

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness,” so says the Scripture. Thankfully enough people have either overlooked that verse since the letter started making its rounds amongst churches thousands of years ago, and then started getting published for the whole world to read; but thankfully enough people in the history of that world have had more than enough courage to still stand in front of other human beings and teach in spite of the warning in James.

Hopefully all of us have not just one teacher in mind when someone asks the age-old question, “Who was your favorite teacher?” Hopefully it takes us time to come up with the answer, because we cannot possibly narrow it down to just one. Now I could be a good momma’s boy and tell you mine was my own mother, who had to be my pre-school teacher during what were, I’m sure, not the most well-behaved days of my life. But instead, I say that it was and is Mrs. Smith.

One of the first times we young students actually had a decision to make, to have some kind of say, regarding our education was what foreign language class we would take. We could start our 8th grade year,

and that was supposed to impress future college admissions personnel, as if we should already start thinking about college in junior high school. The game-plan would be to start early so you could take more advanced classes in that foreign language in high school, and again, further impressing those college admissions counselors, and then test into a higher level of that language in college, make an all-around better résumé that will, obviously, impress future employers; all part of the absolutely perfect plan to have the most successful and greatest life ever imagined. The ego teachers get to deal with on a daily basis!

So it was for Mrs. Smith when I walked in for my first day of French class. Obviously, it would have made more sense to take Spanish for the frequency it could be used throughout the United States, but I had to be different. I had this ego taking over, after all. Maybe I was under the impression I would be taking all these trips to France, or I would be listening to radio stations from certain parts in Canada, or something. Regardless, I was determined to be part of the classy, more beautiful, more regal language of *le francais*.

Again, thankfully Mrs. Smith either overlooked that verse in James or, just, flat-out didn't care of being held to a higher standard in the eyes of God, because I think God envisions the Mrs. Smiths of the world to not simply teach grammar, pronunciation, noun-verb agreements; along with all the other essentials of equations and science and health. No, God works through teachers to help us often-egotistical students to realize a world beyond ourselves, and, just as essential: to help us see the immense potential each of us have, to impact that world for the better.

Now it so happened we *did* take a trip to France as part of the regal and classy French Club that I was a part of in high school. Except the timing was about to get rather interesting for those of us who would be venturing outside the country for the first time, because the United States had just invaded Iraq; and let's just say, many of our European brothers and sisters were not on the same page with that decision.

Nevertheless, we Americans from a small farming town in Ohio got on the plane and flew into Paris. There were protests in a few spots around their nation's capital, but at no point were we ever in danger. At no point were we treated with anything less than the most hospitable respect. At

no point did we ever experience the stereotype of the far too high-and-mighty snobbish French people.

So, yes, thankfully Mrs. Smith overlooked that verse from James. Because, if it wasn't for her, this farm boy, whose parents thought it was a vacation to leave the county, would have never experienced a world in the pivotal years of life when I thought I could be the center of the known universe: to see first-hand the beauty of God, the vast reach of God in places far beyond what I knew existed. And not just to see it, but to, actually, want to be a part of that world; to, actually, want to use whatever I have to somehow care for that world, *God's* world, *God's* people. Mrs. Smith didn't just teach me French. She taught me fascination. She ingrained in me human respect for all walks of life. She proclaimed the very Gospel itself.

Of course, part of our baptismal calling for all of us is teaching, not in the sense of lectures or memorization charts, necessarily; but in how we live, in how God lives in us, in our story, in the people who made a difference in us for the better, including the teachers who overlooked that verse in James and decided to stand in a room and be an impact for

God to go to work. To be yet another way that God will never stop teaching us the most basic, but most essential lesson of all: that God loved us, and all of humanity, so incredibly much to the point of becoming part of this world and dying in it; dying in our broken condition, dying so that the whole world may rise again. The ultimate teaching of love that can never be under-cut, that can never be proven wrong, that can never be taken away from any of us. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed!

Amen.