

Sermon: Rabbis and Disciples
Text: Ephesians 4:1-8, 11-13
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Christian Education Launch
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The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry,

Ephesians 4:11

Over the years I have come to believe that the phrase “Book of Order” can strike fear and trembling, or at least bewilderment, in the hearts and minds of non-Presbyterians.

And maybe in Presbyterians, too. To be honest, it did for me a little bit, back when I first started down the road toward ordination in the PCUSA. What is this book of order people keep referring to, I wondered? And why does it matter so much?

The answer to the first question – what is this book? – is that the Book of Order is the Constitution for our church, which is to say it is the governing document that guides our day-to-day life together, both at the congregational level and the national level, for we are a connectional church, after all.

And the answer to the second question: why does it matter so much—is the same as the answer to the first question: because it’s the Constitution of our denomination.

Over this same span of years, I have also come to admire the Book of Order, and for many reasons. Chiefly, perhaps, because it is a repository of our church’s best thinking, and best practices, developed over many decades, about how to do church, and how to be church, together, in good times and in bad.

That said, one must also admit that the Book of Order is not a perfect document. At different points in our history as a denomination, it has contained discriminatory language directed at African Americans, at women, at gays and lesbians – now all gone from its pages, I’m glad and proud to say.

A more recent change has rankled me personally. Our General Assembly has voted to revise the official language used to describe the office I currently hold. It has now shifted from “Minister of Word and Sacrament” to “Teaching Elder.” “Minister of Word and Sacrament” to “Teaching Elder.” Somehow this feels like a demotion to me.

But you know who disagrees with me on this point? Yes, the General Assembly of our denomination. But you know who else? Jesus.

The writers of the Bible employed many names to refer to Jesus of Nazareth. Christ, that is, Messiah. Prince of Peace, Master, Savior, Lord, Logos, Son of God, Son of Man, among others.

But the name used most often by his disciples was Rabbi. Teacher in English. This same title is also used by the people who actually met him in the course of his ministry, or benefited from his ministry. Evidently lepers and tax collectors and hungry people also thought of him this way: Rabbi. Teacher.

In a sense this is not so surprising. Faith cannot be inherited, or downloaded. In the end, it has to be taught, and this is true even if the teacher is the incarnate Son of God.

When Jesus is blessing and breaking the bread for his disciples, or for the hungry multitudes who followed him out into the countryside, he’s not just serving as a minister of word and sacrament par excellence, he’s serving first as teacher: *This is what faith looks like. And you can do this, too.*

Per the passage in Ephesians I read a moment ago, we’re all called to specific offices in the church and there is a great variety in these offices, a variety that reflects the great diversity of gifts God has blessed us with, individually and collectively.

But at the end of the day, we’re all rabbis, really. We are all teachers because that’s how faith is passed down: by what we say, and what we do, week in, week out, at home, at work, in the classroom and in the boardroom, at the Communion Table and at the kitchen table.

But that’s only half the equation, because we are all students, too. For after all, that is how Jesus referred to his followers: disciples. Ones who learn.

It turns out, though, that some teachers are better than others, and some people are better learners than others.

The good news, though, is that this can change.

Recently I had occasion to visit someone whose life took a decidedly unexpected turn when she was diagnosed with a serious illness that he did not see coming. What was so hard about this experience for her was not just that the illness hit her out of the blue, but that it sent her life sideways, like getting hit by a bus while crossing the street.

It meant several trips to the hospital and an extended stay in the chemo unit. It meant an indefinite stay in a rehab facility, which is where I caught up with her, and where I had a most surprising conversation with her.

We chatted for a while about how she was doing, and our exchange was going along about how one might expect it to, and then she took the conversation up a notch.

“I never expected I would learn so many new things at this age,” she said.

I was both surprised by and pleased with this admission. “Well, ‘Alice,’” I said, “did you know social scientists have a name for that?”

She looked at me a little quizzically, not sure what I meant or where I was going with that thought.

“It’s true,” I continued. “They have a name for what you just described – a willingness to keep learning even when you’re older, even when you’re in a situation just like this,” I said, gesturing to her hospital bed.

Her eyes brightened. “Oh, really? What’s that?”

“They call it ‘the growth mindset.’”

