

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Teach Your Children Well
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Teacher Thanksgiving Litany

Leader: Holy God, today we give thanks for teachers, all the men and women of our lives who taught us step by step, day by day, fact by fact, idea by idea. How thankful we are for their knowledge and their desire to teach what they knew.

Congregation: The body is a unit, made up of many parts. So it is with Christ . . . Now we are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it: God has appointed apostles, prophets, healers, helpers, administrators, and teachers. *(1 Corinthians 12:28)*

Leader: In everything set an example by doing what is good. In your teaching, show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned. *(Titus 2:7)*

Congregation: Now, about "brotherly love" we do not need to write to you, for you have been taught by God to love one another. *(1 Thessalonians 4:9)*

Leader: His disciples came to Jesus, and he began to teach them . . . *(Matthew 5:2)*
One of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." *(Luke 11:1)*

Congregation: Since my youth, O God, You have taught me, and to this day I declare Your marvelous deeds. *(Psalm 71:17)*

Together: Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you get up. *(Deuteronomy 11:18-20)*

I love writing litanies for our Church service, taking some topic and finding verses throughout the Bible that empower that topic. Today it's all about "teaching," and we've got verses in there by St. Paul, from the Gospel of Luke, the ancient Psalms, all the way back to one of the oldest books in the Bible.

We are reminded that God teaches, that Jesus was a teacher, that every good Church needs teachers, *and* what it takes to be a good teacher. And then we ended the litany saying together those wonderful images from the Book of Deuteronomy about how to hammer home the teachings we need to learn.

We said at the end, Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you get up.

Those verses are alive today in Judaism. You go to a Jewish home, you'll find a mezuzah on the doorframe, a reminder, just as we read in the litany. If you've ever watched Orthodox Jews at prayer, they have bindings on their hands and little boxes of Scripture on their foreheads, just as we read in the litany.

As for talking about stuff that's important, when you go to bed, when you get up, and in between—hey, we do that in our daily lives all the time. My son Aaron and I shared a lifetime of baseball together all of his growing-up years. I coached and practiced him for 12 years, and if he were here today, he would tell you, yes, it was the first thing we talked about in the morning, the last thing before bed, and every free hour in between.

We went over every game, every practice, every at bat. That's how you teach, how you learn, how you remember. The Book of Deuteronomy is just saying let's squeeze a little God in there, a little faith, a little Scripture. So today, on Thanksgiving Sunday, we are thanking teachers for all our learning.

There are a lot of people to thank in our lives, but lots of them we think of only during a crisis. The dentist: My teeth are bad only 48 hours before an overseas trip, and I need an appointment immediately. Dr. Finnegan always says yes. The furnace repairman: Our furnace goes out only on the coldest night of the winter, once even on Christmas Eve. But Todd Flanagan always comes himself and takes care of it. My doctor: I never call him up and say, "Hi, Dr. Lastromirsky, I'm just calling to tell you I'm having a great day." No. It's always some version of, "Hey, I'm dying. I'm sure of it. Should I come in?" Your list and mine could go on for hours—all those stop-gap people who enter our lives for a moment and get us out of some mess, save our hide, get us functioning again.

Seriously, I'll bet if we had a Plumbers' Thanksgiving Sunday, every family here could tell a great story of how your plumber saved the day. Or nurses! We really should have a Nurses' Thanksgiving Sunday. I think Alida and I spend half our lives visiting hospitals and nursing homes, and every happy patient we meet talks about their nurse.

But today, at the core of our Thanksgiving service, we're thanking teachers. I picked teachers for a couple of reasons. First, other than parents, teachers are the folks who have the most lifelong impact on us. When I talk with four- and five-year-old kids at Church, almost immediately they talk about their teachers. And when you talk to any 80-, 90-year-old person, if you want a great conversation, asked about the teachers from their childhood. Even now, with my 95-year-old father, who lives in a kind of gentle oblivion, when I ask him about his Latin teacher at Mechanic Falls High School up in Maine, my father starts smiling, gets talkative, energized.

In fact, every one of you here today could entertain the rest of us with stories of school days and teachers who shaped you forever. I have the pulpit, so I'll tell you mine. But what I really hope is that this whole day will trigger lots of Thanksgiving memories for you—of teachers from kindergarten to college, from Sunday School to dance class. And who knows? Maybe this spirit of Thanksgiving will carry over, and you'll call your dentist or plumber just to say, "Thanks." No such thing as too much gratitude.

Let's start with the Bible, the verses from our litany. Jesus didn't have an official title. We call him the "Christ," which means "God's anointed one." That's why we call him "Jesus Christ." But 2,000 years ago, people often called him Rabbi. *Rabbi* . . . which means "teacher." That's pretty much what he did for three years. He's famous for a few big miracles: walking on water, raising Lazarus from the dead, removing demons from people. But the bulk of his life's work was teaching. Teaching the public what he was about and teaching the disciples so they'd be prepared to take over after him.

If you saw the Broadway musical, "Godspell," or the old Oscar-winning foreign film, "The Gospel according to St. Matthew," what comes through is Jesus's intensity as a teacher. He had knowledge, and he wanted to share it; he wanted people to get it, to understand.

We've had teachers like that, haven't we? Every one of us. They walk into the room, they're practically bouncing on their feet, they love their subject so much. And there is no bonding quite like when a teacher who loves a subject meets a student who loves it too.

