

Sermon: Proper 12A

Title: Differentiated Learning

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In 1999 Carol Ann Tomlinson published a book called *Differentiated Instruction* that revolutionized the way teaching takes place in the classroom in the United States and all over the world.

The make-up of classrooms had changed dramatically in the 20th century. They had gone from rooms full of local kids who were, in large part, homogeneous. They lived close enough to the school to get there easily. So, their families had settled from roughly the same areas of Europe. For roughly the same financial reasons. So, you had Norman Rockwell classrooms with white northern European kids whose families were all farmers. Who all learned with slates and chalk and slide rules.

But by the end of the 20th Century, that was not true anymore. Students were bussed to large schools outside the local neighborhood. They came from all kinds of areas; their families made their living in various ways. Their backgrounds and their home lives were dramatically different.

So, the *premise* of differentiation is that students in classrooms today *are very diverse*. They are male and female. They are ethnically diverse. They come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Their families of origin are diverse. They may have learned English as a second language. They may come from homes with more opportunities for learning. Or homes scarred by abuse. Homes with good nutrition, attentive parenting and adequate safety. Or homes where none of that is present.

All of these conditions impact the way a person acquires and sorts and stores and accesses information that they learn.

In addition to external factors, there are internal factors that impact the way we learn. We know this by experience, right? Traditional classroom learning was premised on reading as a means of learning. And for many people, that is the best way to learn. They remember easily what they read. They may remember even where on the page or on which side of the book or how far into the book they read a certain fact.

Some of us are auditory learners, we remember most easily what is said to us. When we recall information, it is often in the voice of the person who told us.

Some of us are physician learners: we have to touch a thing. To stack blocks as we count them, to rearrange items as we organize them, to physically manipulate items to integrate facts about them into our long-term memory.

Some people are visual learners. If you go down to my office, you will see large pieces of newsprint on the wall, each representing a project I am working on. I have to have it in front of me to process that information.

With the shift to differentiated learning, the focus of the classroom moved from imparting information in an orderly and predictable way, to being concerned with whether or not the student is acquiring, retaining, sorting and calling up the information in a way that promotes lasting learning and applicability.

It seems obvious to us. Of course we are all different. Of course, we all learn differently and of course the purpose of school is not teaching but learning. And yet, in 1999, the concept was revolutionary.

It shouldn't have been. Jesus used it in the first Century. In our gospel reading today, Jesus uses a series of examples about what "the kingdom of heaven is like:"

- A mustard seed
- Yeast
- A treasure in a field
- A pearl of great price
- A huge catch of fish
- A trove of money

He does this, I think, because he is searching for the metaphor that will "land" with every audience. He is using examples for people who farm, or who work in the home; for people who fish, for merchants, and for wealthy men.

The kingdom of heaven is a difficult concept to grasp, then and now. Which is why in this long section of Matthew, Jesus spends an inordinate amount of time trying to explain and explore it.

But in this passage, he is using a variety and an abundance of images, because he knows he is speaking to people with various experiences and learning styles, and his focus, like the focus of differentiated learning, is not on his teaching but on their learning.

The crowd following Jesus came from every walk of life and they came for all kinds of reasons. Some came to be healed; they just wanted Jesus to lay a hand on their loved one and be relieved of suffering

They came because the system of Roman rule oppressed them and Jesus' message of revolution, of overturning the status quo, offered them hope for freedom and release.

They came because they dared to believe. They wanted desperately for God to care for them, to love them, and to send, as had been promised, a Messiah to fix a broken world.

But in a way, they are all very similar. Their world was tenuous. They lived in the capricious Roman rule. Even if they were wealthy, their circumstances could change in a moment. Most are working class - they work for everything they have. And there is no guarantee that there will be food or work tomorrow.

Imagine then what good news it was to them to hear that the kingdom of heaven was a place just for them. Imagine if you were a farmer who sowed seeds, where the smallest of seeds results in the ridiculous abundance of the love of God.

Imagine what good news it was to the woman who served just her own family. To learn that working into every handful of food, was the love of God that multiplies and enriches, to create more and more nutritious food for her family. And the unlimited potential of a loving God

Or the good news to a fisherman, or a merchant, or even a wealthy man.

To each of these people, Jesus is describing a place where all their fears of scarcity and unpredictability are set aside, and eternal abundance and security are in their place.

No matter who they are or what they do, there is a place in the kingdom for them. A door is held open for them to a promise they could never have imagined.

WHAT JESUS WANTS THEM TO LEARN IS THAT THERE IS A PLACE FOR EACH ONE OF THEM. PARTICULARLY AND SPECIFICALLY, AND THAT HE IS HOLDING THE DOOR OPEN FOR THEM!

And notice, if you will, what is NOT said in this text. Jesus does NOT say, "you can earn more if you do this or that." Jesus does NOT say, "but all this can be taken away from you, if you...."

The promise of the kingdom, for these listeners and for us today, is abundant and unconditional.

It is more than you can imagine.

AND

You can't do more and earn more of it. You can't mess it up and lose it.

Jesus is saying, "there is a place in the kingdom for every one of us." Whatever our background. Whatever our context. Whatever our learning style.

And in that place, you will find your treasure. Whatever that means to you, whatever you value most. A seed, a pearl, a net full of fish

AND there is no earning more of the kingdom or messing up and losing your spot.

Abundant Unconditional

It felt like good news to people listening to his words in the 1st Century. Does it feel like that to you, today?

Jesus went to great extremes to communicate to those around him the glory and promise of the love of God. He was concerned NOT with his own teaching or how it reflected on him or what was most comfortable for him... But what would leave a lasting impression on his audience. What would get the information into their hearts? And he was relentless in his efforts.

If we seek to follow Jesus, then we must seek to be like him in this way... We must begin to be concerned with how we communicate the Good News of God's love SO THAT OTHERS UNDERSTAND THE JOY OF GODS LOVE!

That it is bountiful, open to every single person, regardless of their circumstances.

And we must communicate it not necessarily in a way that is easy or simple for us. We may have to stretch out of our comfort zone. We may have to try more than one way to express it. Remember, it's not about the teacher, it's about the student. This is the good news, in the 1st Century and the 21st century... *To everyone, in every context...*

The kingdom is a place of abundance and unconditional love. And Jesus is holding the door open for you.