

## ENACTING COMMUNITY: LIVING CHRIST IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

Dr. Hadley Wood, Point Loma Nazarene University,  
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*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13: 34-35*

*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Phil. 2: 5-8*

*Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. Phil. 4:8*

*And beyond all these things, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Col. 3: 14*

I would like to share what it means to me to live Christ in the classroom and the inspiration I find in scripture and in John Wesley. I am not suggesting myself as a model to follow. This is just the story I know best. Indeed, this is more a map of my spiritual battles than a list of victories. But God has used teaching as a scalpel to operate on my all too flawed human heart and a whetstone to sharpen my all too blunt human mind.

This message will look at scripture but also at psychology, not because I worship the God of therapeutic individualism but because I know that what I believe in my heart of hearts about God has a profound influence on how I live with those around me. The spiritual becomes personal. And I know that what I assume about God in my heart can take its cue from my own unexamined realities, not from what I believe in my head. I also know that the patterns of heart and mind I practice daily often shape my internalized understanding of God. The personal can become spiritual.

At age 31, I was a new professor and a new Christian, struggling to learn teaching and to live my faith. These two quests became and have remained deeply intertwined because for me true faith in the Creator of the universe demands no less than a complete and radical reordering of life. I understand faith as beliefs embodied, enfolded in concrete actions, lived out in the complex, challenging, often confusing context of others. Even in a secular university I would feel the necessity to align my pedagogy and my theology because faith cannot be an incidental accessory that we add to the more “permanent” aspects of our lives, i.e. our lives as parent, spouse, researcher, professor, citizen, friend. Likewise these other identities make no real sense if divorced from our core identity as followers of Jesus Christ. The I who believes is the I who teaches and learns. Were this not so, there would be something drastically wrong with my Christian walk and something equally wrong with my teaching.

What I do as Christian and teacher must find its basis in my personhood. Whatever I do in the classroom ultimately derives its authority from who I am, from my values and commitments as lover of God. Good teaching, like Christianity, is relational not dogmatic. Even in lecture form, teaching is delivered relationally, inviting students to relationship with the material and with the professor who presents it. Teaching technique must flow from authentic selfhood. There can be no genuine relationship with a fake self. Teaching, especially Christian teaching, is a way of being from which flow ways of doing. To try to solve a serious teaching dilemma exclusively at the level of doing without ever thinking about what transpires at the level of being can be an exercise in futility and frustration. If the relationship between me and my students is strained or hostile or adversarial, no amount of teaching strategies and techniques will transform the atmosphere of the class into a dynamic, energized community unless I heal the relationships.

As a Christian who believes that the divine call to love God and one's neighbor should be at the heart of the passions I bring to class and to students, I always wonder what an answer to this call might look like. I am helped by John Wesley's sermon *On Zeal*, where he explains that the essential properties of love result either in works of piety such as reading the Word, prayer, communion, fasting, and abstinence or in works of mercy, works we do in the service either of men's souls or of their bodies or, I imagine, of their minds, that intriguing blend of body and soul. In fact, works of mercy, says Wesley, should take precedence even over works of piety (*On Zeal*, I.5). Indeed, what would I be saying about what it means to be Christian if I prayed for 2 minutes at the beginning of class and then ignored student needs for the next 48 minutes?

So what do my students need most, academically? Of course, they need the direct content that I am teaching them. But more importantly, almost all of them need to think better. When I teach only those few students with adequate critical thinking skills, I opt to teach only the pre-educated. If as Christians we are to feed the hungry and care for the poor, are we not to provide intellectual food to those that need it most and reach out to those with the most intellectually impoverished backgrounds? It is tempting to focus on the 3-4 students who automatically apply higher thinking skills to class material. I am called, however, to connect with all my students, to inspire the apathetic as well as the enthusiastic, the underprepared as well as the pre-educated. When I offer appreciation and respect selectively, conditionally, they become forms of judgment, sugar-coated versions of disrespect and rejection. If the divine call to love my neighbor extends to my enemies, surely it also extends to unprepared, bored, apathetic, unruly students. Loving them does not mean approving of all they do, but if I wait for them to behave in certain narrowly prescribed ways before caring, then I probably don't really care for *them* at all. Surely this work is not beneath one called to follow a servant God who humbled himself, became a man, washed feet, and died on a cross.

