

For us Presbyterians, this might be considered a high holy day as we stand between the beginning of our public schools in the last couple of weeks and prepare for our own Sunday School program beginning next week.

Let me give you some history for that, and this will not be on the test!

You see, coming through the Reformation, John Calvin in Geneva and John Knox in Scotland supported the education of all citizens – for one thing, simply to have a better life, and two, for active participation in the church and their world.

The seed for our commitment to education is planted within our understanding of the Bible.

As we see in the Old Testament, education was to be practical, to give guidance in worldly wisdom, providing instruction in an ethical way of life, and to pass on the traditions and values that bind the community together.

The people saw Jesus as a teacher beyond anyone they had known...amazed at the power and the insight of his teaching...his ability to deal with the most difficult of life's issues.

As disciples of Jesus, we are given the task of going into the world to teach all that Jesus commanded.

And what he commanded was LOVE: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

That was his way of life, the truth of his message and mission.

We are keepers of that unbroken circle of the way, the truth, the life of Jesus.

And it seems we need to be ever vigilant as keepers of that unbroken circle - the way, the truth, for the life that is threatened by the cancer of hate, racism, violence metastasizing in our world.

The powerful teaching of Jesus challenges our most cherished assumptions, and in so doing, it challenges our identity, our values, and our sense of self.

Powerful teaching is always challenging. That's because powerful teaching delves straight into the heart of the matter. It cuts to the quick; it steps on toes.

When that happens, as we see with what Jesus taught, with how he taught, people can react with defensiveness and with resistance.

Think about when you've been challenged by a great teacher: heart rate goes up, you get all tense and convoluted as you want to argue with the teacher, sometimes just in your head, but sometimes verbally.

But there are those rare occasions, you want to argue physically...and with Jesus, they did!

Simply said, we Presbyterians believe that education involves the shaping and development of the gifts we are given as individuals, an affirmation of the intrinsic worth of each human being as a created in God's image.

Both Calvin and Knox were concerned for education and held that both the government and the churches as well as the family were responsible for religious and secular education.

Jim Smylie, former professor of church history at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, notes that Calvin was so personally involved in education, he even came to the city Council once with a complaint against a student who was shooting peas at one of the instructors. (Some things never change!)

But change was what John Knox was bringing to education in Scotland, and his vision was universal education, for the poor as well as the rich, girls as well as boys, and advancement

depended on ability, not social background or wealth.

As in Geneva and in Scotland, so wherever Presbyterianism has been planted, it has invariably shown a similar love for learning.

Coming later to the colonies, Presbyterian ministers started academies and colleges to train ministers and others, many of whom became leaders of colonial America.

Dr. Moses Waddel, the founding minister of this church had started academies in Georgia and South Carolina before being called as President of the University of Georgia.

Check out the historical marker outside the church on Hancock Avenue. Dr. Waddel is identified as "Noted Educator and Presbyterian Minister" – I find it telling that 'Educator' is listed first.

It was the Presbyterian educator William McGuffey in 1833 who created a series of books used for decades to educate children.

They introduced children to a moral code that emphasized goodness and honesty and included Bible verses and were supposed to teach religion, civics, and great literature.

But also in the 1830s and 1840s, as there was an expansion of diverse cultures in a community, debate began about the content and direction of education for our children through these common schools.

However, many in the Reformed tradition wanted to reaffirm the responsibility of society to support the education of everyone while at the same time urging the church to take responsibility for the Christian education of their own children.

This is when Sunday Schools began to grow as some churches began to supplement faith education that had been in the public schools with their own Sunday School programs, but Mark Twain exposed the difficulties of even churches teaching their own children.

You remember his story in Tom Sawyer, and Mark Twain's mother was a very strong Presbyterian: Tom Sawyer was in line to win the Bible memory contest.

Before giving a copy of the Bible as a prize to Tom, the Judge wanted to show off the young scholar. "Who," the Judge asks Tom, "were the first two disciples of Jesus?" To which Tom replied, "David and Goliath!"

As this debate over what to teach and how to pay for it has continued over the years, Presbyterians, though, have never believed in cloistered education behind walls of fear and incestuous ignorance.

Building on our educational heritage from Calvin and Knox, Presbyterians have always heard the calling to throw their influence and energies and leadership into a system for the education of all of America's children.

And First Presbyterian Church has a rich history of its members living out that calling in the education of our children in this community and in the church – giving their energies and time, their wisdom and vision to assess the needs and set priorities and implement the actions that open the doors into the future of these young lives.

And now more than ever, we need to focus on how important teaching and instruction is to our daily lives.

This matter takes on a whole new perspective when we consider that a lack of proper instruction in so many things can be "life threatening," both physically and spiritually.

What if you had never been told that certain animals could be very dangerous? What if you had never been told certain plants and chemicals could kill you if ingested? What if you had never been told that fire was extremely important in life, but could also be extremely dangerous?

And most importantly, "What if you had never received any loving instruction about God and Jesus Christ."

Sadly, there are literally tens of thousands of children who will never hear the name of Jesus used, except as a swear word.

This is why Sunday School matters.

As Tom Ehrich said, "...the opportunity Sunday School provides for Christian community, faith discussions, exploring the wonder of a young faith and the many questions of a mature faith, matters as much as anything a congregation does."

After observing people as a pastor for nearly forty years and examining my own journey of faith, I have a theory about people and faith. I believe there are two kinds of faith: a borrowed faith and a personal faith.

I think most of us begin our spiritual journey with a borrowed faith.

We borrow faith from our parents and grandparents, Sunday School teachers, pastors and church camp counselors and youth group leaders.

We believed that Jesus was Lord because they believed Jesus was Lord.

At some point in our lives, that borrowed faith needs to become personal. It needs to become our own. It needs to be written by our hand, not another's. It needs to be put in our words, not someone else's.

Why? Because I don't think a borrowed faith will take you very far. I certainly don't believe it will take you over the rough roads that life will put in front of you. To travel down those roads, you must have an 'all-terrain faith'.

You need a faith that works when you need it and provides wisdom, guidance, courage, confidence, comfort, forgiveness, patience and hope.

How do you move from a borrowed faith to a personal faith? I would like to think that it could occur through studying scripture, reading about others' discoveries, discussions and dialogs with believers and unbelievers and praying for enlightenment.

That means asking questions, being able to hold up all parts of life to examination, seeking the truth wherever it takes us in our lives.

One night I was called to the hospital – a young man had been seriously injured when he lost control of his truck and it ran off the road and flipped over a couple of times.

I sat with the family through the night – the doctors filed through the waiting room – orthopedic surgeons, internists, neurosurgeons, all said the same thing:

"Jeff has some very serious injuries, but he's strong, and he should pull through."

Jeff was strong, physically; he worked out every day, body-building, running, he was strong.

Every day, when it was easy, he exercised, and when the tough times came, he was able to hold tight, pull through.

Faith cannot be a sometime thing. Faith is a decision every morning to walk with God, talk with God, in the small things, the big things, and everything.

Sunday School gives the tools, the words, the foundation to move from a borrowed faith to a personal faith.

So may we all be filled with a spirit of confidence and courage that allows us every day in this great big world to love: to learn the way, the truth, for life.

We are the keepers of that unbroken circle for us today, for us tomorrow, and for all the tomorrows to come.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.