

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter/Year A  
May 7, 2017  
Text: John 10:1-10

### “Thieves and Bandits”

Over the years there have been many movies made that fit the ‘teacher and student’ genre. Quite a few of them are based on true stories of educators who tried to make a difference in the lives of their students. There are two I would like to touch upon.

There is the 2007 movie “The Freedom Writers” in which Hilary Swank plays Erin Gruwell, a newly graduated teacher whose first teaching assignment is at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, CA. Erin’s bubble of enthusiasm as a newly minted teacher is quickly burst well within the first few minutes of her freshmen English class as her students walk in, most of them unaware of her presence at the chalk board because of their boisterous behaviors. Sans her one white student, her students are Latino, Cambodian, and African-American. The air is taunt with friction in this school once known for its academic achievements. Each group will have nothing to do with anyone outside their culture and each student comes with his or her own issues, hence learning is hardly a priority for most. The new teacher finds little to no support from the rest of her fellow teachers or from her father who was once active in civil rights, or her husband who begins to resent all the time and energy Erin is putting in to help her students find their way. But she is determined to help her students find and believe in themselves. The turning point for all involved comes when a hateful and stereotypical drawing is confiscated by Erin and she confronts her students and uses “The Diary of Anne Frank” as her guiding force. By providing notebooks as a vehicle to get to know her students and for the students to know and express their feelings, there is, thankfully, is a turnaround for all.

Then there is Morgan Freeman’s 1989 movie, “Lean on Me,” that is loosely based on the career of Principal Joe Clark. Mr. Clark was no newbie to the world of academics. As the movie starts we see him as a young man teaching a class at Eastside High in New Jersey, a school also known for its academic achievements. He is full of energy and that energy transcends to his mostly white students. After hearing news that would greatly affect himself and the rest of the faculty, he issues a few choice words and then storms out of the school in a huff and we are left to watch as the building and students deteriorate. Mr. Clark is called back many

years later as principal of Eastside High and it is hardly the school he once knew. It is now racked with graffiti, gang violence, and drugs. White students are now the minority as African American, Latino, and other students of color are left to learn, if they do at all, in dangerous and deplorable conditions. Both faculty and students are frustrated and left with feelings of hopelessness by everything that confronts them both inside and outside their academic lives. And the school itself is in danger of being taken over by the government unless the students improve their test scores on the Basic Skills Test. “Crazy Joe” Clark as he is called by the school superintendent, wastes no time in clearing out the riffraff. He is like a bull with a bullhorn taking no prisoners from neither staff nor student. He promptly expels any and all students identified as drug dealers, troublemakers, and abusers. Teachers and staff-he puts in their places. It is his way or the highway. Be part of the solution or don’t be there at all. While his ways are unconventional, like locking all the school doors during the school day so that drug dealers cannot easily enter, Mr. Clark eventually has a positive effect on his students. And in the end, more than 75% of the students have passed their tests.

What these two movies have in common are students who, more often than not, have the odds stacked against them, economically and socially. Many of them do not see the relevance of education when it is enough figuring out how to simply survive when they see family, friends, and classmates gunned down in the streets. For many of them, violence, gangs, abuse, ignorance, and repeated cycles of poverty are the norm in their everyday lives. And there are outside voices telling them that they are less than, not worth the effort, or how dare they try to be better than anyone else. There are outside voices that tell them that their lives could be made easier by selling drugs and joining gangs. There are those outside voices that tell them not to look forward to too much else because their surroundings and situations are all there is for “people like them.”

Still, what these movies also have in common are those teachers who were willing to put their own lives and money on the line, who put their own lives on hold so that they might be available to their students at any hour. There are teachers who listened when no one else would. There are those teachers whose voices persuaded those young people to consider leading more full and productive lives; so that their circumstances would not be the thing that defined them. So that the cycles of ignorance and poverty and fear and settling for less than would not rob them of greater possibilities in their lives.

I am sure that there are a few of us current, former or retired teachers and staff, who could share similar stories of our students and the odds that faced them.

Like Erin Gruwell and Joe Clark, I often wondered and still do, if I, if we as educators, made a difference in our any of our students' lives? Were any of our children able to walk beyond the real and imaginary gates of poverty, ignorance, hunger, low self-esteem, and neglect? Did we plant at least one seed for a better future? Did our voices count among any other positive influences that encourage them to reach for the stars? Were there other voices, voices that may have led them astray? That gave them hope for the future?

I suppose that in a way, we can all ask similar questions when it comes to your own children, your grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, and of ourselves. Think for a moment. What voices did you hear growing up? How many voices have you heard and responded to in your lifetime? In whom or what have you relied on to make your life richer? Are there those things which promised 'abundant life' but have left you short, unsatisfied, perhaps empty?

On this Good Shepherd Sunday we are reminded that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus so that we might have life and have it abundantly. And while there are thieves and bandits, situations that may cause dreams to be deferred or us to become stilted, befuddled and disillusioned, Jesus makes it clear that he is both the Gate to the sheepfold and the Good Shepherd. It is his voice that is calling us above all others. He is the One who promises to protect and provide for all that we need in order that we may live life in abundance not only after death but here and now.

The Lord is my shepherd. And yours. And the world's. But belonging to him doesn't mean just resting safely in his arms. We are a community of people who belong to the greater community of humanity which means others belong in the sheepfold. They are also part of God's flock.

Our first and second lessons confirm the paths we must also walk in following the examples of Christ and of those first apostles and followers of the Way. Wasn't this Jesus recurring theme? The Father sent me, I send you. I forgive you, you forgive others. I love you, you love others. I shepherd you, you shepherd others.

As one theologian put it, for too long our Good Shepherd lessons have been read from one point of view. We see ourselves and the Church, as the sheep who Jesus calls. And that is good. But there is another faith-filled way to read it especially in this season of Easter. The others, the world, the "lost", the hurting,

the disillusioned, those who may also struggle with the thieves and bandits of our world who seek to steal and kill and destroy; they are also the sheep. And we, we are the shepherds. We are called to be shepherds to the world.

Not just the world half-way around the globe but with the world that starts with the person in the pew near or next to you and extends out the door and out into the neighborhood and into your homes and across (classrooms) and communities and across the nation to the ends of the earth.

It is not “a warm and fuzzy calling, but it is a calling to an “abundant life.” A life abundant with things that matter rather than things that just fill up space. A life abundant with caring for others, most especially for those who don’t matter to anyone else.”

“There is a world full of hurting and needy people walking through the valley of the shadow today. Will you take up your rod and your staff and walk with them?” Will you open your gate and let them come in? Will you open your gate and let them go out to dream, to soar? “Will you help Jesus shepherd the world?”

Amen.

\*This portion inspired/taken from a sermon by the Rev. Delmer L. Chilton for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (May 11, 2014).