

How Do We Say Thank You?

Now, what do you say? Have you ever said that to your children? Of course, you wanted them to say “thank you” right? You’ve probably used that prompt so often that as soon as you say it, your kids know what they’re supposed to say. But is saying the words the only way that we say thank you? There’s a story I tell in catechism class about a boy who had a paper route. Of course, today I have to explain what that is, but I’ll assume you all know. This particular boy lived in a small town where lots of his other relatives lived. On one particular corner, his aunt lived in a big house with lots of carefully tended flower beds. This young man had to go around that corner every morning on his paper route. Since it was his aunt’s house, he always cut through the yard – and through her flower beds. Again and again, she asked and begged and demanded that he stop doing that, but sometimes messages don’t get through. Well, this young man was saving his money to buy a bicycle. But he could never quite get enough to buy the bike he wanted. Then his birthday came, and his aunt bought him the very bicycle he wanted so badly. He was stunned and he asked, “How can I thank you?” Well, what do you think his aunt said? “Stop going through my flower bed.” And he never tramped through it again.

I usually tell this story to describe the proper motivation for living a Christian life. We aren’t trying to get a new bicycle from God. He’s already given us the best bike we could ever get. He’s given heaven and the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection to eternal life. We live a new and holy life to say thank you. My point today is that saying thank you is more than just saying words. Today, we’re celebrating God’s gift of Christian education. We’re celebrating the fact that Jesus established the holy ministry so that all of us – children and adults – can learn more about his love and grow in our faith and stand firm through all the trails of this life and finally reach heaven. So, **how do we say thank you?**

I.

How do we say thank you to God who established the ministry and sends us the teachers that we have in our church and school? And also how do we say thank you to those ministers that he sends? By a miracle of God’s grace, those two questions have the same answer. **How do we say thank you for the ministry of Christian education? By treasuring the teachers God gives us.**

Our society pushes us to treasure teachers. They set our children on the path to college and prepare them to succeed. Even in a public school, teachers have a tremendous impact on our children. We Lutherans believe that the state is a gift of God and so we do treasure all the benefits we get from it. We do appreciate the efforts of those public school teachers. When those teachers are Christians, they are serving God by serving our society at large. But teachers in our Lutheran elementary schools and Lutheran high schools are a different kind of gift from God. They are ministers of the gospel. The Holy Spirit calls them to do a kind of work that the state can never do: lead our children to know Jesus better. Sometimes, even to lead our children to come to faith in Jesus. That transcends all the other wonderful things they do. Certainly, we want our teachers here at Peace and at HVL to teach our kids English and math and science. We want the college prep efforts at HVL to be highly successful. But first and foremost, we call – not hire – we call our teachers into the ministry to proclaim the gospel to our children.

When I was studying for the ministry, the dean at Northwestern College liked to say, “There is no higher calling than the holy ministry.” He didn’t mean to put down people who aren’t ministers. But in a world that values money and prestige, his point was that ministers serve God. We are representatives of our Lord Jesus to his people and to the world. When our teachers help our children understand more clearly how much Jesus has done for them and how much Jesus has promised them, when they help our children through the painful process of recognizing their sins and repenting and then being confident that Jesus has forgiven them, those teachers are standing in the place of Jesus himself. God loves us so much that he sent those men and women to us here at Peace and to us at HVL so that our children in preschool and elementary school and high school constantly have Jesus’ own representatives pointing them to their Lord.

That is a treasure. Today, we’re celebrating the fact that one of our teachers has been doing that for twenty-five years now. God led her to dedicate her life to serving him in that way. Now, that doesn’t mean that she or any of us ministers are perfect. You certainly could have a better pastor than you do. And every one of our teachers would admit that there are other teachers out there who are more gifted than they are. In fact,

every one of them could probably give you a list of teachers that they admire and wish they could be more like. But God doesn't really give us permission to criticize his gifts. Every teacher that he has called here, is gift that God carefully chose for this congregation. He has worked in their strengths and even in their weaknesses to build us up in the faith. In Stephanie's case, he's been doing that for twenty-five years, most of them here.

We say thank you for that gift by remembering those teachers in our prayers. We say thank you for that gift by actively supporting their ministries – and I'm talking about more than just money, although our offerings absolutely are important. Every word of encouragement that you speak to any of our teachers is deeply appreciated. It's not always easy to do their work. There can be times when a teacher feels like no one has his or her back. Letting them know that you see their hard work and you do appreciate what they do for us and our children means more to them than we always realize.

