



PENTECOST SPECIAL OFFERINGS

CHILDREN AT RISK • YOUTH • YOUNG ADULTS

SERMON

Loving Our Neighbor: Public Education and Pentecost

Psalm 71

Matthew 18:1–6; 22:b34–40

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is present to the people gathered on the streets of the city. They are from many nations. When the Spirit comes, they are able to understand each other despite speaking different languages. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit brings, in Walter Brueggemann's words, "the fresh capacity to listen," and I would add the ability to understand and be understood. Listening and understanding is at the heart of the Pentecost story and human community. It isn't always easy to understand someone who speaks our language. It's even harder when someone speaks a different language or comes from a different place or is a stranger. Fear of someone different is one obstacle to understanding who they are and what they are saying. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is present in a way that helps the crowd in the streets move beyond the fear that sometimes makes it impossible to hear each other. The Spirit can do the same thing today. Listening and fear of someone different lie at the heart of one of my favorite poems by one of my favorite poets, Naomi Shihab Nye. The poem/story is "Gate A-4"

Gate A-4¹

"Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of

Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately."

Well—one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. "Help," said the flight service person. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly. "Shu dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibt? Stani schway, min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "No we're fine, you'll get there, just later. Who is picking you up? Let's call him."

¹ Gate A-4 by Naomi Shihab Nye is found in her collection Honeybee Green Willow Press 2008.

We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her—Southwest. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten thousand shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

Once the crying of confusion stopped, once fear diminished, once people heard and understood each other, no one seemed apprehensive about the other person. Pentecost is about the fresh capacity to listen. Fear can block our ability to listen and understand the world and the people around us. Which brings us to the focus of the rest of this sermon. One way we move beyond that fear is through education. Presbyterians throughout the years have recognized the importance of quality education for all children. And for most children, that education takes place in public schools. Please pray with me.

Gracious God, within whom we live and move and have our being, focus our hearts and minds on your word to us this morning. I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts will be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

There is a red sign on the lawn of a house in my neighborhood. It reads: **DRIVE LIKE YOUR KIDS LIVE HERE!** Every time I drive by that sign, it grabs my attention. I slow down no matter how slow I may already be going. The sign is a good reminder to be attentive as I drive to the children in my neighborhood. But, ever since the first time I saw it, something about that red sign bothered me, gnawed at me. **DRIVE LIKE YOUR KIDS LIVE HERE !** The assumption behind the sign seems to be that I would drive differently because my child lives in the neighborhood than I would if someone else's child lived in the neighborhood. Do I need to imagine my own children playing on the sidewalk to drive

safely? The signs are an innocent reminder to drive carefully. I get that. What troubles me is that it isn't enough to say simply: **CHILDREN LIVE HERE. DRIVE SAFELY!** We have to make it about **our** children, appeal to the driver's love for **their** child. Shouldn't the safety of all children be enough? I think so.

What does that red sign have to do with public education? Our concern for children and our commitment to quality public schools is not because "our" children attend. We care because we care about children, period. Our kids may be grown and out of the house or we may not have children—it makes little difference. Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves includes our neighbors who are children. One way we love our neighbors and their children is to provide those children with a quality education so they can live fully and discover their unique gifts.

In the gospels we meet Jesus, a teacher/rabbi who shows a particular concern for children. Some scholars suggest that his attention to children was unique in the ancient world. In Jesus' time, children, along with women, old men and slaves, were often viewed as physically weak burdens on society who had little value in the wider community. In Greece and Rome, it was an accepted practice to abandon unwanted children along the roadside to die if no one stopped for them. Jesus demonstrated another way. Again and again in his ministry, he lifted children up. He paid attention to children and told his disciples that unless they became like little children, they would not enter heaven. Indeed he warned his followers not to despise children or to cause them to stumble. Jesus clearly embraced and valued children.

And he cared about education. Jesus was a rabbi, a Jewish teacher of wisdom. He is called rabbi by others and assumes the rabbinical position as he sits and teaches the multitudes. When asked the greatest commandment, he offers two. The second is about loving the neighbor as yourself. The first is a call to love God with heart, soul and mind. As it says in our denominations policy statement on public education, "*Mind in this text has a particular meaning. It does not mean the seat of personality or the whole person as it does in other Biblical texts. The word translated as mind means thinking or reflecting, a more specific intellectual activity than we find elsewhere. Learning and intellectual activity is one way we love God.*"² As followers of Rabbi Jesus, we are to love God by using our minds and loving our neighbors, which means giving our neighbors' children the opportunity to use their minds as well.