Many of us try to teach thinking skills to students, I try to teach those skills, but it is hard, I don't fully understand how to do it and it often makes me feel like an incompetent failure because the students are unresponsive. Here again Wesley offers insight and inspiration. In his sermon, *A Call to Backsliders*, Wesley's description of why some Christians give up trying to live a holy life reads like a description of our students and their relationship to tasks of academic rigor. If some give up on difficult tasks through arrogance, feeling above such efforts, even more

people, says Wesley, “perish by despair, ... by want of hope; by thinking it impossible ... Having many times fought ... and always been overcome, they lay down their arms; they no more contend, as they have no hope of victory. Knowing, by melancholy experience that they have no power of themselves to help themselves, and having no expectation ... [of] help..., they lie down under their burden. They no longer strive; for they suppose it is impossible they should attain (*A Call to Backsliders*, I.2).”

Since arrogance and despair yield the same result—a refusal to try, a resistance to change—it is, says Wesley, extremely easy to misread despair as arrogance. Indeed, “there are few who are not deceived by appearances...” (*A Call to Backsliders*, I.3). It is critical to address this despair, this learned helplessness, because it matters whether our students learn to think well and because those who practice despair in their academic lives are more likely to allow it to transfer to other aspects of their lives as well; the personal becomes spiritual.

How then can I combat my students’ fear? How can I live out the relentless grace and tireless love that God has poured out on my own life? Today’s second Philippians scripture points me towards an important tool in combating student fear. Too often I have read this verse as an encouragement to be critical, to label what is not true, not right, not excellent or worthy of praise. And I have certainly graded students this way, focusing primarily if not exclusively, on their faults, inadvertently heaping more despair on those who may already be immobilized by fear. But the scripture says that my focus needs to be positive. I need to read that hopeless student paper and find something good, true, excellent, to celebrate. I need to focus on that hopeful seed of student capacity and affirm it, nurture it. I need to believe in it because the student may not yet have the ability, or may have temporarily lost the ability to believe in it himself. Indeed, the more the student cares, the deeper his despair may be and the quicker it may emerge. Our brightest students can be some of the most, not the least, vulnerable.

If they are to be effective, praise and encouragement must always be true, or else we are engaging in a particularly devious form of disrespect. Certainly, when you read student work forensically, looking for clues that good thinking is beginning to happen, grading is initially more difficult. Furthermore, providing praise may seem challenging when the student has produced little to merit it, but focusing on process can supply you with plenty of positives. You can affirm a student for being more focused in class, for asking a good question, for showing greater patience, or for learning new ideas faster than earlier in the year. And you can show the student what he can accomplish if he continues to apply this good trait to the tasks to come.

In addition, you cannot recommend academic or spiritual virtues that you do not strive to live out in the classroom. If you are as impatient as I, you may think, “Why not just tell students how things should be?” But students need a meaning embodied, a word made flesh; they need a story lived, not recounted. What we say will matter less than what we do if the two are at variance. How we treat students is the deepest lesson we teach and we have multiple opportunities every day that in no way diminish content. When we handle with firm grace the chatty student, the cell phone junkie, the sarcastic student, the overly talkative student, we teach patience, faith, empathy, hope, perseverance, and generosity. When we deliver these lessons truthfully, respectfully, we teach love and Christian community.

