

Teaching as a Christian Vocation

BY MINORI NAGAHARA

Regardless of the role to which their abilities and “deep gladness” lead them, teachers soon discover that their profession demands tremendous effort and commitment. Hope, grace, and hospitality are the keys to their flourishing amid the obstacles and frustrations that could breed disillusionment.

I remember once, during my first year of teaching, walking home from school after a particularly difficult week of breaking up fights, trying to reason with angry, rebellious pre-adolescents, meeting with parents and administrators, and enduring unusually rowdy class sessions with my sixth graders. Trudging along, I mentally replayed various scenes from the week and worried about what the following week might bring. As my mind wandered to a list of other jobs in which I would not have to deal with the particular difficulties and challenges that I faced as a teacher, for a fleeting moment I wondered if I should have chosen a different line of work.

I am thankful to say that the difficult aspects of being a teacher were not enough to keep me from returning to my classroom day in and day out. What kept me going at that point and at many other low points in my journey as a teacher was not a sense of grim determination to make things work, nor was it any extraordinary strength of character on my part. Rather, what allowed me to persevere was the belief that my work was meaningful and that I had been called to serve that place at that time. My work as an educator had clearly become more than just a profession to me. It was not something I did solely to pay the bills or to put food on the table. Teaching had become a very concrete way in which I could practice and express my

faith on a daily basis. As a Christian colleague and I concluded in one of our many conversations, our classrooms were places of ministry – places to which we had been called to serve.

For many Christian teachers, the act of teaching – of creating opportunities and conditions which allow students' learning and growth to take place – is not just a career choice, but is part of their vocation, their calling from God. How does anyone know that teaching is part of their Christian vocation and not just a passing interest or one career option out of many? Determining the contours of our vocation may not be an easy process, but Frederick Buechner suggests a helpful starting point when he writes, "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹ Deep self-knowledge and a sense of where we personally see the world's needs point us toward where God wants us to meet those needs and, by doing so, participate in his work here on earth.

The first step in discovering our God-given vocation involves the act of identifying and affirming the talents and abilities we have been given. This cannot be done with pride or arrogance. In order to responsibly determine what we have been called to do with our lives, it is helpful to gather information about who we are, where we have come from, what we enjoy, what our temperaments are like, and where our strengths and weaknesses lie. Particularly encouraging is the idea that God allows us to pursue the things that bring us joy and gladness. Those who find a deep sense of gladness in helping other people learn and grow into all that God has called them to be may live out their own calling in the field of education. Though this is not the only "gladness" teachers enjoy, the teaching vocation is often given to those who take delight in the process of learning and teaching.

Teachers' differing abilities and sources of delight lead them to notice and care about different aspects of our broken and hurting world. Given the vast array of educational needs today, they may live out their teaching vocation in very various ways. While some are drawn to work in inner-city public schools, others will serve in Christian education. Some may be passionate about meeting the learning needs of students who arrive in the country as refugees, while others, noticing the needs of those who live overseas, travel to teach in international schools. Teachers may develop a special concern for a specific age group of students or for those with special learning needs.

CHALLENGES TO LIVING OUT THE VOCATION OF TEACHING

Regardless of the educational role to which their abilities and "deep gladness" lead them, teachers will discover that their profession is complex and demands a tremendous amount of intellectual effort and emotional commitment. Hope becomes the key to their survival and to flourishing in the midst of obstacles and frustrations that can breed disillusionment. The challenges I faced as an inner-city teacher included working with students who came from dangerous home environments, were involved in gang

activity, or were mentally ill, just to mention a few. These challenges were in addition to the daily grind of school life with its many tasks, campus politics, and—in the current educational climate—the constant pressure to raise test scores. Despite all of these causes of frustration and reasons for despair, I found that remaining hopeful in the potential that God has given to each individual can keep teachers from writing off any student, group of students, or the task of teaching them as hopeless.

Students come into the classroom with a variety of different life experiences, levels of ability, learning styles, and needs that must be addressed for learning to take place. A teaching practice or method that was highly effective with one group of students may be completely ineffective with another. It is an ongoing challenge for teachers to find the most effective ways of reaching their particular students for the purpose of fostering growth and understanding.