One additional piece of Biblical context when it comes to quality public schools. Jesus demonstrated again and again a special concern for those on the margins of society, those he calls "the least of these." He embodies the prophet Micah's words that we are called to "do justice, love steadfastly and walk humbly." How do we "do justice" when it comes to education? We need to ask ourselves how we can help ensure that all children receive quality education in all our public schools, not just the privileged. The quality of one's public education should not be determined by an individual's zip code. It often does.

As Presbyterian members of the Christian household, we are called to love our neighbors and their children by providing for their education. Again, it makes no difference if we have children or if for some reason we choose to send our children to a private school. Jesus' teaching about loving our neighbor is clear. It asks us to care about the neighbors' well-being and to work to ensure that their children have the opportunity to develop their potential, and for most children that development to their full potential will take place in public schools. The 2010 PCUSA policy statement states it well, "*Quality public schools*

² Loving Our Neighbors: Equity and Quality in Public Education. A PCUSA policy statement approved by the 219th (2010) General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Page 6

*give us the best chance to empower the most students to embrace abundant life in community*³.” This is not a new thing for Presbyterians. Beginning with John Calvin’s support of free schools, people of the Reformed tradition have always affirmed the value of education and its potential to transform lives and systems. In 2019, many Presbyterian churches are engaged in concrete actions to support schools. The Educate a Child task force is working to provide resources to congregations including an education covenant.

What can we do to support public education as we love our neighbor? How do we make our words affirming public education flesh in the lives of individuals and our congregations? The issues are numerous. I will suggest three.

1. We can affirm and celebrate the teachers and other educators in our midst. All too often we hear the phrase “failing schools.” The truth is that many public schools are thriving and have amazing teachers working long hours. Often these teachers provide classroom resources from their own pocket. We need to celebrate teachers and perhaps, if needed, find the funds to offer reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses. In a similar fashion, we need to celebrate our children and their education. We need to be interested in what they are learning and affirm that education, especially in the sciences, does not threaten Christian faith. As we celebrate and affirm teachers and education, we can focus on education for the whole person—an education not just for employment later in life. A quality education helps children and young adults understand the world, appreciate nature and art and be good, informed citizens.
2. We need to be mindful of the boundaries between church and state, religion and public education. It is a critical act of hospitality that we honor the separation of church and state and not teach or act as if one religious point of view is normative in a classroom or school. Hospitality in our schools means that every child feels fully welcomed in their school no matter what their faith or if they come from a home without a faith tradition or one antagonistic to faith. Public schools can be a place where we affirm the great diversity of religious views on the American landscape.
3. We need to learn about and address school funding in our city and state. Charter schools and private schools are appropriate choices for some children, but they create challenges in oversight, funding and equitable pay for teachers. As Christian citizens, we need to remember and, dare I say, affirm that we support public schools for all children with our taxes even if we choose another educational option for our child. Funding schools isn't about my kid, it's about all kids. There is a wide gap in school quality. We need to close the gap and ask how we can lift up schools in neighborhoods where there is poverty. One way might be for a church to adopt a school in a struggling neighborhood. Another may be to create a before- and after- school extended learning center that is affordable for all. There are other ways we can help.

Our children are precious, all children are precious and filled with hopes, dreams and potential. Maybe a new way to read that red sign in my neighborhood—**DRIVE LIKE YOUR KIDS LIVE HERE!**—is by affirming that “our” kids do live here—in a way all children are our children. They are our shared future. This in no way diminishes the individuality of each family and parental rights, hopes and dreams. Not at all. I say all children are our children in the sense that they are made in God’s image, they are vulnerable and we are called to work together to ensure that all children are safe, have a place to live, food to eat and a good school where they can discover, learn and grow.

Jesus calls us to love our neighbors. One way we love our neighbors is by providing great schools for our neighbors who are children. Let's get busy!

³ Loving Our Neighbors. Page 7

In Jesus' name,
Amen.



Rev. Dave Brown is a member of the Educate a Child Work Group and one of the authors of the 2010 policy statement. He served as staff to the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy. Dave is a writer, consultant and creator of BLUES VESPERS in Tacoma WA. He engages Interfaith issues as one of the PNW Interfaith Amigos. Last October, after a wonderful 13 years, he retired as pastor/head of staff at Immanuel Presbyterian Church Tacoma in order to engage more fully these other interests and passions.