

Today as we offered our blessing for all of our kids and educators for a new year, I want us to think for a moment about teachers. Can you think of a teacher who had a profound impact on you? A teacher that made you feel safe and empowered to learn?

I was fortunate to have a lot of really great teachers and coaches and I still remember in vivid details some of the lessons I learned from them, but the best teacher I ever had was my second grade teacher, Ms Neyman.

You see, first grade was one of the worst years of my life. We didn't know it at the time but my first grade teacher was dying of cancer. While she had not received a diagnosis when I was in her class, I'm sure she felt utterly miserable and the way that impacted our classroom was that she had no patience, no energy, really nothing to give us except her pain and frustration and anger. And to be clear, none of that was her fault, but it did make for an awful experience.

I would go to school crying every day, worried sick that I would do something to make my teacher snap at me. I ended up in the hospital several times that year with uncontrollable nausea and while the doctors eventually figured out and treated that issue, I also think the anxiety of school had something to do with.

It wasn't just that I hated school. I was terrified of going to school. I survived the year more than finished it, but one thing I knew and that was school was an awful place.

Naturally, I didn't want to start second grade after summer break. But then I met Ms Neyman. To this day, my parents credit her with saving me – at least saving me in the sense of helping me come to love school.

She was kind. She obviously cared about every student in the class. She made learning fun. And she was hilarious.

For many of us – and certainly for me – our teachers have maybe had more of an impact on who we are than anyone other than our parents. Maybe even more so in some cases.

And certainly that's true about the teachers we had in school, but I think it's also true in a more informal sense. If we're lucky, we've all had people in our life who have been mentors, people whose wisdom and example showed us the way forward, people who were our teachers, even if they didn't have that formal title.

I think the woman we read about in our Scripture today was one of Jesus' teachers.

Think about that concept for a minute – Jesus' teacher.

It's kind of strange, right, because we think of Jesus as part of the Trinity, as divine, as perfect. And yet one thing Christian theology holds is the tension that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, and if Jesus was a human, then that means he had things to learn. It means he was a product of his time and place just like we all are. It means he needed people to help him see the world, and his place in it, a little differently sometimes.

I first started thinking about this idea that Jesus needed a teacher when another teacher of mine asked one of the hardest questions I've ever had to answer in an academic setting. It was Dr. Willie Jennings, one of my seminary professors and one of the most influential theologians working today. Currently he is at Yale Divinity School.

Dr. Jennings was famous for asking his students to deal with the hardest questions they might get when they became pastors. He didn't believe in giving us an out in dealing with the hard stuff. So on one of Dr. Jennings test, he printed the passage of Scripture we read today and then had this question for us to respond to, "You are a pastor of a church and a member of your church comes to you and tells you that she's troubled by this passage. She asks, "It seems like Jesus calls a woman with a different ethnicity a dog. Was Jesus being a racist in this story?"

I told you Dr. Jennings believed in asking hard questions but it's the exact question the Scripture poses to us if we take it seriously.

Jesus called a woman with a different ethnicity a "dog,"

*Now racism in the modern sense is a constructed category that didn't really develop until 1500 years after Jesus day to justify colonialism but Dr. Jennings wasn't asking us to give a discourse on the history of the concept of race. He was asking us to answer the woman's question.*

Imagine for a moment this story from the perspective of the woman. Word had spread about this Jewish prophet who had opened the eyes of the blind, drove out demons, and brought good news to the poor. And this same Jesus was coming to her hometown. This was good news as she knew what it was to see the suffering of someone she loved. Her daughter was tormented by a demon. She must have suffered herself seeing one she loved tormented in such a way, knowing that there was nothing she could do about it, nothing until that day when Jesus passed through. So she cried out to this Jewish prophet, she cried out a plea for mercy and healing.

What answer was she expecting? Was she expecting Jesus to pronounce that her sins are forgiven as he had done for so many others? Was she expecting Jesus to simply touch her daughter, healing her as he passed? Whatever she was expecting, the answer she got was harsh – maybe the harshest thing Jesus ever said to anyone, "I've not come for you. I'm here only for the Jews. I will not take the food for the children and throw it to dogs like you."