How good are we here at Peace at supporting our teachers – both emotionally and financially? How regular are we in praying for them? How often do we think of them as God's carefully chosen gifts to us? Haven't we all had that moment of exasperation in which we just couldn't believe they did whatever? God sends sinful human beings to be his representatives. He doesn't promise us that it will always be obvious that they are his gifts to us. But he does tell us to trust him and be thankful for his love and all his blessings. Are we?

I have to confess that I don't always regard our teachers as gifts from God. That's sin. If you're as guilty of that sin as I am, today is an opportunity for us to repent. To confess to God that we have not received his gifts with joy and gladness 100% of the time. And to ask for his forgiveness. And as your pastor, let me announce the grace of God to you: you are forgiven for Jesus' sake. He alone of all the people God ever called into the ministry was perfect at serving and representing his Father. He alone perfectly respected and appreciated the ministers God sent to serve him. That perfect life counts for us ministers and for us members. Jesus died and he paid for all the times and all the ways that we failed to be properly grateful for his gifts. His blood has washed all that sin away. We are now holy in his sight. That too is a gift of God.

II.

That forgiveness, that holiness through Jesus, is the heart of all the work of every teacher we will ever call. Because God sends us men and women of faith to be those teachers, one of the greatest joys they have is seeing our children grow in their faith and live their faith. Our teachers are not just moving kids from grade to grade and then on to high school or college. They're building a family under God. What makes us part of that family? The faith we have in Christ. That faith is fed by the gospel our teachers proclaim. **How do we say thank you for the ministry of Christian education? By treasuring the gospel our teachers share.**

The book of Hebrews talks about ministers and it says, **“Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”** Every year, I ask my catechism class what would make it a joy for me to come to class and what would make it a burden? It's pretty easy for them to understand that kids who don't participate, kids who don't do their homework or don't put real effort into it make it a burden to come to class. On the flip side, kids who participate and get all they can out of the word of God are a joy to teach. It's not just pastors who feel that way and it's not just about homework. It's a joy for a teacher to have a child in class who loves to learn, especially the word of God.

But the joy doesn't end at the classroom door. It is a joy to see God's people live their faith. Every Sunday, when I look out at this congregation, it is a joy for me to serve you. Every one of you that I see here makes me glad that I get to be your pastor. Now, I didn't do an email survey of our teachers and ask them, “Agree or disagree: it's a joy to see your students in church.” But I'm pretty sure if I had, I would've gotten a 100% agreement rate. Our teachers love seeing our kids express their faith. They love to see them here in church, both while they're in school and after they graduate. Our teachers love to hear our students lift up their voices and praise their Savior. So it's going to be a special treat for Stephanie when the kids and the alumni sing one of her favorite hymns.

But it doesn't end at worship. Our teachers know that they are laying a foundation for a lifetime of faith in Christ. When a student grows up and gets married and then brings his or her children to be baptized, that's a special moment for their former Christian teachers. When they show day in and day out that they know their Savior and they live the way God calls us to, that is a rich blessing for their former teachers. We may not always remember it, but just as our new life gives thanks to God, there is no better way to thank your Christian teachers than by treasuring the gospel they taught and living according to it.

But all our teachers understand that they only play a part in Christian education. God has entrusted formal education to them. But God has entrusted all our children first of all to their parents. We ministers are here to help you raise little Christians. We're not here to do it for you. So if you really appreciate the gift God gave you in sending your Savior, you're going to want your children to know that Savior, too. If you really appreciate the gift God gave you in giving you a congregation and a school and the ministry of Christian education, you're going to reinforce the gospel your children hear at school in your home. In today's world, it happens too often that our kids are hearing one message in our Lutheran schools, and a different message at home. Sometimes, it's what the parents say. Sometimes it's more subtle. It's what they do – or don't do – that sends the message that church and all that bible stuff just isn't all that important. God did not call your teachers or even me, your pastor, to take your place in bringing your children to Jesus. He called us to help you. If you haven't understood that or taken it seriously, it's time to confess that sin to Jesus and ask for his forgiveness. That forgiveness is yours, because Jesus died and rose to take even that sin away. And now he calls you to say thank you for his love by reinforcing the gospel message in your family life, in your home, and as you sit here together in church and hear his word. I'm sure there is no greater way to say thank you to our Christian teachers than by doing that. Amen.