In addition to the challenge of meeting the academic needs of diverse learners, teachers face the difficult realities of daily life in a particular school community. They may work with colleagues who are not easy to work with, in schools where politics trump sound teaching practices, and in districts where “teacher-proof” curriculum materials are used to ensure higher standardized test scores. Their school may be a refuge for students who come from home situations where their basic needs are not met. While there are moments enlivened by the students finally grasping a concept one has labored to teach, some days are filled with seemingly menial tasks that leave teachers feeling unnoticed and unappreciated. Teachers may become angry at an injustice that a student has suffered or feel powerless and just weep over the trials a student has to face.

In the face of injustice, disrespect, and a sense of powerlessness in remedying the problems that exist in society, in the school, and in the classroom, it is easy for teachers to become angry and discouraged. Yet, as educator Sonia Nieto reminds us, “hope can conquer many fears and it can endure even when there is little cause for optimism.”² When teachers are filled with hope, they will persevere and find ways to continue on the journey to which they have been called.

TEACHING AS ONGOING LEARNING

Fully embracing one’s vocation of teaching requires much more than completing a teacher education program, keeping up with the latest in educational practices, and remaining passionately dedicated to the education of children and young people. It requires continual intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth.

Teaching is an intellectual undertaking in which the teacher is just as much of a learner as the student. As educational theorist Paulo Freire notes,

Education takes place when there are two learners [teacher and student] who occupy somewhat different spaces in ongoing dialogue.

But both participants bring knowledge to the relationship, and one of the objects of the pedagogic process is to explore what each knows and what they can teach each other. A second object is to foster reflection on the self as an actor in the world in consequence of knowing.³

Without the desire and the disposition for continuous learning, teachers become complacent and are not as effective in their role of inviting students into the learning process.

How, one may reasonably ask, will students ever learn anything if their teacher is focused on learning? The answer is that teachers do not focus on learning to the exclusion of teaching. Rather, in an authentic learning experience, all participants have the opportunity to share insights and create knowledge through the interaction that takes place. Because students and teachers come from different backgrounds, have different educational experiences, and serve different purposes in the classroom, it is natural that what they learn from each other will differ greatly. Teachers who are avid learners—who enjoy studying the world, their students, the learning process, and their teaching practices—cultivate the attitude of studiousness in their students.

Effective teachers are all researchers whether they recognize this in themselves or not. Every day they observe what happens in their classrooms: they gather information, ask insightful questions, generate and test out new ideas, and draw conclusions about the effectiveness of their practice, which then informs how they will teach the next lesson. Because no two classrooms are exactly the same, it is not enough for teachers to read up on the latest “best practices” in education. They need to take those best practices and tailor them to their students’ particular needs. A great deal of teacher learning happens as a result of classroom research—why is this student acting up in class, why is another one unable to complete her assignments, how can I teach this material in a way that engages students with these particular needs? This on-the-go

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research, in turn, has positive ramifications for student learning.

Learning is often most rewarding when pursued in the company of others, and this is certainly true for teachers. Positive and constructive dialogue with colleagues and with other adults can help build community among teachers and lessen the feelings of isolation that result when teachers view their practice as a strictly private effort. Teachers feel vulnerable when they

allow others to enter their classroom to see their strengths as well as their shortcomings, but as Sonia Nieto writes, “If teachers are to improve what they do and gain more satisfaction from their work, building critical and long-standing relationships with their colleagues is essential.”⁴

TEACHING AND LEARNING TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY

Regardless of the school environment in which a teacher works, the act of teaching is infused with the hope of creating a more just and equitable society. To this end, teachers need to facilitate the moral development of their students in every aspect of learning. They can do this by affirming the uniqueness of each student and his or her role in the classroom, and helping to create a just community in which students can thrive.⁵ Students have been created in the image of God and gifted with strengths and talents. Teachers should help students recognize and affirm their gifts and develop them through a process of lifelong learning. They should encourage students to recognize and appreciate others’ gifts as well. Of course, in the classroom, as in the school and larger society, certain strengths and intelligences may be valued over others. Yet teachers set the tone in their classrooms and have the opportunity to create an environment of respect for the variety of divine giftedness that we find in one another.

