

1 February, 2009  
Deut 18:15-20; Ps 111  
I Cor 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

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Stanley Fish's recent book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, has ignited a bit of a firestorm in the circles of higher education. Taking aim at the widespread idea that higher education is meant, not only to impart knowledge, but also to cultivate in students the attributes of good citizenship, creativity, acceptance of diversity, and so on, Fish argues that the purpose of education is to train the mind in certain academic disciplines, full stop. He writes, "Yale College's [mission] statement... [promises] 'to seek students of all backgrounds' and 'to educate them through mental discipline,' but then the mental discipline turns out to be instrumental to something even more valuable, the development of students' 'moral, civic and creative capacities to the fullest.' I'm all for moral, civic, and creative capacities, but I'm not sure there's much I or anyone else could do as a teacher to develop them. Moral capacities (or their absence) have no relationship whatsoever to the reading of novels,<sup>1</sup> or the running of statistical programs, or the execution of laboratory procedures, all of which can produce certain skills, but not moral states. Civic capacities -- which mean, I suppose, the capacities which go along with responsible citizenship -- won't be acquired simply because you have learned about the basic structure of American government, or read the Federalist Papers (both good things to do). You could ace all your political science and public policy courses and still drop out and go live in the woods or become the Unabomber.<sup>2</sup> And as for creative capacities, there are courses in creative writing in liberal arts colleges, and colleges of fine arts offer instruction in painting, sculpture, pottery, photography, drafting, and the playing of various musical instruments. But even when such courses are housed in liberal arts venues, they belong more to the world of professional instruction...than to the world of academic interrogation." (p.11) Fish wishes to restrict the role of college education to imparting the knowledge contained in various disciplines, and teaching students the analytic skills which will enable them to contribute ideas of their own.

Those of you who are engaged in the work of education will recognize that them's fightin' words. Fish has waded into the fray of an ancient argument about the proper role of education: is it to form the mind by imparting some kind of knowledge, or to form good human beings, however that is understood in various cultures? Fish seems, rather provocatively, to be arguing that educators don't have that much influence anyway, but that's rather out of the mainstream of the fray. Most of us can attest from our own experience that our teachers and mentors have exerted great influence on who we have become, which intellectual disciplines we enjoy, how we treat other people, and the kinds of behavior we consider acceptable. This is not to say that we are mere sponges or mirrors, which take on the form of whatever we are shown, but, even given our capacity to resist and rebel, those who train us up do a good deal to determine the people we become. When Mme. Van Swearingen, my high school French teacher, took me with her to her Aikido class, she introduced me to a discipline of meditation that has formed the basis of my prayer life for more than twenty years. That's why St. Paul feels it necessary to comment on the role of Christian education in the life of the community: "Knowledge puffs up," he comments, "but love builds up." (I Cor 8:1)

The question he's raising is what we are supposed to do with the things we learn about our faith in Christ Jesus. In other words, what is the purpose of Christian education? Is it to allow us to master a certain body of knowledge -- let's say, the meaning and history of the creeds; the memorization of certain key Bible verses; the core teachings of Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and

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<sup>1</sup> It's hard to imagine reading Dostoevsky, *Jane Eyre*, or even a good mystery novel without encountering issues which engage our moral capacities.-- DM

<sup>2</sup> Here Fish confuses the ability to exert influence upon a student with the ability to control his or her ultimate decision.

St. Augustine; the use of colors to mark liturgical seasons; and the history of the church in the former colonial properties of England? Or is it intended to form us as human beings so that we can lead lives that are noticeably Christian, to help us become little Jesuses walking in the world?

The issue is not merely academic, for Christians are not Christian alone; to be a Christian is to be in relationship with other people, and how we behave has a lot to do with the quality of those relationships. And so St. Paul presents us with two images of the educated Christian: in the one corner, Little Miss Smarty Pants, well known to us from grade school, who knows all the answers before the questions are even asked, and makes sure everyone else knows she knows them, too. In her world, excellence is measured by how many books you've read, whether you can find the right quote to trounce your opponent in an argument. It's the world St. Paul himself comes out of, the world of the studious Pharisee, who has dedicated his life to the learning of God, who has memorized every verse in Scripture and most of the commentaries, who lives strictly in accordance with the law, who gets ahead by defeating others in argument, and who might walk right by the wounded man on the edge of the road or the bleeding one nailed to the Cross. In the other corner, we have the humble person of God, who knows all the teachings and has every gift, but who spends his life using them to strengthen those around him. In his world, excellence consists in loving others in concrete ways, setting aside your own claims when they interfere with the well-being of others. It's the world St. Paul moved into, the one Jesus exemplified when he left heaven to come live among the dregs of humankind and raise us to the sky.

