

Amy Richter

Celebration of Episcopal Schools: Jeremiah 3:15-18; Psalm 23; John 10:11-16

St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD

October 4, 2009

*Shepherds after God's Own Heart*

“I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.” (Jeremiah 3:15)

Today we celebrate Episcopal Schools, and two Episcopal Schools in particular, St. Anne's School of Annapolis, which began as a ministry of this church, and has since grown into being its own independent Episcopal School, a sister institution to this one, a partner in the community of Annapolis; and the Preschool of the Arts of St. Anne's, a ministry of this church which serves the larger community. We celebrate these schools and the ministries through which their heads of school, teachers, administrators, and students serve as shepherds after God's own heart, feeding God's lambs with knowledge and understanding. We celebrate anyone who teaches – in a school, at home, at work, at church, anyone who seeks to be a shepherd after God's own heart.

Today's lessons tell us a lot about God's own heart and shepherding. In the gospel Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . I am the good shepherd. . . I know my own and my own know me.”

UNICEF published some statements gathered from all over the world about what makes good teachers. A number of the statements have to do with knowing those we wish to teach. One person from Pakistan wrote, “A real friend is someone who knows all about you and still he loves you. A good teacher is a good friend. A good teacher is someone who teaches . . . with love.” Someone from the Philippines wrote, “Good teaching is keeping yourself in the shoes of your students.”<sup>i</sup>

Elizabeth Ballard wrote a short story about a person who became a good teacher.<sup>ii</sup> The name of the teacher in the story is Mrs. Thompson. As Mrs. Thomson stood in front of her 5th grade class on the very first day of school, she told the children a lie. Like most teachers, she looked at her students and said that she loved them all the same. But that was impossible

because there in the front row, slumped in his seat, was a little boy named Teddy Stallard.

Mrs. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn't play well with the other children, that his clothes were messy and that he constantly needed a bath. And, Teddy could be unpleasant. It got to the point where Mrs. Thompson would actually take delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen, making bold X's and then putting a big "F" at the top of his papers.

At the school where Mrs. Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's past records and she put Teddy's off until last. However, when she reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise, Teddy's first grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners...he is a joy to be around." His second grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle." His third grade teacher wrote, "His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best but his father doesn't show much interest and his home life will soon affect him if some steps aren't taken." Teddy's fourth grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends and sometimes sleeps in class."

By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents, wrapped in beautiful paper and tied with pretty ribbons, except for Teddy's. His present which was clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper that he got from a grocery bag. Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing, and a bottle that was one quarter full of perfume. But she stifled the children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on, and dabbing some of the perfume on her wrist. Teddy Stallard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to." After the children left she cried for at least an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, and writing, and arithmetic. Instead she began to teach children.

Mrs. Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the

faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class and, despite her lie that she would love all the children the same, Teddy became one of her "teacher's pets."

A year later, she found a note under her door, from Teddy, telling her that she was the best teacher he ever had in his whole life.

Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He then wrote that he had finished high school, third in his class, and she was still the best teacher he ever had in his whole life.

Four years after that, she got another letter, saying that while things had been tough at times, he'd stayed in school, had stuck with it, and would soon graduate from college with the highest of honors. Four more years passed and yet another letter came. This time he explained that after he got his bachelor's degree, he decided to go a little further. Now when he signed his name, it was a little longer - the letter was signed, Theodore F. Stallard, MD. When Dr. Stallard married, Mrs. Thompson sat in the place usually reserved for the mother of the groom. To the wedding she wore the bracelet Teddy had given her, the one with several rhinestones missing. They hugged each other, and Dr. Stallard whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you Mrs. Thompson for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference." Mrs. Thompson whispered back. She said, "Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

Have you ever known the joy of being known? Of being known and loved and led into being the person God means you to be?

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep. My sheep know me." In sending Jesus, God did the ultimate version of putting God's very self in our shoes, coming among us, knowing the vulnerability, hurt, pain, sorrows, joys and delights of being human. God knows first hand what it means to be human. God knows each one of us, is nearer to us than our own breath, understands us, and loves us – loves us enough to raise up shepherds after God's own heart, to feed us with knowledge and understanding.

We are all teachers – we are all proclaiming something by our lives – what are you proclaiming by yours? Some of us are teachers by vocation, some of us claim teaching as our life’s work, the privilege that gets us out of bed in the morning and gives focus to our day. But all of us are called to pattern our lives after Jesus the Good Shepherd and to trust in the knowledge and understanding he imparts. The Rev. Guy Sayles sums up Jesus our pattern in this way, “We are meant to have what Jesus had and has: a radical and liberating faith in God; a childlike trust in the grace of God; a trembling wonder before mystery of life; a durable hope that, because we are in God’s hands, death and sorry and pain and tears are not the end, but joy and wholeness and laughter are; an astonishing confidence that we and the world are headed, not toward midnight, but toward sunrise; and an undimmed awareness that the heart of all things is unconditional and compassionate love.”<sup>iii</sup>

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Whether you are teaching this truth or trying to learn this truth, may you be blessed by the shepherd, who knows you and loves you with an unconditional and compassionate love.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.unicef.org/teachers/teacher/teacher.htm>.

<sup>ii</sup> The story was first published in *Home Life* in 1976. Dennis Roddy of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* interviewed the author and learned that she based the story on the experience of a friend of hers who taught Sunday school and was touched by the gifts she received from a student of a broken rhinestone bracelet and a bottle of inexpensive perfume and the author’s own experience as a child of giving her teacher a gift that was ridiculed by her classmates but valued by her teacher.

<sup>iii</sup> The Rev. Dr. Guy Sayles, “We Will Be Like Jesus,” [www.day1.net](http://www.day1.net) April 30,2006 in a sermon on 1 John 3:1-7.