Students need to learn how to balance concern for their own work with a healthy desire to work alongside others in a way that is beneficial to all. Teachers can help by establishing rules for the classroom and modeling explicitly what is valued in a peaceful, cooperative learning community. They can teach students not only how to resolve the inevitable conflicts that will arise and to treat others with fairness, but also how to help their fellow students to learn. In such an environment, students will not focus only on their own learning or success, but will actively care for one another.

Each day will bring new opportunities for problem solving and conflict resolution, as teacher and students—broken human beings that they are—learn to care for one another and work cooperatively to maintain peace in the classroom. Within this laboratory community, students will get a sense of what a thriving, healthy community looks like and how to be a contributing member of it. As students leave the classroom and move to other spheres of life, this lesson empowers them to contribute to society as caring, responsible adults.

THE TEACHER AS AN AGENT OF GRACE AND HOSPITALITY

Reflective teachers understand that despite their best efforts to be flawless in their work and to treat colleagues, students, and parents with fairness and kindness, on many days they will fail to do so. Thus, one of the greatest gifts that Christian teachers can offer to their students is a classroom where grace and Christian hospitality abound. Since teachers and students are broken people striving to live in community, it is crucial for classrooms to be places of safety and affirmation where learning can take place without the fear of rejection.

I spent so much time with my students, it was inevitable that we would make mistakes and hurt one another. On many occasions I apologized to a student for my snappish remark or impatient attitude. On many mornings as I walked to school, I prayed to forgive a student for his or her offense on the previous day. Grace and forgiveness were the glue that held us together, allowing us to accept and appreciate one another more deeply than we had before.

Teachers must set the tone by having a gracious attitude toward students who offend them or who fail to carry out their responsibilities in the community. Is the classroom a place where forgiveness is offered when mistakes are made, where reconciliation and restoration are prioritized, where each person is loved and treated with fairness? Students watch the teacher carefully and often mirror how the teacher approaches relationships.

Christian hospitality is another crucial characteristic of a vibrant, inclusive community. As Christine Pohl points out, Christian hospitality does not refer to some pleasant environment in which everyone is nice. Rather, this “countercultural” virtue “involves respecting the dignity and equal worth of every person and valuing their contributions, or at least their potential contributions, to the larger society.”⁶ Given the ever-growing ethnic and religious diversity in classrooms across the country, Christian teachers have a wonderful opportunity to affirm their students’ God-given dignity, in spite of how others may rank them, or how students may rank themselves, in societal hierarchies. This experience of hospitality from a teacher can make a lasting impact on students and play a role in helping them to become all that God would have them to be.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, effective Christian teachers who view teaching as their calling from God look like other effective teachers who do not approach teaching from this perspective. Good teachers constantly grow and learn alongside their students, meet a variety of students’ needs, and help them reach their full potential as human beings who contribute to the world.

So what do Christian teachers bring to the table? Grounded firmly in God’s work of salvation in their lives, Christian teachers approach every part of the educational process courageously, and serve tirelessly with endless hope. Henri Nouwen put it this way:

Since we are broken people striving to live and learn in community, one of the greatest gifts Christian teachers can offer to their students is a classroom where grace and Christian hospitality abound.

Our true challenge is to return to the center, to the heart, and to find there the gentle voice that speaks to us and affirms us in a way that no human voice ever could. The basis of all ministry is the experience of God's unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, an acceptance so full, so total, and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised, and admired and frees us for Christ, who leads us on the road of service. This experience of God's acceptance frees us from our needy self and thus creates new space where we can pay selfless attention to others.⁷

The freedom that we experience in our identity as beloved children of God allows us to pursue our calling – whether that is teaching or in some other field – joyfully. As we do so, we delight in the fact God himself delights in us and in the work of our hands that we offer back to him.

NOTES

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 118.

2 Sonia Nieto, *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 61.

3 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 8.

4 Nieto, *What Keeps Teachers Going?* 78.

5 Julia K. Stronks and Gloria Goris Stronks, *Christian Teachers in Public Schools: A Guide for Teachers, Administrators, and Parents* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 35-36.

6 Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 61.

7 Henri Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 58.



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