

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

Gratitude for the Reality of Easter

Apr 12, 2015

**Ps 133 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 – Sermon Text = 1 Cor 15:58
(272, 260, 440, 698)**

At breakfast on Friday morning,
Greg Freedman introduced me to the name of Rafe Esquith.
I had not run across his work before.
He teaches 5th grade at Hobart Blvd Elementary School in Los Angeles.
He's been in the same classroom – Room 56 - teaching the same grade for 30 years.
He has received national and international awards too numerous to mention.
He's written 4 books on his approach to teaching
and been the subject, along with his students, of a PBS documentary.

Everyone in his classroom has to study a musical instrument.
That teaches them to listen.
Everyone in his classroom has to go with him to a Dodgers baseball game
and keep track of the game on one of those scoring sheets.
That teaches them to pay attention to what's going on around them.
His students come from the neighbourhood,
a lower-class section of LA where Koreans and Hispanics live.
His students have a phenomenal record
of getting into colleges and universities
and doing amazingly well there.



I'm looking forward to reading more and learning more
about this remarkable teacher.

After all, that is what we expect ministers to be in our tradition - teachers.

One of the traditional titles for the minister is 'teaching elder.'

Together with the community of 'ruling elders' in a congregation
and the community of other teaching and ruling elders in the Presbytery,
the person holding this office nourishes souls to flourish
in the grace of Jesus Christ,
just like Paul was doing in those earliest of churches.

What has struck me most in these initial explorations
into the passion and work of Rafe Esquith
is his conviction that his students have the ability to excel
if given nourishing space in which to do that.

These are kids from the ghetto.
Their families are surrounded by and immersed in poverty and violence.

Most teachers and the school systems they work in
figure they have done their job if they simply control them.

Esquith advocates for a better vision – growth rather than control.
And the foundation of his ability to inspire such growth in his students
is his foundational assumption that they have the ability to excel.

Here are some words from his 2004 book, *There Are No Shortcuts*,
talking about sacrifice and realism in the vocation of teaching:

With better vision, we sacrifice for students for whom that sacrifice will most likely pay off. I'm sorry to say this, but there are times when even superhuman effort will not save a child from his environment or himself. It's not the job of the teacher to save a child's soul; it is the teachers' job to provide an opportunity for the child to save his own soul.

I couldn't help but think of Paul
as I was beginning to discover the gifts and resilience of this teacher.

Paul confronted children of God
who were out of control,
especially in the wild urban environment of Corinth.
Many leaders, then and now, would try to control the situation
by denigrating the people involved and trying to impose some kind of control on them.

Two things prevent Paul from taking this approach:
1) he is grateful to God in Jesus Christ for the people with whom he works; and
2) he recognizes that it is God who is in control in God's way.
Gratitude for the reality of Easter and humility in serving that reality –
those are the guiding lights in Paul's ministry.

Let's remember how Paul has come to understand the reality of Easter.
This was the event in which God had saved the world
by fulfilling all of the promises that arose from his covenant with Abraham –
I will be your God so you can be a blessing.
In the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, God began a new era in human history.
New possibilities opened up for all peoples.
Growth rather than control became the focus.
As Richard Topping helped us explore in his recent 'ted talk,'
discipleship becomes less about what we 'must' do
and more about what we 'may' do.

Paul begins and ends this first letter to the troublesome children in Corinth
by praising them as beloved saints of God.
Remember those words from Paul's introduction to the letter –
these beloved saints had been enriched in every way by God,
they had every spiritual gift they could need,
they were equipped to excel in their fellowship with Jesus Christ.
He closes the letter with the same sentiments.

With this view of these Christian with whom he was working,
Paul kept his focus on their potential for growth.
He did not write them off as 'things' needing to be 'controlled.'
He welcomed them as 'friends' who deserved to be 'nourished.'

As we begin to open up our space here at Brentwood
to a much broader range of people
who come to enjoy the performances that will happen here,
we are not really in control of what happens in this space.
We extend a welcome to artists to use this space of grace.
We expect their art will inspire those who watch and listen.
We are confident that the Holy Spirit will use the space to bless people.
We offer our sanctuary as a space of grace for the arts.
We won't be able to control that as much as we can *our* services or events.
We will have to humbly trust Jesus Christ to use it to sow seeds of his blessing.
And we will be ready to nourish those seeds
when Jesus gives us an opportunity.

We will get to nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
when the Spirit piques their interest in what we are all about,
when the Spirit piques their interest in who we are following
as we make available this space of grace for the arts,
when the Spirit piques their interest in how they can grow into God's grace.

Rafe Esquith and Paul are good models
for how we can welcome souls to be nourished to flourish
in the grace of Jesus Christ.

In the most simple of terms, they encourage us
to greet these people as friends in Christ and see them as capable of growth.

We will find that in their growth we experience our own.

As we seek the welfare of this part of our city, as God promised in Jeremiah,
we will find our own welfare as agents of the reality of Easter.

And in everything, we will seek to excel in our work for Christ
out of gratitude for the salvation God offered that first Easter.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can
ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*