

**“Amazing Teacher”**  
**Mark 1:21-28**  
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My first semester in seminary I took a class on Christian Education taught by Mary Elizabeth Moore. At the first class meeting the syllabus was passed out. As I looked through the schedule of what would transpire during the semester, I panicked!

I realized that if I completed what was on the page before me, I would be a different person by the end of the course of study. You see, her class was not so much about acquiring information, such as facts to memorize or techniques to learn. It was more about transforming me into one who could transform others. It was about *Teaching from the Heart*, the title of her book. What scared me was that I realized I would be a changed person, and I didn't know if I could rise to the challenge.

Jesus was an amazing teacher who transformed lives. He was much less interested in facts, figures, laws, and rituals than about making his students whole. When the man with the unclean spirit comes face to face with Jesus, he cries out, “what do you want with me,” because he knows Jesus has the power to transform him and make him a whole person.

Jesus was an amazing teacher who taught with authority. He knew his subject matter, and his subject matter was God. There was something about Jesus that was so authentic, so true, and it shown forth like light into darkness. And people followed that light even if it meant they would be challenged to change.

They called Jesus' teaching “new.” And it was “new.” His lesson plan was not the same as the other Jewish rabbis. Their emphasis was on checking off a “to do list” of ritual purity laws; we might call this list “how to behave in temple,” or “how to keep the Sabbath,” or any number of the many detailed “dos and don'ts” that Jewish people were told by their religious leaders were necessary in order to please God. Jesus' lesson plan was different. His syllabus was about changing people's hearts and minds. Jesus knew God; he knew what was important to God; he taught with the authority that comes from God.

Have you ever had a teacher like that? My high school counselor, Mrs. Russell, was that kind of teacher. She affirmed what I knew in my heart was true, and one of those things was that my best friend, Betsy, who happened to be a Methodist, was not going to hell. What a relief! She also gave me confidence in many other of my ideas and guided me, not by loading me up with information, but by transforming me into a healthier person. She drove out the demons because she taught with authority!

Our daughters attended Sycamore Elementary in Claremont. Sycamore is known for being a little radical. It doesn't give grades. It doesn't give massive amounts of homework. It doesn't

emphasize spelling. What it teaches most of all is a love for learning. The girls thrived in that environment. They were empowered to choose topics of interest, and in part, to design their curriculum. Now when they left Sycamore to enter junior high, I was a little worried for them. They were not great spellers. They could write a compelling, creative story; but the grammar wasn't always right. My fears were unfounded, because the grammar could be learned, spell-check was available, the nuts and bolts could be acquired. But what stood out was that they loved to learn. They were enthusiastic, engaged in learning, and that has continued to this day.

Jesus was the kind of teacher that cared more about his student's relationship with God than the legalistic purity laws of the temple. He didn't advocate wild abandonment; he advocated the highest level of devotion, love of God, relationship with God. He even encouraged his disciples to "break the Jewish law" when it interfered with the well-being of people. Some might call this situation ethics; I guess they would be right. But the situation was this: What is God's desire in this moment in time? What will bring this person close to God? What will make God's dream for the world come true, *today*?

One of the hardest things I ever had to learn was that things are not always black and white and here I'm not talking about black being wrong and white being right, but rather I'm talking about extreme absolutes. I had to learn that there are many shades of gray in between the extremes. I wanted things to be clear-cut, either right or wrong. That made me feel safe because I would know what was expected of me. But the list of do's and don'ts became long and complicated. And then sometimes doing right would simultaneously do wrong to someone else. Living in shades of gray is not for the weak-hearted. It takes courage to live faithfully without always knowing the absolute right path to take. But that's OK, because what Jesus taught us was that what God truly wants is our willingness to be in relationship.

Jesus teaches us to live in the ambiguity of life when the answers are not always easy or forth coming and when we sometimes screw up and get it wrong. In fact, the times I've learned the most have often been after a really big blunder.

One of the things I do for our conference is to teach United Church of Christ history and polity to those seeking standing as ministers in our denomination. I tell them that it took years and years for the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical Reformed Churches to become the one denomination we know today as the UCC. There were disagreements and divergent views on many levels; but what kept the dream alive was that both denominations had leaders who valued the relationship, the unity of the church, more than every jot and tittle of union. With my polity students I repeat this mantra until they can finish my sentence: "In the UCC, it's all about relationships." That's what our beginnings as a denomination, our present and future church is all about. It's all about relationships!

I've always thought that teaching was an undervalued profession. Why do teachers make less than corporate executives? Teachers hold in their hands the power to change lives and to change the world. I know a lot of teachers who I think are fabulous. Some of their days are meaningful beyond measure; and some are really tough and discouraging. Learning doesn't happen on the schedule we would like it to happen. Sometimes it has to do with planting a seed that stays underground for years; but then one day new life appears. Often the teacher will never know

when she/he has made a profound difference in a child's life. And teachers come in different forms; it might be the neighbor, a parent, a clerk in a store, the volunteer, the gardener.

Imagine being in Jesus' classroom. His classroom was the daily walk of life. People met him in the everyday, when maybe they didn't expect it. And they were confronted with an amazing teacher who, in his presence they were transformed. Through him they learned to know God. Through him they acquired the courage to live in the ambiguities of life. Through him they learned that it's not about a to-do list but about a relationship.

Relationships are more demanding than lists, they take time, relationships take a willingness to be vulnerable to the other, even to relinquish some things for the well-being of the other, but relationship is what God has always wanted from us, and Jesus shows us the way. Thank God for the amazing teacher whose name is Jesus.