

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Feast of St. Matthew on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

### The Ministry of Education in Troubled Times

Have you noticed that the lectionary for St. Matthew's Day contains a whole lot of talk about teaching? In today's scripture readings there are four selections and each one of them focuses on some particular aspect of teaching or learning:

**Proverbs:** The importance of finding and following a dependable path in life.

**Psalms 119:** Having clarity of insight to discern those things that truly endure.

**II Timothy:** Recognizing that truth and values come to us only from trusted people.

**Matthew's Gospel:** No one who learns the Good News can ever be separated from God.

To me, those four scripture readings provide a remarkably concise summary of why it is that the ministry of education is so important for the church. What these readings say to me is that anyone who doesn't have a life-goal to pursue is probably not going to get very far. They say that everyone needs a vision of what it is that really matters in life. They tell me that the source of such guiding goals and vision is not really going to be found in books or courses but in the sharing of lives with people you can trust and respect. They tell me that there is nothing more important to discover than the Good News that God cares, forgives, and loves me **no matter what.**

Those four educational principles are at the very heart of what our educational ministry here at St. Mark's Chapel is all about. Nothing that we do could possibly be more important. In troubled times like those in which we live these days, we need a solid grounding if our lives are to be effective, fulfilling, joyous, and constructive. A few months ago your Chapel Committee was really struggling with the tough question of whether we could afford to rent space to set up a Sunday School. Those good folks want to manage our money prudently but, at the same time, they decided that this Chapel couldn't afford NOT to offer our children good learning, equipping and training them for Christian living. We voted to climb out on a bit of a limb financially, trusting that God has a way of making possible even those things that we doubt we will ever be able to do.

It's very interesting to me that we have as the Scripture readings today this beautiful four-part summary of how centrally important the church's educational ministry really is. I know you'll probably find this hard to believe, but we didn't pick St. Matthew's Day purposefully as the Sunday when we would install and commission our Sunday School teachers; it just turned out that way. Now some of you may think that's nothing more than just a curious coincidence. Personally, I'm not so sure. God, it seems to me, has a funny way of shaping things so that they come out right—better than you could ever have planned, little "tweakings" of time and events that pass human understanding—if we're paying attention.

Anyway, at the conclusion of today's Eucharist, our Coordinator of Education, Lee Shaffer, will be presenting to all of us the wonderful group of volunteers who give of their time, talents, and energy

week-by-week so that our children can be nurtured in the Faith. Our Sunday School is much more than just a babysitting or child care operation. It is a means by which this faith community instills in a new generation those values we have found to be life-giving. Our Sunday School communicates both to the heads and the hearts of our children what it means to live a life fully grounded in God's loving purposes for all of us.

Remember, also, that education is a two-way street. Those who set out to communicate the Faith to children very quickly discover that in many ways, THEY are the ones who are being taught. As we struggle to understand the words of Scripture, as we show children activities to express their thoughts and feelings, and as we celebrate together God's ongoing nurture, ALL of us are being educated—not just the children. ALL of us are receiving the gifts and blessings that God has promised to those who seek to understand and who are willing to follow. It is true: "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened"—no matter what your age or circumstance.

So, we're gathered here to give thanks today—thanks for the Ministry of Education and also for the life and ministry of the Apostle Matthew. Do you know that the name "Matthew" means "**God's gift?**" Through Matthew's Gospel, you and I are the inheritors of the greatest gift that a human being could ever hope to receive. The Gospel of Matthew has as its centerpiece the so-called Sermon on the Mount. In those words, Jesus takes all the attitudes and perspectives that most of the people in this world take for granted and turns them completely upside down. Jesus laid out a whole new set of priorities and values that had been lost for generations. Jesus redefined the whole notion of what religion is all about in a way that shocked and surprised the religious authorities of that time. Now Matthew wasn't a devout Jew who had come to hear the new Rabbi preach. He was a tax collector, someone beneath the purity standards of the Temple community, someone who worked hard every-day and had little time for or knowledge of the "deep things of life." Standing in that crowd surrounding Jesus, Matthew was astonished to hear truths from Jesus that he had never in his wildest dreams imagined: He heard from Jesus that love is stronger than armies, that peace is possible even among hostile enemies, that forgiveness releases us from hatred, that humble ordinary people are the equal of Kings, that those who grieve will find comfort, that the oppressed and downtrodden will one day rise up victorious. Matthew's whole life was changed by those incredible words. He immediately went out and invited everyone he knew to come and hear this wonderful news—to be taught by someone who really had a whole new picture of reality. When Matthew was criticized for exposing a "holy man" like Jesus to all these common folk, this rabble of unreligious and ignorant commoners—these feral cats from off the street—, Jesus spoke up for Matthew saying, "Listen, I haven't come to teach the choir; I'm here to heal the sinners and the homeless." Matthew's eyes were opened from that moment on. He really got it! And he wrote it all down so that we might "get it" too. Now, how great a gift is THAT?

You and I are the bearers of that very same unending Good News—all of us—and though the teachers whom we will be commissioning this morning may be more directly and actively engaged; the Sunday School belongs to all of us. Its support and its funding are our opportunity to make a huge difference in the present and future lives of the next generation of St. Mark's Chapel members.

However difficult, demanding, or challenging that task may seem, keep in mind that passing it along to the future it is a privilege, an opportunity, a gift. Let us always welcome and embrace that calling.