When our Church kids go off to college, I tell them to find one course each semester, one teacher you love, that you can't wait to get to class for, and you'll have a great college career. All you need is that one.

Now, most of you know my lousy track record as a student. You've heard 20 years of sermons, and at least two of my books are confessional. I've been graphically clear about my wasted life in classrooms from PS 90 to prep school to Colgate, one long, consistent, putrid record of academic apathy. No need to repeat any of that. Instead, I'm remembering those times when the "light went on," when some teacher, some subject, some lecture set me on fire for learning.

Do you remember the great Robin Williams film, "Dead Poets Society"? Williams plays the New England prep school teacher whose mantra is "Carpe Diem." "Carpe Diem," he fairly shouts to this classroom. "Carpe, Carpe Diem, seize the day, boys, seize the day, make your lives extraordinary!"

Frankly, I'll bet every person here today has had one teacher in their life who had the power, the influence, the spirit to look you in the eye and dare you to be "extraordinary." And you believed it, and you did it. In some way, with some topics, some concepts, some learning, you "seized the day." And you can sit here in your pew today at age 35, 55, 75, and look back upon that day with that teacher, when it all really began to make you who you are today. That's why we are thanking teachers today.

I was a pastor outside of Boston for several years and while there, took a lot of classes at Harvard, through Harvard Divinity School, the School of World Religion, and plain old Harvard. I took one course at 8 AM, the only class I ever saw where attendance increased as the semester went on, as students told their friends, and people dropped in to hear the lecture.

In another course, many class sessions ended with applause for the teacher. One year, I was taking three courses. My daughter was a freshman in high school. There was a school holiday, so I took her to Harvard with me, a 14-year-old girl on a day off, sitting through three hours of college lectures. If she were here today, she'd tell you it changed her life. She was never the same again. She saw students who couldn't wait to get to class, who battled over good seats, who sat in on courses they weren't even taking; and she saw teachers who couldn't wait to get to class, whose passion and energy for teaching were clear as day.

I have to believe Jesus was that kind of teacher. I've already mentioned that Jesus was a miracle worker and a healer, and I don't doubt any of that. I'm pretty much a full-bore believer. But it is his teaching that grabbed people. It is

his teaching that stuck in their minds and their hearts and propelled Christianity forward. It's what he said and how he said it that turned the light on for people, that changed their lives forever, that opened them up and made them want to know more.

I'll give you an example. Jesus walked on water, the Bible says. O.K. It's sort of a "one-off" thing. Either he did it or he didn't, end of discussion. But when Jesus sits people down and tells them the Parable of the Good Samaritan or teaches them the Lord's Prayer or says, "Go the extra mile," "Forgive 70 times seven," or "Blessed are the peacemakers," we're still working on that 2,000 years later. We're still trying to parse it, apply it, spread it, live it. That's teaching.

No sermon of mine is complete without telling a story I've told you five times before, so I'll close with just such a story. My life was forever changed—maybe even saved—by an English teacher. When I was 13, I was sent to a New England prep school, Northfield Mount Hermon School for Boys. My father said he knew either the streets were going to kill me, or he was going to kill me. So one day I was dropped off in the wilds of Western Massachusetts. And I proceeded to waste every minute and every opportunity and was eventually kicked out. When I worked my way back in, Dr. Clough took hold of me (and I do mean took hold of me).

Dr. Clough was everything a prep school teacher in a mid-60s, macho, all-boys Christian boarding school should *not* be. He hated sports, smoked like a chimney, cursed like a trooper . . .

But oh, how he loved the written word. He loved poetry, he loved literature, he loved writing. He made us recite out loud. He made us write, he made us think; he pushed, he cajoled; he would, every day, hit me over the head with a rolled-up *New York Times*, demanding to know what garbage I was creating that day. But every clout of *The New York Times*, every curse-laden criticism, every torturous assignment came with two truths: he loved words, and he believed in me.

Since I've been your pastor, I've written five books. The sixth went to the publisher this week. And I can honestly tell you, after every paragraph, every story, every poem, every book, I ask myself if this would be good enough for Dr. Clough. You don't get to see it, not a word or a sentence, until it is good enough for that teacher.

That's the measure of our Christlikeness, too, isn't it? At the end of each paragraph of our daily lives, each period, each chapter, each story, we want to know if we matched Jesus's teaching.

Today, we honor the men and women of our Church, Christlike people who have raised generations of children to measure up, to love some topic, to treasure learning, to open a book, to love words, to know something worth knowing. Thank God for them.

Let's join together and sing our final Hymn, No. 714, "For the Fruit of All Creation."

*For the fruit of all creation,
thanks be to God.
gifts bestowed on every nation,
thanks be to God.
For the plowing, sowing, reaping,
silent growth while we are sleeping,
future needs in earth's safekeeping,
thanks be to God.*

*In the just reward of labor,
God's will is done.
In the help we give our neighbor,
God's will is done.
In our worldwide task of caring
for the hungry and despairing,
in the harvests we are sharing,
God's will is done.*

*For the harvests of the Spirit,
thanks be to God.
For the good we all inherit,
thanks be to God.
For the wonders that astound us,
for the truths that still confound us,
most of all that love has found us,
thanks be to God.*