

Another Day

Biblical reflections for busy teachers



Gathering around Great Things

"Your works are wonderful." Psalm 139:14

There was a time when educationists debated whether we should be subject-centred, teacher-centred or child-centred. When the secondary level teacher would ask, "What do you teach?" the primary level teacher could respond with the put-down, "I teach *children!*"

Nowadays, we are more likely to phrase the debate in terms of the difference between having learning or teaching at the centre. The question to ask of what is happening in a classroom is not "What is being *taught?*" but "What is being *learned?*"

This shift of focus is doubtless a very helpful one, and a salutary reminder to those of us who fall in love with the sound of our own voices, that what matters is what the children and young people we are with are actually gaining from our being with them.

Parker Palmer, however, in *The Courage to Teach*, argues that there is, in fact, an important sense in which we should be subject-centred. He writes of what he terms 'the grace of great things' and says that the 'great things' are the subjects around which we gather; not the disciplines that study them nor the texts that talk about them, but the things themselves. He continues:

"Watch a good teacher sitting on the floor with a group of five-year-olds, reading a story about an elephant. Viewed through the eyes of those children, it is almost possible to see that elephant in the middle of the circle! And with that great thing as the vehicle, other great things also come into the room – things like language and the miracle of symbols that carry meaning."*

The disciplines we teach are windows on God's world, a world of his wonderful works. Let us open the windows and look together at one of them today. May those we seek to teach learn that his works are wonderful as we gather around some great thing today.

Lord, when I consider the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the seashore, restore to me some of that child-like wonder and grant that those I teach may catch something of it from me. Amen.

* Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 118.