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What Teaching Has Taught Me

A year ago, I never would have imagined that I'd have my own class of thirteen fifth graders every week or a crew of tiny children to keep track of on Sunday mornings. Now, though, I couldn't imagine my life without them. I'm still quite new at this, but I've already learned valuable lessons that will last a lifetime: how to hold my temper - and lose it when necessary, that hands covered in marker are a blessing, and that trusting in God's plan is far more beneficial than leaning on my own ideas.

When I was in elementary school, I thought, "If I ever grow up to be a teacher, I'll never yell at my kids. I'll just be super nice and they'll just be super nice right back." Obviously, I didn't know much about fifth graders. As it turns out, fifth graders are loud creatures. They haven't yet grasped the idea of talking in turn and are still in the process of mastering proper manners. This makes controlling my classroom, on certain days, comparable to herding cats - no, actually, it's closer to herding howler monkeys. Usually, I can manage chaos fairly well, but by my first day as a religion teacher, I had already broken my childhood yelling rule. My classroom neighbor, Alli, and I had been through our share of first days. We figured that we could relax a bit and get to know our classes. We planned a few games and activities to get to know the students and for them to get to know us, but first we were going to have them fill out note cards explaining a little bit about themselves. After our classes were assigned, my class - bumbling and

chattering - followed me to our little classroom and - with much noise, and little grace - took their seats. I handed them each a note card and fully expected a few minutes of peace and quiet as they answered the questions I had written on the board. After explaining the task at hand - twice - and answering questions regarding each and every question on the board - and a few others, including “How old are you?” “Do you know my brother?” “Do you get to leave High School for this?” - everyone’s note cards were complete and it was time to play our games. I told the class to split into two groups and, unsurprisingly, they split into girls and boys. I instructed them to grab the hands of two people in their group at random and use teamwork to untangle themselves; after I repeated my instructions three more times, they began. I have four girls in my class, so it wasn’t shocking when they quickly discussed and giggled their way through it. My boys, on the other hand... well, let’s just say I left class without a voice that day. Lately, I have to yell simply to teach and be heard in my classroom, so raising my voice doesn’t create much contrast. Because of this, I’ve mastered other means of maintaining order. One of my favorites is the silent staredown. I’ve learned that if I simply stop talking in the middle of a sentence and glare at the misbehaving student, eventually he’ll turn his attention back to me. Leaving church on Wednesday without a voice now is a sign of success; it proves my ability to teach for close to the entire hour.

Aside from my fifth graders, I have another obligation involving teaching children about God. Our Children's Liturgy kids are some of my favorite parts of Sunday mornings. Alli and I take any children that want to come downstairs with us for the readings during Mass and give them a more kid-friendly reading and activity. I’m so easily awestricken by the faith - and curiosity - of young children. I often take the sidelines as Alli reads the story, sometimes needing

to give some little boys my silent staredown, but mostly just watching them listen and question and wonder. After we've read the Children's Gospel, they have an activity to accomplish. My personal favorites are marker days. On these days, the kids are given markers and a question and we instruct them to draw or write an answer to it. For example, one day, their task was to think of a nice thing they could do for someone else. One little girl drew a pony and wrote that it was for Ms. Nelson. She asked what I thought and I told her I was sure Ms. Nelson would love her pony. These are my favorite days because we let them make their own decisions on how they want to be kind or tell God they love Him, and we have the blessing of simply witnessing their beautiful minds in action. We go around the classroom asking if anyone needs help thinking or spelling. Every day something new takes my breath away and reminds me why God loves children so much. I swear, though, nothing is sweeter than a four year old voice asking, "Can you write 'I love Jesus' for me, Teacher?" I write the words on his yellow construction paper and he beams back at me, giant brown eyes teeming with pride. I look down at my hands by the end of these days, and of course, they're covered in all kinds of colors. All day the colors remind me that I'm doing something good, and I know God has put me right where I'm supposed to be.

The last, and probably most significant, thing that teaching has taught me is that no matter how prepared I think I am, I'm not. In fact, some of the days I've felt least prepared for have turned out to be my favorite. Going into my classroom, I never really know if we'll accomplish our tasks. I don't know how they're going to act or what questions they're going to ask me, but I couldn't ask for a better lesson plan. Teaching, my fifth graders especially, has taught me to be open to what God's plan is - even if it's contrary to my own. I know that God uses me even on the days when I can't answer their questions - "Why do we call it noon?" - and

I'm reminded that I certainly don't know all the answers, or even most of them. God has taught me so much through the questions these crazy kids ask and the lessons learned by searching for the answers - I know now, by the way, that 12 p.m. is called noon because Jews used to say a prayer called "none" at that time. Some of the best lessons are the ones not included in the syllabus. One of my favorite days was one that had very little planning. I was simply going to read a passage from the Bible about Jesus' crucifixion and the days preceding it. I would read a piece and stop to ask questions along the way and they would stop me to ask questions or offer commentary - anything from "What does crucify mean?" to "When do we eat?" to "I'm gonna punch that guy." - and it was like we were teaching each other. I realized not only that God had sent me to help them, but that He had sent them to help me. We may have had more planned, but we sure didn't accomplish it. That day was so much more productive than it would have been if we would have actually done what was planned. God offers so much joy in those moments of real, honest, silly, chaos. We simply need to open ourselves up to it.

To some people, this sounds like a horror story, but without my days of sore throats, marker covered hands, and total loss of control, I never would have made these realizations. I believe that God gives us these opportunities to show us the places that we're supposed to be, and for me, even on the chaotic days, there is no place I would rather be than in our zoo, yelling over the constant chatter, cleaning marker off tables, and reading a Bible. Whatever the calling, God gives this opportunity to anyone willing to listen, to take up his - or her - cross, and follow Him.