

“Every disciple will be like his teacher.” I’d like you to think about a memorable teacher that you’ve had, whether in elementary school, middle school, high school, college, or even in your profession. Who is the first person who comes to mind? Now, why this person? Is it because they were a master of their subject? I remember a teacher I had when I was at Cal, she taught a class on Leo Tolstoy, and to my knowledge, I don’t remember being as in awe of her as I was with any other teacher. Her expertise in his literature was remarkable. She knew him backwards and forwards, and explained his works not only with proficiency, but with glee. I may not have read the books and plays assigned, but I sincerely looked forward to her class.

Did anyone think of someone like that. Did anyone think of a music teacher? When I was at the seminary, there was a priest who taught there, Fr. Paul Maillet, who was a concert pianist before he was a priest, and I heard that he could trace his teachers’ back to Mozart. Mozart’s teacher, taught someone, who taught someone, who taught someone, all the way down to Fr. Paul’s teacher. Talk about “every disciple will be like his teacher.”

For me, after reading this passage about disciples, a word that means students, I was reminded of Mr. Ratto, my 6th grade math teacher, and I’m not saying this because I am teaching 6th grade religion now. I have shared this story with you before, but it’s worth sharing again, because this teacher taught me something that has stayed with me, something that had nothing to do with math, and to this day I look back on that moment, and think, I would like to be like that teacher.

The story goes like this, every once in a while we would have a math problem assigned over the weekend that took a little bit more thinking; they were word problems, like riddles, so they were meant to be fun. But this one particular problem was a little bit too tough for me, so I didn’t do it. Well, as it turns out, many of the other students also did not complete the assignment, and so, to this day, I can see Mr. Ratto standing before us, weighing this little stack of paper in his hand. That’s when he asked us, “who didn’t do the problem?” Silence. And so he asks again, “who didn’t do the problem?” Silence again. At this point, I knew that it was futile to remain silent because he had the stack, he was going to know who didn’t do it. So, I raised my hand - I was the only one to do so, and Mr. Ratto looked at me, which at the time felt more like a death stare, and asked me, “Mario, you didn’t do the problem?” To which I sheepishly responded, “no, I didn’t.” “Well,” Mr. Ratto continued, “since you admitted that you didn’t do it, I am going to give you full credit.” And suddenly, the hands of the other kids who didn’t do the assignment shot up as well. Too late for them, though.

I’ll be totally honest, I don’t remember any of the math from that class. But I remember the lesson in virtue that Mr. Ratto taught me that day. I remember that he loved his students, which was easy to forget since he often had an intimidating exterior. In addition to math, he coached several of the sports teams. And because of this love he knew that what I, and the other students needed to learn most in that moment wasn’t math, but virtue. And he did this in two ways. He taught us to be honest and responsible for our actions. But in his own actions, he showed us how to be kind, patient, and merciful. Did I go on to become a completely virtuous person? No, but I am trying to be, and when I hear the words, “every disciple will be like his teacher,” I think of Mr. Ratto and the standard he set, especially now as a teach in the school, and in here.

For us Catholics, though, this idea of becoming like our teacher takes on an infinitely greater significance when we remember that we have one teacher who is above all the other teachers we have ever had, or will ever have. And we know who this teacher is; it is Jesus himself. One of his titles was rabbi, which means teacher. And Jesus came to teach us. For the

past several weeks we have been listening to him teach quite explicitly. On the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, our rabbi got up in the synagogue, and reading from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, taught that he had been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. After this, he taught the first apostles that they would be sharing in this mission, that they would be teachers too as they fished for men. And for the past three weeks, he has been teaching the crowds in his Sermon on the Plain that the blessed of the world, the ones who are truly happy, are the poor, the hungry, those who are weeping, and those who are hated, excluded, insulted, and denounced on account of Him. Last week, we heard our great teacher instruct us to love our enemies, and do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who mistreat us. He told us that we should allow people to strike us on one cheek and then offer the other one as well, and then let them take from us without asking for anything back. Not a very attractive teaching. And yet the reason for this teaching is clear; Jesus tells us to do this because this is what he did, and this is the way to become like him.

If we look at Jesus' life, it's clear to see that he lived the life of the poor. "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head" (Lk 9:58). He definitely was hated and excluded and insulted. After teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, the crowd tried to throw him down the hill on which their town was built. And if we look to the end of his life, we see how he too was struck on the cheek, and had everything taken from him, even the clothes on his back. "Every disciple will become like his master." The question we have to ask ourselves is do I want this?

This is somewhat of a trick question; the answer should be no. We shouldn't actively desire to live in poverty and to be insulted. The way we should view this question, the way Jesus presents it to us is, are these things the source of my joy? Are they what give meaning to my life? Or, if I am deprived of these things, can I still be happy? When others are comfortable and have a lot of possessions, and I do not, am I upset? When others are rejoicing and I am weeping, am I bitter? When others are well-thought-of, and I am put down, am I jealous? Or am I at peace? Because the teaching of Jesus is that even if we are deprived of certain things, it does not mean that we are deprived of everything. On the contrary, when there is an absence of certain things, when something is lacking, when I lose something, when something is taken from me, it is actually an opportunity for something else to enter in. The grace of God.

St. Paul experienced this. Writing to his community in Corinth, he tells them of a time when he was struggling with a personal issue, of which we don't know the details exactly. But with great humility he tells them, "a thorn in the flesh was given to me... Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (cf. 2 Cor 12:7-9). Paul had to lose his desire for comfort, he had to let go of his plans, and in doing so we see in him the epitome of the disciple who became like his teacher. On the cross, Jesus lost everything; he was helpless, he was broken, he was weak, and yet, it was there that he taught us what real strength looks like. It is through the weakness of the crucifixion that an empty place is prepared for the power of the resurrection.

And so it is with us. In our lives Jesus asks us to lose a little bit of what we hold onto, the things that we think make life meaningful and worthwhile. In the Gospel from today he tells us to let go of a big one, our egos. "Remove the beam from your eye, he says, as if to say, "don't look down on others and their minor flaws and imperfections, when you yourself are more flawed than they." Maybe when Jesus spoke in the synagogue about restoring sight to the blind,

he was referring to us and our own beams, but not to demean us, or scold us, but to call us to something better. Sometimes in life, Jesus asks us to let things go; Lent is a time for this, but He does so with gentleness, and with mercy, saying, “let’s remove what is holding you back, what is slowing you down, what is preventing you from seeing clearly, from living life to your fullest potential, becoming the person I made you to be. St. Paul had to have the beam removed from his own eye; on his way to arrest the followers of Jesus in Damascus he was struck blind by the Lord, but later had his sight restored. He came to realize that that was the teacher at work in him, and in his letter that we heard proclaimed today he explains what happened. What was corruptible was being clothed in incorruptibility; what was mortal was being clothed with immortality, death was being swallowed up in victory. And so, he says to us, “be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” Yes, the disciples are becoming like the teacher.