If you haven’t heard of it before let me say right here, right now: the growth mindset is among the most important life practices that any of us can develop. And I mean this not just with regard to the life of faith – though it certainly matters in that regard – but in all of life.

In brief, the growth mindset is simply a willingness to approach life with an open mind and an open heart, and to continue learning your whole life long. It stands in stark contrast to the closed or fixed mindset, which assumes that you are who you are, and your capacities are fixed, and there's not much you can do about that.

Chip and Dan Heath are the sort of the Matthew and Mark of the growth mindset. They are evangelists of this great good news that our capacities are not necessarily fixed. Mind you, it's not Gospel level good news.

But as we get set to launch our CE year, it's good news nonetheless.

In their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* they tell the story of Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University. Together with her research team Prof. Dweck has spent a significant portion of her career studying these two mindsets: the growth mindset and the fixed mindset.

In study after study of how these two mindsets effect behavior, studies whose subjects range from elite athletes to world class musicians to ordinary businesspeople, they found that the growth mindset was the key factor.

That is, a willingness to stretch oneself, to take risks, to accept constructive feedback, to take the long term view, and to understand that failure is essential to growth – these factors were the biggest predictor of a given subject's ultimate success in life.

But the one study that illustrates this point most vividly, and the one that is perhaps most relevant to the launch of our CE program this year, was focused not on elite, high level performers but on junior high students. Math students in particular.

For time's sake, let me summarize their methodology and their results. (You can read the study in full in chapter 4 of *Switch*.)

Professor Dweck and her team looked at two specific groups. All of the students attended the same school, where nearly 80% of the kids were eligible for free lunch. These were low income students, the most at risk group in the country for academic failure.

The control group was taught basic study skills. Not even study skills, really. They were just taught math, and some of the students – most of them, in fact – believed they were bad at it, and they said so out loud. *I'm stupid. I'm terrible at math.*

These statements are all right out of the fixed mindset playbook. And sure enough, these students proved themselves to be right. Their grades, which started off in the C+ range, actually got worse over the course of the year.

The growth-mindset group, by contrast, was taught that the brain is like a muscle, that like your bicep, it can get stronger if you just work at it. The students weren't taught any special skills necessarily. They were just taught that with effort, they could get smarter and they could succeed.

This was literally life-changing news to some of these kids. Here's how Prof. Dweck described the effect. When the teachers introduced the growth mindset idea to the study group, one boy, Jimmy – “a hard core, turned-off, low-effort kid . . . looked up with tears in his eyes and said, ‘You mean I don't have to be dumb?’” (*Switch*, pg. 167.)

From that day on, Jimmy worked hard and became a good student, and the math scores of all of the growth mindset students topped the charts.

Why does this matter? How does this relate to us here today?

- i) Because this can happen at any stage in life. Alice, sick in her hospital bed, was open to learning new things about herself and about how to rise to life's challenges.
- ii) Because take the growth mindset and imagine the results it would produce if you were teaching not math but faith. And
- iii) Because of the kind of world we live in. Because of terrorist attacks and unexpected break ups, and surprise visits to the chemo ward. Because politicians burst on to the scene who terrify you, and because of the violence in our streets.

That's why we keep teaching the faith, and why we start with kids and continue with adults.

Because faith isn't necessarily easy, and it is certainly not a magic wand that you can just wave and make everything immediately better, or okay.

No. Faith is much more like a muscle that you have to develop over time. The really good news is that it doesn't matter when you start practicing your faith and developing this muscle, only that you do.

I don't know if you watched the Olympics this summer, but in event after event, the story was the same. So and so started on the balance beam, or first starting swimming, or took her first tennis lesson when she was four years old.

And now look at where she is. Standing on the podium with a medal hung around her neck.

So imagine if we started teaching kids the fundamentals of faith at four or five years old, where they will be in 10 or 20 or 30 years.

They will grow up believing that they can take on giants and win, that they can feed hungry people, even when resources are scarce, that they can find a solution to homelessness.

They will carry with them throughout their lives the belief that in the end, love will always triumph over hate, that we can get discriminatory language and practices out of our laws and out of our Constitution and out of our church and out of our country.

Some of you don't have to imagine how this works. Some of you have been practicing your faith for years, decades even, and you already know the difference it makes in life.

Which is why today I can confidently say, we are all rabbis and we are disciples.

Amen!