

“What must we do to be doing the works of God?” One of my favorite questions. And his answer is even better: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

But of course, this simply raises the question, what does it mean to “believe in him” or as the Greek tenses emphasize, “to be believing in” the one whom God has sent. And I want to get at this question today in a way that may seem a little round the bend, by asking how we can recognize what we have recently come to call (without any definition whatsoever) “a teachable moment.” Since both professor Henry Louis Gates who has in the past month has allegedly become the most famous black victim of police brutality; and President Barack Obama, who was already famous for being the first black ever to hold the position of the highest ranking police officer in the land: they have both used this phrase without defining it, as if we all know what it means, I will begin by venturing my own definition.

I would suggest that “a teachable moment,” at least in the context it is being used refers to something like that moment when the king in the fairy tale whose tailors have outfitted him with the newest and trendiest finery for the parade, overhears a young boy on the big day in question saying to his mother “Look Mom, he’s wearing nothing at all.” In that *moment* the King recognizes something that could not have otherwise come to his consciousness. That is what I am calling a “teachable moment.”

The first lesson for today tells of just such a moment. The career of King David the young shepherd boy called and anointed by God through the prophet Samuel to replace the failed King Saul, having slain the giant Goliath, withstood the pursuit of his royal rival, vanquished the enemies of the nation, and made Jerusalem his own capital, now reaches it’s climax. At the zenith of his career, we are shown the King’s character at its very lowest. What became clear in the reading for last week is that, however one regards the **crime** of David’s adultery with Bathsheba, whether as a cinematic romance or a power-over exploitation rape, it pales by comparison with the intrigue around his murder of her husband Uriah. Next to David this foreigner, Uriah, shines with noble virtue. The King arranges to have his loyal soldier killed in battle by the enemy, in nothing more than a self-serving cover-up. As a friend on whom last week’s wonderful sermon had a particularly powerful impact said to me, “He didn’t do it because he loved Bathsheba and wanted her for his own. He did it to save himself from the embarrassment of being exposed. He did it to cover his royal tail.”

Now for the “teachable moment.” The court prophet Nathan appears before King David and tells him a story of a grave injustice done by a rich man to his poor neighbor, seemingly without a thought but just because he felt entitled. David becomes enraged on hearing Nathan’s report. “The man who has done this deserves to die.” Caught up in the story in all the dignity of royal justice, he pronounces judgment on himself. Nathan replies, “That man is you!” Then after hearing the word of God from Nathan about what terrible consequences all this will have for the future of his house on of his Kingdom [a judgment that ends with reference to his intention to cover-up, “For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun”],

David replies, “I have sinned against the Lord.” In the presence of God the openness of King David is tested. He could well have put the prophet Nathan to death, thus attempting to continue the cover up. But the greatness of David is that he was able to be taught, to hear what God was saying through the prophet. Or perhaps more accurately, the greatness of the prophet’s story was what opened the heart of the King. His anger at the rich man in the parable is what enabled him to own up to his own behavior and begin the process of repentance. When has your heart been opened?

So now imagine it this way: It’s a White House Press Conference and the president is answering questions about Health Care. The last question from reporter Lynn Sweet seems to come out of left field. It refers to a story by now familiar to everyone, and the question is asked in such a way as to put the President in a position to identify with the story, to place himself within it. As president his reaction is iconic, it becomes emblematic, a kind of trigger or lightning rod for the pent up anxiety of the nation. Yet, something about his initial openness, and over time, about his willingness to admit his error, to change his own mind, to correct his earlier emotionally charged words, promises to calm the nation.

In this case it is his participation in the experience of those, mostly black or latino, who have been stopped by the police for no reason that opens him to the same connection that changes David: You are the man. I well recall when my friend Charles Taylor, whom many of you remember because he served here for a time. Charles, an African American, was taking a class at the SFTS in San Anselmo and while he was strolling on its beautiful grounds at lunch, a police car pulled up beside him and the officer asked him what he was doing there. He was livid, days later when he recounted the experience in our colleague group, he was still angry. From that moment I understood this experience in a different way. I could begin to identify. For Obama as the president to identify with the emotional reaction of his friend Henry Louis Gates was to allow all of us to glimpse the experience and vulnerability of minorities, to share their frustration, and to participate in some manner in their reality. This was the teachable moment for us: “You are the man!”

What a profound resonance that sentence has in the language of our culture! But it’s even deeper than that. When Jesus is arrested and flogged by Pilate according to John’s gospel, he is brought before the crowd in a purple cloak and crown of thorns and presented to them with the words, “Here is the man,” in Latin *ecce homo*. Both king and criminal, both prophet and charlatan, both our priest and our victim, Jesus is presented to us. And because in our common human experience we can be open in him to accept our own weakness, our brokenness and sinfulness, we also have the capacity to participate in his resurrection. Seeing him as the one we ourselves have put to death, appearing to us as “forgiveness,” as if the corpse of Uriah appeared to David, all bloody, still punctured with the enemies arrows and offered him forgiveness, we can choose to participate forgiven in his New Life beyond death.

This is our continual teachable moment, our “beginner’s mind,” the willingness at every moment to be open to change, to what one author has called “the Joy of Being Wrong.” This is what the church means by conversion, that habit of humble openness to the presence and forgiving call of God in our life, so that we may be made new, be enabled anew to participate in the life of the one whom God has sent, to share in the Risen Life, to participate in work of God.