Imagine, for a moment, a community made up entirely of know-it-alls, and you'll have a pretty good image of the Christians in Corinth. Such a community is likely to be fractious. When differences of opinion occur, rather than listening to one another, each member is likely to insist that he or she is right, is the most knowledgeable person in the room, the sole possessor of truth. In such a community, each person is going to be out for his or her own advancement. Those who are lesser -- less smart, less educated, less wealthy, who possess less leisure to think -- these are likely to be pushed to the side or trampled on, for, in such a community, they will count less. This is the world of the marketplace, where the résumé is all.

In a community where knowledge serves love, care for one another will be the primary value. When differences of opinion occur, the members will listen to one another and seek together for the truth. When a member is in need, the other people will reach out to support her, bringing food, offering to care for children, helping to tend the elderly relative so that she can have a few hours to herself. In such a community, the most able people in each field of endeavor will wrap their lives around the needs of the broken, those whom others would push to the margins. The poor will receive seats of honor with the rich; women will have the freedom to learn alongside men; children will be honored for their contributions; the elderly will be sought-after fonts of experience. The most able and the least will be held to one standard: whether they serve and assist others with all they do. "Love is patient," Paul reminds the Corinthians; "love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." (I Cor 13:4-6)

Furman Stough, the eighth Bishop of Alabama, used to say that the longest journey is the one from head to heart. *The longest journey is the one from head to heart*, and yet, this is the journey that each of us is called to make in Christ. We begin with the act of faith, claiming on stammering lips, *I believe that Jesus is the Son of God*. (Obviously, we need some knowledge even to make this claim.) We move from that beginning point to learning about Christ: reading the Bible, imagining ourselves into its scenes, considering the ideas of theologians, thinking about how we worship, and why. But such learning, if it stays on the page, is dead. Secular people study theology and do as much. People of faith know that that when the word became flesh, God set a pattern for us as well. We learn these things, so that we can live them. We form our minds in Christ, so that our lives can be transformed

in him. Or, we transform our lives, and in the doing our minds open themselves to new people, new ideas, new kinds of holiness. You might read about Jesus feeding the five thousand and be motivated to work in the Food Pantry, or you might volunteer at Elijah's Promise and then be moved to wonder who Elijah was and read about him; either way, the encounters you have with the guests and the other volunteers are likely to lead you to see your own life in a new way. The study and the living and the encounter with others form one learning environment, one path from head to heart to Jesus.

Today is our annual meeting, the day on which we gather as a community to discuss the state of our church, what we are doing well and what we could be doing better. But talking about those things makes no sense unless we remember why we are doing them. A parish is meant to be a community of formation, a group of people who come together to grow more like Jesus (or, at least, more like Jesus created us to be). We worship God, listen to the Word, receive the sacraments so that we can be grounded in our humanity and open it up to God's divinity. We learn together, so that our minds can be cleansed of false notions and worldly attitudes and of all the junk that gets heaped up in corners and causes us to trip, and we open our minds to truth, to understandings of God that challenge who we are and how we live. We serve together so that other people may know through us that God loves them, wishes them to be whole and healed and unbroken. We learn to care for one another in concrete, tangible ways, so that we can learn to trust that others will be there in our time of need, that God will be there, too. Like athletes training for the Super Bowl, we learn to give our all for the sake of the others on the team.

When Jesus cast out the demons in Capernaum, his astonished audience cried out, "What is this? A new teaching -- with authority!" (Mark 1:27) The authority of Christ was that he made things happen through his belief in God. His faith changed his life, and the lives of those around him. Through his ministry, the hungry were fed, the sorrowful were consoled, the sick were healed, the smug were challenged, the broken were raised to new life. And that is the source of our authority as well: when we live what we believe. We can flap our lips all we want, but unless our hands and feet move in the direction our words suggest, our words will remain empty and our witness dead, erudition without compassion. But when we make that longest journey, when our faith moves from head to heart, then we will have the integrity of Christ, the mind of Christ; then we will be Christ for one another and for our world. Amen.