Whether or not Jesus' words pierced her, they certainly pierce me. How could a man who constantly welcomed outcasts and forgave sinners respond in such a way to this SyroPhoenician woman? I think the answer is simple: Jesus was not only divine but also fully human and, as such, he had been taught his whole life that women like her were less than and that Jewish people shouldn't associate with them. In Jesus day, every morning, male Jews would pray and thank God that they had been born, "a Jew and not a dog (the Jewish derogatory term for non Jewish people called Gentiles), a man and not a woman, a freeman and not a slave." Jesus must have heard this prayer many times. It is quite likely that Jesus began each morning with this prayer himself, at least until he met this woman who had two strikes against her – a Gentile and a woman.

But whatever this woman felt after Jesus' harsh words, she found the strength to remind Jesus that dogs, that she eats too. This Syro Phoenician woman, whose name we do not even know, has become one of my favorite characters in all of Scripture. And I think I'm so struck with her because she refused to let Jesus have the last word. No, she didn't make some great statement about equal rights for all. No, she didn't chastise Jesus for his prejudiced remark. She simply reminded him that dogs eat too. It wasn't really meant to be a challenge to Jesus' worldview, at least it wasn't an overt challenge...and yet, Jesus was changed. Jesus himself said it was because of her response that Jesus changed his mind. Jesus learned to see her as a human and not as a dog, a person even whose faith was to be admired.

This woman is the only person in all of the gospels who gets the best of Jesus; she's the only person that causes Jesus to change his mind; the only person who taught Jesus.

Jesus was willing to have his mind changed by someone whom he had been taught his whole life was less than. And I wonder if the reason Jesus would later welcome Mary as his equal when he was at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, is because he had learned his lesson from the SyroPhoenician woman – that no one is a dog, no one is second class status regardless of gender or ethnicity or any other category. For the rest of his life, Jesus never treated anyone as less than again.

But here's the thing, a teacher can only teach someone who is willing to be taught. We would likely never know this woman even existed if Jesus didn't realize he had something to learn from her. It is so tempting to react defensively if I am called out for my prejudice, my racism, or my complicity in systems of oppression. And yet, Jesus, the Son of God, didn't react defensively. He, in essence, admitted that he was wrong. He was able to receive a challenge from someone whom he had been taught was less than him. And because he was able to receive that challenge, he was able to be transformed.

And that brings me back to the blessing we offered our kids and educators today. For most of us, my guess is that it is easy to remember our teachers from our past. But I want us to do something that is maybe a little harder.

Imagine who might be our teachers as we go forward.

It's harder on a number of levels because, for one, most of us aren't formally students anymore and so we don't think about the people in our lives as possible teachers. But I think the other reason is that it's natural that, as we get older, we become more set in what we think and how we live. We begin to think that it's our job to pass on the wisdom not to receive it. And that's half right. It is our job to pass on our wisdom, especially to the kids we blessed this morning and others in our community. But I would argue, it's also our job to always be open to being challenged, to always remain teachable.

And if we can have an open mind, I bet you we might find that some of our best teachers might be these same cute kids we blessed a few minutes ago. What I find so striking about our Scripture is that no one, probably including Jesus, thought that the SyroPhoenician woman could

teach Jesus something he needed to learn. And yet Jesus was open enough to receive the teaching, even if it came as a surprise.

While it's a different dynamic with our kids, I think the temptation is similar – to assume that we have things to teach them while forgetting that they also have things to teach us. But any of us who have ever been open to learning from kids knows how wrong that assumption is.

I've learned so much from my own kids, and from kids in youth group and confirmation class. They don't always accept what I say about God or life or really anything at face value. They're willing to challenge me. And guess what, I've learned from them. I've changed my perspective because of them. I'm a different and, I would argue, a better person because of them.

We are a church that takes great pride in having a meaningful children's ministry. One of the great losses of COVID was the depletion of that ministry and one of the things I'm most proud of is how Katy and the CE board have built it back into the vibrant program it is today. But I think maybe the most important things we as a congregation can do to be a church that always welcomes and affirms children and youth is to simply be willing to receive their questions, their challenges, their perspectives, their hopes, and their ideas for who they would like this community to be...to invite them to change us.

We are called to be their teachers, but we are also called, to be open to the reality that they also have a lot to teach us.

I began this sermon by asking you to think about a teacher who has had a profound impact on you. I'll end it with the challenge to be open to discovering that sometimes the teachers we need might not be those we expect. So may we always be open to learning and being transformed by them, and, in so doing, to follow the example of Jesus.