

NO SCHOOL FOREVER!
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

The title of today's sermon comes from a song from the rock singer Alice Cooper, he of the long hair and excessive mascara. I confess that I don't know much about the songs of Alice Cooper; I have depended on friends who have pointed me to this particular song. Here is an excerpt from the lyrics. (You'll have to imagine the throbbing guitars.):

Well we got no choice
All the girls and boys
Makin all that noise
'Cause they found new toys . . .
 School's out for summer
 School's out forever!

No more pencils, no more books
No more teachers' dirty looks.
Out for summer, out for fall
We might not go back at all.
 School's out for summer
 School's out forever!

This ought to be the national anthem.

The prophet Jeremiah—how's that for a transition?—would have understood this song. Jeremiah was “out there” as prophets go, a sort of 6th century Alice Cooper. Here are Jeremiah's lyrics:

This is the covenant I will make with them, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other,

“Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.

“No longer shall they teach one another.” School will be out forever! That is an extraordinary word when you think that it comes from a Hebrew prophet. The Hebrew tradition has been one that takes teaching very seriously. “Teach these things to your children,” exhorts the book of Deuteronomy (6:7). The apostle Paul was quite proud of the education he had received at the feet of the great teacher Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3) So it is a surprising word when the prophet says: “No longer shall they teach one another.”

It is an extraordinary word for Presbyterians as well, for ours has also been a tradition that has valued education. “The tradition began with John Calvin’s support of free schools in Geneva, Switzerland, and John Knox’s concern that schools be provided for all children in Scotland.”¹ Presbyterians have insisted that their ministers be educated. We have formed colleges and secondary schools.

John Calvin begins his most important book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, with these words: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess . . . consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”² Education is a way to lift all people into the knowledge of God and God’s world. Education is a path to equality and dignity for all people. That is the ideal.

It is not, however, an ideal that has always been realized. Too often, education has been used as a tool, not to unite people, but to divide them; not to provide equality, but as an instrument of elitism; not to lift all people up, but to keep some down.

Think of the most basic setting where education is carried out—the classroom. Whether it is a Sunday school class, or an elementary class in public school, or a lecture hall in a university, a classroom almost always consists of a teacher and students—one who is wise and others who are unlearned, one who imparts knowledge and others who take it in. Thus it has been, and thus in our world it shall always be.

Yet we know that such a setting can lead to abuse. Here is a teacher who plays favorites, boosting up some and putting down others. Here is an instructor whose authority

¹ “A Call to Church Involvement in the Renewal of Public Education.” Adopted by the 199th PCUSA General Assembly (1987). p. 4.

² *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.1.1.

becomes authoritarian and abusive. Here is a professor who uses his or her influence over students to engage in inappropriate relations with those students.

I happened to read this week about two famous people who were school dropouts. One was Robert Frost, one of the greatest of American poets. The other was Quentin Tarantino, the director of such movies as “Pulp Fiction.” Quentin Tarantino was tested and found to have an IQ of 150. Yet he dropped out of school. Robert Frost left school. They were certainly smart enough to appreciate the education. Was it that they rebelled against the authoritarian setting of so much education, where so much is rote and routine?

Jeremiah pictures a day when there will no longer be teachers up there and students down here, but all will be equal in their knowledge of God and God’s world, “from the least of them to the greatest.” But too often education has not united the least to the greatest, but has divided them. Education becomes a function of economics, where more money buys a better education, and those at the bottom of the ladder get further and further behind.

We make judgments about people based on the prestige of their schooling. The graduate of the highly rated four-year university is more highly regarded than the one who graduates from the community college.

Some years ago I was talking to a woman who was one of the counselors to students at Vanderbilt University. She and other counselors were on the staff of the university to help students with the inevitable problems which students encounter in a university setting. I asked her what sort of problem she encountered most frequently. I expected her to say that it is problems related to being away from home for the first time—being homesick, perhaps, or not using wisely the freedom that college life affords. But she surprised me: “The biggest problem I see,” she said, “is students who really shouldn’t be here in the first place. Their parents were dazzled by the supposed prestige of the place, and insisted that their children attend. In fact, their child would do better in some other setting, or maybe not in college at all.”

Before I get tarred and feathered by Vanderbilt graduates, let me hasten to say that I hear you can get a pretty good education there. For many students, it’s exactly the right place to be. But not if a student is there just for the prestige factor. That sort of elitism is not intended for the least to the greatest. Instead, it divides and separates people from one another. The problem is not confined to Vanderbilt. It is that too often we use education as a way, not to unite people, but rather to make distinctions based on credentials and prestige.

Jeremiah looks ahead to a day when all people, rich and poor, high and low, greatest and least, will have a knowledge of God and of God's world. Education will be a way to give all people dignity.

The scriptures of the Old and New Testament present a picture of a world that is totally different from the world we live in. "Israel thought it was different because it was different; it was a society of equality in a world where most people were divided into groups of high and low."³

Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar and teacher, says that at its best, education is meeting.⁴ When true learning takes place, the distance between teacher and learner is reduced, and both together discover the joy of learning in God's world. "You shall know the truth," says Jesus, "and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

Jesus was a teacher, but a different kind of teacher. The people recognized it right away: "He teaches with authority, and not as the scribes." (Mark 1:22) I wonder what the difference was. Maybe the people saw in Jesus a love for the God about whom he spoke, and a love also for the people to whom he spoke. Maybe in Jesus they saw a new way, where all people together, regardless of their status in life, could have God's world opened to them in new and wonderful ways.

Many of you in this room are or have been teachers. It is among the highest callings in our world. You have taught, oftentimes in adverse conditions, with too few resources, too many students, too many demands. And even in the midst of that you have sought to do the best you could in imparting, not just book learning, but dignity and delight to each student in your charge.

I suspect you understand the vision of Jeremiah: The days are coming when all will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest. You teachers, of all people, know that it is not yet an ideal which has been realized. But as God's people we look to the days when God's ways will be, not just head knowledge, but written on our hearts, and when all people together, from the least to the greatest, will know the Lord. †

³ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum. 2002), p. 135.

⁴ *Living Toward a Vision*, p. 167.