The Best Teacher
By the Rev. Marcia Davenport

This has been the first week of school for many families, children and teens, and college students. It seems appropriate that as a whole, our Scripture lessons for this Sunday focus on teaching and learning. And on knowing God's teachings and Word as the source of wisdom. Knowing our relationship with God as the one unshakeable foundation for living out our day to day lives in peace.

I want to begin our reflection by asking you, to pause for a moment and think: Who was the best teacher I ever had?

Unlike my husband, Bob, who could recite the names of each of his elementary school teachers off by heart, I jump immediately to a man who was the most formative teacher to my faith in God.

Father Sean…. substitute an unpronounceable Irish surname, just
Fr. Sean. Fr. Sean taught homiletics, and theology at the Holy Spirit Seminary in Aberdeen, Hong Kong. I took my first seminary course from him, a Jesuit Irish priest, and it changed my life.

Sean had a poetic prose when he lectured so beautiful that I would write down his sentences just for the pleasure of reading them back out loud. But it was a single sentence in a convoluted teaching on the theology of Kurt Lonergan, that changed my life. Sean said, "Jesus, God wants you to love and serve Him now, just as you are. You don't have to wait until you are perfect enough, you are just whom He calls and needs, now."

I was blown away. Me, in all my messy, overweight, chewed fingernails, not very happy relationships, anger, anxiety? How could that be? And yet, if that were the truth - God wanted the real me, now, how amazing, how freeing, how miraculous, that I could just say, "YES."

That single truth set me free to begin my journey of love, to follow my call, as unlikely as I or anyone else might have seen it. Fr. Sean showed me who God knew me to be, and challenged me to become that person.

Who was your best teacher? How did they change your life, yourself? Who taught you God?

In our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, Proverbs 1:20-33, the figure of Wisdom, a feminine personification we know in the New Testament more closely identified with the Logos, or Word Christ, yells raucously at bystanders in the market square, "What's wrong with you? Why are you in love with the easiest simplest understanding of how to live life? Why do you reject God's truth?"

God says, "I've told you. I've poured out my truth, my thoughts, my wisdom to you, my words, and you ignore me."

God like any parent teaches, 'Do not touch the hot stove' but the child 'shall eat the fruit of their own way and be sated with their own devices'. We all are free to make our own choices, but we cannot choose the consequences. Wisdom is listening to God's Word. Living God's way. Relying on God to show us the way.

James in the third chapter of his letter to the churches, praises the courage and audacity of teachers of Jesus Christ. "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." It reminds me of the note sent home by many kindergarten teachers to the parents of her/his students, "I will undertake not to believe everything your child tells me about you, if you will take with a grain of salt, everything your child tells you about me!"

But it is in our Holy Gospel passage from Mark 8:27-38, that we encounter the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, and learn from Him.

Jesus was a teacher. Of the 90 or so times He is addressed directly by people in the Gospels, 60 times He is called 'Teacher' or 'Rabbi'.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, comes to visit Jesus in the dead of night, and the first thing he says is: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God." (John 3;1-22) Mary Magdalene, heartbroken, peers up at the figure of the gardener outside his tomb, hears His voice, and replies, in astonishment and joy, "Rabboni" or dearly respected Teacher!

In his public ministry of preaching and teaching, "the bystanders said 'he taught as one having authority, not as the teachers of the law," Jesus' final words to his disciples, followers are: "Go ye into all the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost and teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

Jesus, without any academic degrees, without ever entering a classroom, is a Master Teacher.

How? He teaches with power, with the Power of God's Truth, with the Incarnate Presence of God's Person. Jesus teaches to the present reality, the now of his listeners, he is in touch with their human needs and conditions. Jesus teaches with compassion, with the love that characterizes the new Kingdom of God's rule. And Jesus the teacher, challenges his disciples to see beyond their preconceived ideas of reality to the Presence of God's rule, to live according to the new rules of God's reign. Jesus teaches with purpose, He brings the word of God's final reign now, and future, what is needed is a new attitude 'to love God with all your heart, and soul and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself."
Jesus teaches in word and action.

It is in the context of Jesus the Teacher that we can approach Mark 8: 27-38 with fresh eyes. Jesus is travelling with his disciples and teaching them. He asks an open ended question, 'Who do people say I am?' He accepts their answers, and then offers the more challenging question, a test question, what have they, his pupils come to know of their Teacher, Master. And Peter gives the right answer: 'You are the Messiah'. God's Annointed One come to initiate a final and absolute reign of God in the now.

"And then He began to teach them." What it meant to be the Messiah, to be the Suffering Servant of whom Isaiah wrote.

To be rejected, killed by the authorities. But then to rise again.

No lovely picture of a triumphant military leader recognized as a political power and calling the people to overthrow the rule of Rome.

No purifying prophet who will sweep society, reestablish Israel's supremacy among the nations and usher in peace and holiness.

Everything Peter said Jesus was supposed to be as the Christ is rejected by Jesus' words. And yet the essence of Jesus the Christ is defined by his suffering, death, and resurrection.

As we see in this pivotal moment of the Gospel, the hinge of the Book of Mark, the turning point, Peter and the disciples get the message completely wrong. Peter, not only shocked but rebellious, rebukes Jesus and is harshly rebuked with all of Jesus' authority.

Instead, Jesus begins to teach - the disciples, and the crowd, "If you want to become my followers, here are the rules of the Kingdom: You need to deny yourself, become, first of all, mine. Define all of your living, yourself by belonging to Me. Enter the family of Jesus the Christ.

And secondly, accept and embrace what following Me first will mean in your life. Persecution, certainly, but giving up your own will and submitting to Mine, following Christ, daily and always. As one of my favorite theologians says it, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction." Toward God.

Mark 8:34-38 offers an extremely difficult description of what we call Christian discipleship. Mark seems to know this, as the book ends with Jesus abandoned literally by everyone. But the resurrection brings those same fearful followers together again with their Lord and with each other and binds them as those who have learned and those who will teach the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We are the community of believers, the family of Jesus Christ, and so we teach and learn from one another what it means to follow Jesus, to be the love-filled change in our world.

Amen.