

**20 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 26 – Year A – November 2, 2011 - Homily**  
**Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

What do Elijah and Elisha, Socrates and Plato, Isaac Asimov and Gene Roddenberry, Gandhi and Martin Luther King all have in common? The answer is that they were each mentors or mentees, one of another! Author Thomas Wolfe describes the importance of a mentor in his own life in this way, “I was sustained by one piece of inestimable good fortune. I had for a friend a man of immense and patient wisdom and a gentle but unyielding fortitude. I think that if I was not destroyed at this time by the sense of hopelessness, which these gigantic labors has awakened in me, it was largely because of the courage and patience of this man. I did not give in because he would not let me give in.” The apostle Peter was a mentor to Barnabas, and in turn, Barnabas mentored Paul. Most of us have probably had one or more mentors in our lives, those who deeply influenced us, developed abilities in us, or left a profound stamp on the direction of our lives.

I’d like to share one such story this evening. One of my earliest mentors was a teacher called Mrs. Sturgeon. One of the gifts she developed in me was servant leadership. At the age of eight, I wouldn’t even have known that phrase, but here’s how I learned the lesson. The class was divided up into small groups. Each small group was given a project to work on and each group was assigned a leader. I was the leader of my group and so I was in charge of overseeing the work of the rest of the team, and pulling the whole project together in a creative way. In this case, we cut out the pictures, drawings and text and arranged the whole thing into a colorful and shapely collage on bright red poster board. By the end of the project, I remember being disappointed that my own written contribution was relatively small compared to that of others in my group. I realized later that as the group leader, my responsibilities had been mostly focused elsewhere. Whether by accident or design, the result was that I’d sacrificed personal satisfaction in researching and writing my own piece in order to direct and oversee the success of the team’s project. In fact, I’d spent a lot of time encouraging and commending the team for their efforts. In other words, a lot of my time had gone into helping the team find material, or in planning how the whole project would come together so that everyone had something different to add to the success of the whole.

This portion of Paul’s first letter to his beloved Thessalonians reminds them of his own sacrifices on their behalf. Paul and his team didn’t just share the good news of Jesus and walk away. Paul, especially, was a spiritual parent to each of his communities of faith. He and those who worked with him gave of themselves through physical hardships, spiritual teaching, and emotional stress to the glory of God’s name. Paul’s mentorship or spiritual parenthood embraces both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics. As we heard last week, he talked about nurturing the Thessalonians as a mother nurtures her children. This week he speaks of being like a father with his children, encouraging the community to “live a life worthy of God”.

The transformation Paul speaks of is twofold. The first part is saying “yes” to God in Christ Jesus, and becoming a believer. This is what he means when he talks with great pride about how the Thessalonians heard the Gospel and received it as God’s word. The second part of our transformation is what Paul calls, the word “at work in believers”. When Christ enters our lives, we do not remain the same, the Holy Spirit begins to mold us into Christ’s form. He also reveals our different gifts and we start to feel compelled to offer ourselves in service to the Lord and our neighbors. Living our lives worthy of God is not about trying to earn our salvation, which is a free

gift of God's grace by virtue of our faith in Christ. However, our faith *is* made manifest in the evidence of our lives. Otherwise, we would be precisely like those who talk the talk, but don't walk the walk as this week's Gospel story highlights.

Being a mentor means serving others faithfully, and selflessly. Paul says, "You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers." Paul embodied a highly relational form of ministry, including a humble team approach, as well as hard and persistent work, which he considers a labor of love. As an apostle, Paul's particular gifts are shared in a particular way. He describes his relationship with God as pure. He describes his relationship with the Thessalonians as upright. And being in right relationship with both God and the Thessalonians makes him blameless. This is how Paul lived his life in a manner worthy of God. You and I have different spiritual gifts, and therefore express our ministries in different ways. What we tend to find though is that our spiritual gifts offer a balance with those of others in our own community of faith, in a way that builds up the Body of Christ.

What we also find is that in some way or another, we have probably been a role model, a mentor, or worked with others during our lives in a way that has made a difference. As is often the case, we don't always get instant feedback, or see the results of how the seeds we've planted have blossomed. As we talked about on Sunday at the Bible study, the mystery of faith is part of the open secret of God's kingdom. The Holy Spirit is always at work in believers, so that we can transform the world as the visible face, hands and feet of Christ. Yet we may not see the full or final result of our work, just as Mrs. Sturgeon probably had no idea how she helped shape my life. Our invitation this week is to remember and act on the fact that one way we share ourselves and God's love is by sharing our stories with others. Does anyone want to share a mentor story tonight?  
Amen.