

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Dec 7th 2013

A recent Gallup poll asked participants to call to mind the name of their best teacher. Then they were asked to think of the one word that best described that teacher. What do you suppose was the most common descriptor?

Brilliant?

No.

Demanding?

No.

Passionate??

Nice try, but guess again.

The most common word to describe the best teachers was... caring.

Uh oh. Caring is one of those fuzzy, cuddly terms that makes some people – at least guys like me – squirm a bit. I squirm because caring is a word that lays a claim on me. A person can be brilliant, demanding or passionate about their work; but none of those words requires attentiveness to the needs, hopes, and fears of the people around me. But caring lays claim to my time, energy, and heart. And as any teacher – or parent – worth her salt can tell you, caring looks a little different for each recipient.

For the eager, caring looks like a challenge.

For the lazy, a prod.

For the procrastinator, a deadline.

For the panicked, an extension.

For the discouraged, a pep talk.

For the lonely and ignored, an ear.

For the anxious, perspective.

For the proud, gentle questions that identify insecurities and instill self-awareness and a desire for support.

For the slower learner, a lunch hour lost – never lost, just repurposed – to reteach.

For the confused and fearful, a voice of encouragement, “This is the way; walk in it.”

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Today we remember St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan whose preaching and teaching guided young Augustine on the way to encounter the God of our lives. Augustine was a brilliant and proud young man. He fell away from his mother’s Christian upbringing, preferring worldly living and trendy pagan philosophies. It must have taken Ambrose (let alone his mother Monica!) a lot of patience to teach Augustine, in a way that he could receive it. But that patient care bore fruit, in due time.

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It is comfortable for us teachers to consider the likes of Augustine with a “told you so” shake of the head. It’s less comfortable for us to imagine ourselves as students who still are learning. Today’s first reading from Isaiah speaks of God as the patient Teacher, who cares for His students:

He will be gracious to you when you cry out,

as soon as he hears he will answer you.

The Lord will give you the bread you need

and the water for which you thirst.

No longer will your Teacher hide himself,

but with your own eyes you shall see your Teacher,

While from behind, a voice shall sound in your ears:

“This is the way; walk in it,”

when you would turn to the right or to the left.

Caring takes time and patience. The best teachers calibrate their care to what each student needs, and when. Thank God for the good teachers in our lives!

The reminder for today is that the same God who creates us, calibrates his care to our needs – wherever we are today. God is ready as teacher; are we God’s willing students?

Joe Simmons, S.J.