

The Vintage Voice

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Adventures in Teaching

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After thirty-five satisfying years of full-time parish ministry, I retired in 2007 expecting to use my experience by serving as a parish interim. Instead, a longtime friend who is dean at the nearby community college surprised me with an invitation to teach “Literature of the Bible” in the English Department.

Not what I anticipated — but I was thrilled: my B.A. is in English, and I love to teach. However, that wasn't quite enough of a credential for the college; they were looking for an M.A. in English, with a few Bible courses. My M.A. is in Theology, so I had it backwards. In a circumstance like this, the college forms an “equivalency committee” of faculty and staff. My committee determined that I could close the gap by providing testimonials of my church and community involvement, which they called my “eminence.” Commendations from my bishop, my head of school, and the local public school district satisfied the requirement. For weeks, when I encountered members of the committee on campus, they addressed me as “your eminence.”

Now began my adventures! In my classroom of nineteen- to forty-year-olds, I had to learn to hold students' attention by teaching in sound bites, presenting my thesis in the opening sentence. So, Isaiah became “the Wayne Gretzky of the Old Testament,” always skating to where the puck is about to go: preaching judgment when the people apostatize through fear (First Isaiah); comfort when they are devastated (Second Isaiah); and outrageous hope while they still despair in exile (Third Isaiah). But when I called the apostle Paul “the Dear Abby of the Mediterranean World” for his pastoral advice by letter, I met a profound silence: I discovered my young students aren't old enough to remember Abby, and few of them consult a newspaper anyway. I needed current metaphors, in the students' idiom.

I pressed on to reinvent my teaching, because I could see that my classroom efforts to present familiar material in a clear and relevant way were making me a more interesting preacher to congregations I serve on Sundays. When introducing my class to Isaiah's vivid visuals of reconciliation — the great banquet (25:6–10), the highway home across the desert (35:8–11), and the restoration to wholeness (35:3–7) — I described these visions as Isaiah's “cartoons”: impossible possibilities, each captured in a dramatic picture. I broke the class into small groups, each choosing one of the cartoons, and asked, “If Isaiah were drawing this word picture for us today, what images might he use to help us see his point?” I invited the groups to access the internet as a resource, on the classroom computer. The small group illustrating “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. . . . the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den” [NRSV 11:6–8] blew me away with an astonishing image they found online in just moments. The image they put up on the classroom screen was Elmer Fudd, leaning on his gun like a crutch and sharing a grin with his nemesis, Bugs Bunny. A delightfully impossible détente!

When it came to teaching the Book of Psalms, I faced a new challenge. A psalm articulates raw feelings of lamentation and joy, of anger and exultation, as little other biblical material does. I wanted my students to experience psalms as visceral expressions of feeling. So I had them read psalms aloud in the classroom: in unison, then antiphonally, to develop verbal teamwork. Finally, I marched them out the door, two by two, Bibles open, chanting Psalms 120 through 134 as we descended a flight of stairs, circled a part of the campus, then ascended as the Hebrews did through the city gates of Jerusalem and onto the Temple Mount, all the while chanting these “Psalms of Ascent.” It was an invigorating vocal workout of adoration and praise. When we returned to the classroom, the students’ energy level was so high that they could hardly take their seats! In their evaluations at the end of the semester, this activity was mentioned as a highlight.

When I present the luminous yet challenging story of Naomi and Ruth, I want students to visualize and understand women’s vulnerability under the Old Testament’s rules of patriarchy. I draw the River Jordan down the middle of the white board, dividing the classroom into Israel on the left and Moab on the right. Student volunteers hold sheets of paper with the names of each character: Elimelech and Naomi on the Israeli side, with their sons Mahlon and Chilion. We see them flee from the famine in Israel, and cross over into Moab where the boys meet and marry Orpah and Ruth. When Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion die, those students return to their seats, leaving Naomi and her widowed daughters-in-law to part at the Jordan, as Naomi returns to her own people in Israel. We see Naomi release Orpah to return to Moab, where she will have a chance to remarry while she is still of child-bearing years. We appreciate the selflessness of Ruth, who declines when Naomi urges her to benefit herself by returning to her own tribe in Moab, choosing instead to leave her native land behind and — in her love for and loyalty to Naomi — to risk her future in a new land, with new gods, and without any male protector. To see these women, alone together, cross over into Israel heightens the class’s awareness of their vulnerability in a world under the control of men; and highlights the resourcefulness and sensitivity with which Naomi and Ruth together create an unexpectedly wonderful new future in Bethlehem. Visual reenactment brings the story to life.

These very students are helping me learn to sharpen my edge in retirement as a teacher and a preacher. My wife Sylvia and I still live and breathe by our involvement in parish life and ministry. Now, in addition, I am profoundly grateful for adventures in education which allow me to share in the mission of our community colleges to provide open access for all students to pursue their educational goals.



Colville retired in 2007 after twelve years as Rector of St. Mark’s Parish, near Los Angeles in Altadena, where he and his wife Sylvia live. The Smythes are members of St. Edmund’s Church, San Marino, where Colville assists on Sundays and Sylvia leads the Handbell Choir. In retirement, he teaches “Literature of the Bible” at Citrus College in Glendora. He explains, “On Friday, I’m ‘Professor’; on Saturday, I’m ‘Grandpa’; on Sunday, I’m ‘Father’; and Monday through Thursday I’m retired.”