

Teachable moments are a gift; they open our eyes; and sight leads to insight, to understanding, to vision. God gives us clarity about who we are and what we are to do when God gives us a teachable moment.

God gave us some teachable moments this week; three moments that reveal the challenge before us and the opportunity these challenging times present.

That these are challenging times for the Church is no secret. The Reading Berks Conference of Churches is offering a series of classes on renewing congregational vitality in the next few weeks. They are repeating these classes because they were so popular in the fall. They were popular because most congregations in most denominations are struggling.

One writer described this challenging time as our exile; like Israel in the Old Testament, the Church has known good days; we were the center of our community. People came to us. The pews were full, and so were the offering plates. We built new churches; we expanded existing churches; we grew and grew.

That is no longer the case, but there is a ray of hope, because exile in the Bible is a time of renewal. We re-discover our faith in exile. We learn what is essential and what is not; we restore our identity, because we remember who we are. And we recognize the ways we haven't been ourselves.

Exile is full of teachable moments; moments when we can hear God say to us: *Isaiah 43:1 (NRSV) But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

❶❷ TEACHABLE MOMENTS 1 & 2: FROM A BLESSING TO A CURSE

A "benediction" is literally a "good word," a blessing. The opposite of a benediction is a malediction, "a bad word," a curse.

Public ceremonies customarily end with a benediction to send us on our way with God's blessing. Every Presidential inauguration since 1937 has included an opening prayer and a benediction, most often by Billy Graham. The benediction by Rick Warren

4 years ago was protested, but this year's proposed giver of the good word, Louis Giglio of Atlanta, an evangelical who is active in the fight to end human trafficking, generated such controversy that he declined this great honor.

Giglio's offense was to make remarks in a sermon he gave in the 1990's that were deemed offensive and intolerant. Much attention has been focused on what he said and on whether or not this protest diminishes religious freedom; but, in my opinion, these two questions are distractions; they distract us from the main point; and we are gifted at distracting ourselves so we miss our God-given teachable moment.

The teachable moment is this: Do the math. Giglio's sermon was given in the 1990's; roughly twenty years ago. Most ministers preach approximately 50 times per year, so 50 sermons times 20 years equals 1000 sermons.

Someone read those sermons. Someone went looking for something they could use. They found it; they used it; and we the people responded with such intensity that Giglio stepped aside rather than mar the moment. His blessing became a curse.

The lesson to learn here is not about Giglio or the protesters; it's about American society; it's about the culture in which we live and the church's place in that culture, or perhaps a better way to state it is to speak of the church being displaced in American culture.

We are in exile. We are not the center of our community. We are not the moral authority who defines what is right and what is wrong. We are not who we once were, but we are still the people of God, and our time in exile offers us the opportunity to let go of who we are not and to embrace who we are: *Isaiah 43:1 (NRSV) But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

The second teachable moment is related to the first; it also speaks to our context, to where we are and how things have changed: As I mentioned in the announcements, our doors will be locked when the office is open, because a neighboring pastor just down the street discovered a young man in her office; he said he was looking for a

bathroom, but his odd behavior suggested he was looking for something else.

Mount Penn has changed; Mount Penn is changing, as are Exeter Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania, and these United States of America.

We are in exile. We are not exempt from the forces we see on our streets and in society that are causing such heartache. The cross on the communion table will not prevent a criminal from stealing an offering, or as happened at a church in Pennsylvania in December; an estranged husband from the taking the life of his wife, the church organist.

We are in exile, and the sources of security and identity that we once relied upon are being taken away at a remarkable rate! We are not who we once were, but we are still the people of God, so be the people of God; not the moral authority, not the power that must be honored, not the center to which all things and all people come. Those days are over, but we're not done! *Isaiah 43:1 (NRSV) But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

③ TEACHABLE MOMENT #3 THE LOST IS FOUND TO BE LOST AND THE BUCK IS PASSED

While the blessing was becoming a curse, the lost was found to be lost, and the buck was passed. We learned this week that \$15.6 million dollars were lost from the books of the Reading School District. One day, we heard the school board say that they were not to blame; the auditors should have caught it, or the state; it wasn't their fault. The next day, the auditors blamed the school for the information they gave. It wasn't their fault. And the day after that, the state blamed the school and the auditors. It wasn't their fault.

Once again, look beyond sight for insight and see the opportunity that is before us. Our headlines are filled with examples of how we lack the capacity to work together for the common good. We are unwilling and therefore unable to build bridges and cooperate with people with whom we differ. We are so sure we are right that we are

willing to let things go so wrong. We condemn compromise and consensus rather than celebrating the lost being found. We are more interested in beauracratc backstabbing and backside preservation than getting something done.

This was the story in Reading; this was what took us over the fiscal cliff; this was what ended the preliminary discussions about unifying Mount Penn and Lower Alsace Township.

Who will look beyond their agenda and partisan perspective? Who will serve? We will, because "we are sent to serve."

We have an opportunity. One of the core values of the Presbyterian Church, and one of the great strengths of Pennside Presbyterian Church, is the belief that "God alone is Lord of the conscience." We do more than tolerate one another; we respect one another; we work together even when we disagree (and we often do!), because "God alone is Lord of the conscience," we are not our own, "*you are mine!*" This conviction keeps us humble. Humility allows us to keep an open mind; and with an open mind, we can discover common ground on which we can together build the common good.

We take that for granted. We're so used to being able to vigorously debate and disagree that we do not see the gift that we have; the opportunity that is before us; the witness that is ours to our Lord Jesus Christ.

"We are sent to serve," and an essential component of our service is this core value of respect born of humility. This is not the value of our culture. This is not the way of the world; it is the way of Jesus Christ, and these ways are different! We are called to be different and thereby make a difference.

"We are sent to serve," so we can't play it safe and stick to ourselves. We are sent out where it isn't easy, where the common good is often sacrificed for the sake of "what's in it for me," where the values we practice are not celebrated but are rejected and condemned.

And yet, if we continue to practice these values, if we resist the pressure and endure the pain, we have the opportunity to make meaningful change. We start by practicing

these values in the groups to which we belong – a get together of co-workers, a civic group like the Lions or Rotary, our children's parent-teacher group. We start there. We change our community one meeting at a time, one attitude at a time.

This isn't easy. We can't do it alone. We can't do it alone. We can do it together. We're in exile, but we're not done! We're just getting started, *Isaiah 43:1 (NRSV) But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. Amen.*