We can have the boldness to teach like this because we ourselves have been loved in this way. We participate in the Christian story which centers on Jesus' sacrifice, the act by which forgiveness replaces blame and lays a foundation for the healing of relationships, with God and others. A professor cannot effectively live out forgiveness for students if she is unable to forgive herself. By internalizing the story of loving forgiveness, the professor allows herself to be a learner of the material, of teaching and of students. Loving forgiveness accounts for our failures and opens up a free internal space where which change can happen. Being forgiven gives us the courage to look at our faults and to risk.

This is the gift we can give students. We express forgiveness of their intellectual and personal imperfections by refusing to let knowledge of these reduce our affection for them or our faith in their ability to grow. This affection and faith give students the inner strength to look at their failings and begin to work at removing them. And we can forgive students' slow, hesitant learning path when we learn to forgive our own tortured, halting path towards effective teaching.

Finally, the Christian story presents a love embodied in Jesus who came not simply to speak the truth, but to be the truth and calls us to live similarly. The call to embody truth is a call to the paradoxical life that Jesus modeled. He is a god who abandoned divine privilege and became a man; a god who exercised power in suffering, leadership in servanthood. As Christian professors we are called to serve students, but they are not our masters; we try to exercise power so that we can effectively give it away. We have an authority based as much on our ability to admit ignorance as on an assertion of knowledge. This life of paradox forces us to think carefully in all we do.

We must practice effortful clarity of thought—about our discipline, our students and ourselves. The Christian story urges us to conceptualize our work with students in the broadest terms possible. We are not just teaching an academic subject. We are teaching people, teaching them how to live a life, how to be human. If we want students to grow wider understandings of the world, we need to risk widening our understanding of students. We may even need, as Julia Kristeva suggests, to see ourselves as *other* in order to make a space wherein others can be themselves.

Teaching for 41 years has also shown me that students are not the only ones subject to fear. Professors also live complicated lives, struggling to manage the crises of marriage, growing children, and aging parents; to serve family, students, church, community and profession, often with little or no recognition. We can pour out love to people who never thank us. We can do research and have trouble getting it published. We can write grants that we don't receive. We can run experiments that don't work. And we can teach a course for which we have done hundreds of hours of preparation, only to have students greet our efforts with apparent apathy. It is exquisitely painful to face this experience multiple times, to attempt to remedy it only to fail again, perhaps even more spectacularly. We also are subject to despair. We also can just stop trying. We can give up on ourselves, our relationships, our work, our students. Colleagues also need the same words of hope and encouragement, the same work of attention and vision that our students need.

Every day I have multiple opportunities to remind others of their value—to thank the cleaning woman, the groundskeeper, the secretary for their good work; to let colleagues know when students praise their class; to point out a colleague’s valuable skills; to thank people for the ways in which they gift my life with their presence. Or I can say nothing and wonder why neither my classroom nor my department nor perhaps this university feels like a warm and welcoming community.

Will this positive attentive Christian love suffice to make your class a dynamic place and your department a paradise on earth? I don’t think so. But it will open your heart to look for student and colleague needs and give you the courage to look at who you are in class and in your department. And working to return to students and colleagues the love you yourself have received from God will enact community. Community is not a thing, an object that we possess or create, that exists in some way external to us. Community is something we do as we strive to make room for others in our hearts and to live like Christ with those around us.

We are called to live like Jesus Christ who loved us first, before we were capable of loving him. So we must answer the call to live out patience and understanding, perseverance and long-suffering, joy and generosity of spirit even with those who as yet have little of those traits. We are called to have high standards yet forgive to those, like ourselves, who do not meet those standards. We are called to affirm what is positive, what is true, to be purveyors of hope to those who have none, to be gardeners of goodness, affirming and nurturing the positive qualities we see in those around us. To enact community here at Point Loma Nazarene University, we must stop blaming ourselves, our colleagues, our students for being flawed, for being learners; we must love and forgive, remembering how we have been loved and forgiven; we must never give up hope or lose faith. We must truly believe that growth is possible, even if it is hard. And we must rest in the assurance that because this difficult task is indeed God’s work, He will make the burden light.