

P, B and J Message for August 9

You take two pieces of bread and smear them with this gloppy brown stuff – if your mom or dad is into natural food, it's a little greasy and has no additives or sugar to mess it up. Then, you grab a jar of really sweet purple or red or orange stuff and spread it on top of the brown stuff – this layer should be at least a quarter-inch thick to counter-act the gumminess of the brown stuff. Slap the two pieces of bread together, pour a glass of milk and you have a meal fit for any self-respecting five-year-old. This is PB & J – a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Anyone who's ever been around children knows this to be true: Peanut Butter and jelly is the staple of life. No matter what you cook for them, no matter where they are – fancy restaurant, drive through, diner, grandma's house – if given a choice, kids will choose PB and J more times than not. It's their ultimate comfort food... their manna...their bread of life. More about this later...

As another school year starts, and school supplies show up in every single store, I find myself thinking about how children relate to their world and how they construct their own viewpoint about life. From kindergartners clear up through high school, kids and the experiences they have shape the kind of people they will become, and those who spend long days with them, their teachers, have a huge responsibility. It may be because I was a classroom teacher myself that I have a little bit of a bias in favor of educators, but from my own experience, I know that the act of teaching, in any generation, is truly a call by God to serve humanity.

P, B & J, and kids in school popped into my mind when I read this section of the letter to the Ephesians, because it reminded me of the first days of school when, as a teacher, I had to establish a few ground rules for expectations in my class.

Ephesus was a Greek port city on the western coast of what is now Turkey – it had been through its share of conquerors, but at this time was in a period of relative self-governance under the influence of Rome. This letter was written to yet another set of “baby Christians” who needed guidelines and boundaries, just like a new class full of kids need to know what they can and cannot do, and who’s the boss.

An experienced and with-it educator knows that in order to be able to do anything with them, you have to have “control of the class” from Day 1. This means that at any time, when you’re working with a student on one side of the room, no one should be poking or annoying someone else on the other side of the room – everyone should be “on task,” working on some part of an assignment that has been given them. This doesn’t require yelling or threats - one look from the teacher – I call it the “stink-eye” – should be enough to remind a kid caught messing around that he or she needs to stop what they’re doing and get back to work. In fact, you can probably tell who’s been a teacher during their work life, because we all have these wrinkles on our foreheads from repeatedly giving the stink-eye over the years. See??? (Show them the wrinkles)

Wise teachers also know that strong-arming kids isn’t the way to get them to cooperate – they need to buy into the whole system, and if respect isn’t included in the package, you’re going to have a long year. Children know when someone supports them, accepts them and wants them to do well. They have built-in radar that tells them this – and if they sense that a teacher doesn’t REALLY care about what happens to them, they fight back with the only weapon they have – misbehavior. Ask any teacher about their first year of teaching and you’ll hear all kinds of horror stories about the creative ways students can make you miserable if you don’t take the respect part of teaching seriously: my freshman year in high school, my English class was so bad we sent Mr. Barnes out for the rest of the year to recover from a nervous breakdown! In truth, the first two or three years of teaching is the time when educators really learn their craft.

Well, Paul's letter to the Ephesians really reminds me of a seasoned teacher, helping this new class get organized and learn the rules about how to be good Christians. He knows they love God and believe in the Risen Christ, but they sort of wandered off the path and now they need to be brought back into the routine of how it's supposed to go. Here's what I heard Paul saying when I read this passage – note that he speaks with respect; he doesn't shame them or make them feel foolish – he just clarifies something they probably already know:

“OK, class, we’re all in this together, and so this is how I want you to behave. You can get mad at each other sometimes, but you shouldn’t do things that hurt one another just because you get mad. You shouldn’t hit or steal, and you shouldn’t say bad things about one another – instead, you should share and say things that make others feel good about themselves. As your teacher, I believe in you and I know you can be amazing students of God, so if you ever feel like you want to take a swing at someone, remember who loves you and act like God. Be nice, say “I’m sorry,” and let’s get on with our work.”

I can absolutely hear this coming from the mouth of a teacher I loved – Mr. Wilson, my seventh grade homeroom and science teacher. He didn't use the God part when he spoke to us, but all of his actions showed me (and the other kids in my class) that we had value in his eyes, and he knew we knew how to treat each other – he expected it and usually, we delivered. He modeled this respect for us daily – he almost never yelled at the students – he watched and waited and gently corrected. He also understood that we were going to mess up because we were adolescents who thought we knew everything – and he allowed us space to be who we were, while he kept an eye on things so we wouldn't get out of control.

I think Paul (and God) is a lot like Mr. Wilson – he’s the wise teacher-voice in the background, reminding those good folks from Ephesus and us what’s right and how we should be in our world together.

So what about manna and P, B & J? Our second reading brought this part to my mind. Another amazing teacher named Jesus reminds the people how to be - and what matters - in their world. For me, the idea of the Bread of Life is a natural connection to the relevance of peanut butter and jelly to most children. Food is important to kids – to all of us – but it’s not all there is to life. There are other elements that we need to pay attention to -- we need to care about -- in addition to what’s for dinner today.

For us Christians, it is the fact that Jesus, the Bread of Life who was sent by God to die for us, is an absolute basic need to survive. And with this basic need - our faith in Jesus - comes responsibility to others. We are called to share what we have, to forgive, to live as Jesus shows us and God tells us we should. Without these very important ingredients, our “life-sandwich” would be two lonely pieces of bread with no filling - not very appetizing. Jesus even tells the people that bread alone won’t keep them alive – they have to have the Bread of Life, too. Here are the rules: Love God – do God’s work – have Eternal Life. The words he speaks are deceptively simple – in language that anyone can understand (another good teaching technique!) – but the meaning is heavy with significance for us all.

When it comes right down to it, it’s August and we’re all just kids in a classroom, trying to make our way through the school year as best we can. We have rules to follow and a big classroom to learn in – it’s up to us to pay attention and do as we’re told. It sounds pretty easy, but it isn’t always as easy as it sounds. Thank goodness we have great teachers and good lessons to help us get through it.

I'm going to end this message with a short reading from Tony Campolo's book, "Let Me Tell You a Story: Life lessons from unexpected places and unlikely people." This reading is entitled, "Danny Dutton," and these are his rules. I think it will make you smile.

(Insert story here).

God's Peace to us all...amen.