

Teacher: Teaching and Gratitude

What if teaching were fueled by gratitude

It was the end of the school day. Liz dragged herself into the teachers lounge and flopped down in an armchair, sighing loudly. A colleague asked, "Tough day?" Liz relates:

"'I've had enough,' I replied. 'It's just so hard. There must be an easier way to earn an income.' My colleague responded: 'What drew you into teaching as a career?' I didn't have to think long about the answer. 'The idea of teaching really excited me. Plus, I genuinely like working with children. But I just don't have that spark I used to have, and I know this is carrying over into my teaching.'

"My colleague looked at me and said, 'What were the first words you said to your class this morning?'

"'John, please tuck in your shirt! And everyone get into two straight lines!'

"This conversation was a personal watershed moment. I realized I should be grateful for my health and my job, which are gifts of grace, and demonstrate this to my students. I could be organized enough to be at the door when my class arrives, so I can greet them. I could hold the door open and smile as they come through. I could stop making negative comments to my students about how tough teaching is. This would let them know they are valued and that I value working with them."

What's going on here?

Liz had begun to see teaching mainly as day-to-day drudgery and needed to see it with gratitude again and in terms of grace and hope so that she could offer encouragement to her students.

She engaged with pupils in a more intentional way by changing her attitude and the way she spoke to them so that they experienced her teaching differently.

She reshaped her practice by changing her habits and being intentional about the image of teaching and learning that she was presenting to students through her choice and timing of words.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

To have faith in God means to live it out in everyday life — the exciting and the humdrum, the good and the bad. For Christian teachers, teaching is a vocation and not just a job. Living out a vocation means reflecting God in the area of life to which you may be called, reflecting his love and justice, his peace and holiness.

What difference does this make?

A change in attitude can make all the difference. Work does not become less challenging, but gratitude can make it feel less difficult for all involved. Small choices in how we use words and gestures and how we start the day can have a cascade effect. Showing students that we value them and their learning can help them to find worth in themselves and their studies too.

Where could we go from here?

There are various ways of communicating worth and gratitude. One school head greets each child every morning at the main entrance with a handshake, eye contact, and encouraging words. Liz notes: “This realignment of my outlook is just the tip of the iceberg with so much more that I will need to work through, but I am excited to have come this far. I know that teaching will still be a challenge, but focusing on God’s blessings is a good place to start. Time for reflecting on our teaching practices is precious enough, but taking time to reflect on who we are and who our students are before Christ is something we need to be doing regularly.”

Digging deeper

The primary calling for Christians is our relationship with God and fulfilling the responsibility that derives from that relationship to be his coworkers in the world. Our secondary callings are the different ways in life that we do that. These include our family and the various jobs that we do through our life. As we change jobs and roles, our primary calling continues to be expressed. To be a Christian is to be on the journey through life that results from seeking to fulfill one's vocation. A vocation for life is not the same as a job for life. We may not be in a classroom all our lives, but we may still be called to teach in other ways.

God calls according to the gifts and passions he has given us, though God often can see things in us long before we can (Jeremiah 1:5-6; Exodus 3:10-11). Our duty is to develop those gifts, but often we get swamped with the details and drudgery of work as Liz did. St. Paul advises reflecting on the things that really matter (Phillipians 4:8-9) and giving thanks in all that we do (Colossians 3:17).

Living out our vocation is about transforming the place where we are and bringing God's grace into a situation. It starts by living differently in a situation, as Jesus did, making a difference to people's lives. It is standing shoulder-to-shoulder and identifying with the people we live and work with. Lack of thankfulness, however, can allow it to descend into drudgery.

We are apt to mistake our vocation in looking out of the way for occasions to exercise great and rare virtues, and stepping over the ordinary ones which lie directly in the road before us. Hannah More

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