood and adulthood, I find myself yearning for hope—both for them and for myself. I illustrate with a story from that high school class a few years ago. I wrote the experience down then. And while it’s risky to talk about the 9/11 disaster now without overwhelming everything, when I thought about why I teach Sunday school, this story would not let go of me.

It was the Sunday after 9/11. In the high school class we had planned to discuss “images of Christ.” It was to be the topic for the whole year and this would be an introduction. But instead, as you can imagine, we spent most of the time just talking about what happened, of the images now disturbing these young people and searing themselves into their minds: flames and smoke, planes and buildings, and so many bodies now broken.

It seemed important just to talk, to share our shock, to just be together in the context of the church, even if we could not make great sense of such pain in the world. I avoided answers, and so did they. But for some reason, after some forty-five minutes or so of this, perhaps feeling some modicum of responsibility to the morning lesson, a simple question popped into my head and I asked it.

“What images of Christ come to mind in relation to this tragedy?”

A few moments of silence followed.

Finally, from a thoughtful young woman came a response. “An Arab man,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I guess I mean Middle Eastern, you know, with a dark complexion, not so white, blond and blue eyed like we usually see. I mean with everybody now suspicious of Arabs, I think, you know, like Jesus would look like that.”

Someone else followed. “I guess I think of the firefighters. You know, there they are sacrificing their lives for other people, like Jesus.”

Another: "The first thing I thought of was that story where Jesus fed the five thousand."

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"Why?"

"I don't know, maybe because Jesus is feeding people who need help. . . . And that's how many they think may have died."

Another image followed. "That makes me think of the Eucharist."

"How so?"

"Well, the body and the blood. I mean, people are laying their bodies on the line for other people, just like Jesus, and people are literally giving their blood in blood banks all over the country."

We left it there. It was time for worship.

Again, even at the risk of overwhelming ourselves with thoughts of the 9/11 disaster now, when I thought about why I teach Sunday school, this story would not let go of me. Young people need hope. Young people give me hope. From the outside, Sunday school may just look like people sitting around talking about lessons, but

from the inside, having been on the inside, I am convinced more is going on. The insights and attitudes of these teenagers come from being a part of a community that worships, cares, and learns together week after week.

I am convinced that in such dim basement rooms of ragtag kids, God is at work planting seeds of hope in a world that desperately needs it. I teach for hope and give thanks.

Some Questions for You to Consider

- How long have you been teaching and why did you start?
- How have your motivations changed since starting to teach?
- What have you learned from students?
- What are your own earliest memories of attending Sunday school?
- Did you have a favorite teacher at church or school? What do you remember about that teacher?
- In your mind, what role does Christian education play in the life of faith?

About the Writer

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