



Last week, much of our attention was paid to the annual “God’s Work. Our Hands.” Sunday of service to our local community and more, and so we overlooked the part of a new year not just for our Sunday school teachers, but for the teachers throughout our home neighborhoods and beyond. Not that teachers are not already used to getting overlooked in the grand scheme of the workforce. Not that teachers are not already fully aware of what they have to face these next several months: trying to

reach students of varying degrees of learning style and ability, respectfully dealing with parents of differing expectations and participation levels in their child’s education, not to mention some demanding school boards and daunting ballot levies and state curriculum changes. Absolutely no pressure whatsoever, including from a general public who ask the teachers over and over again to shape the young people, the future of the entire world, for the better. Absolutely no pressure whatsoever.

And yet, oddly enough, when the prophet Isaiah provides the wonderful imagery of a teacher sustaining the weary with a word, we cannot help but take advantage of this needed opportunity to consider the teachers in our lives who somehow, someway, shaped our world for the better. So, I want to tell you about Mrs. Calvin, who was my 7<sup>th</sup> grade Pre-Algebra and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra teacher. It all started towards the end of our 6<sup>th</sup> grade year, when during our respective general math class, that teacher went through the roster out-loud one-by-one, telling us if he thought we were ready to move onto the big leagues of the Algebra world, or if we needed a little more time on the math level of things for the upcoming 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. I will be the first to admit that during my junior high days, I was under the impression that I was the center of the entire universe, and being openly affirmed of my adolescent math skills, only further ignited my already massive ego.

I don’t know why, but I came to appreciate those Pre-Algebra and Algebra classes. Maybe it was nice not have to deal with the gray areas of life, but simply finding the exact right number to solve the end of an equation. I always thought Mrs. Calvin would go through more than enough material on her then-ancient overhead projector to help us get through the night’s homework along with some quizzes and tests thrown in for good measure. And then came the time of year when we had to prepare for the thoroughly wonderful state standardized test, that could evidently provide a complete picture on the health of public education for every school district. During one of those classes leading up to the big day, Mrs. Calvin had asked if everyone felt we had covered whatever practice section well enough to be ready for the test coming up soon. A few students didn’t think so, wanting a little more help, even though I was more than ready to move on. It led center-of-the-universe massive-ego me to let out a verbal sigh of sheer frustration that could be heard throughout the county.

Needless to say, Mrs. Calvin had to sustain me with a word: a word that was firm, but still loving; that I was, in fact, not the center of the room, let alone the entire universe. That even I did not have the Algebra big leagues all figured out. And that every student regardless of GPA or parental involvement mattered just as much to her. That this wasn’t about convincing a state board how well she led a classroom, but to convince every student that they were worth her time and dedication and passion; as if it was about much, much more than solving a numeric equation.

And I suppose that's how the teachers sustain many who are weary, including for young people who aren't so sure they have what it takes to do anything academic-related, children who are run down from their home environments, youth who are weary over seemingly impossible expectations for GPAs and extra-curricular activities in preparation to master the big leagues of adulthood. Absolutely no pressure whatsoever for them, let alone the ones standing in front of all of them every Monday through Friday.

Mrs. Calvin ultimately did not sustain me with algebra insider jargon. She sustained all of us with belief, with hope, with compassion, with love. Granted, she did not want any of us junior high students to think we were the center of the whole universe, but she still convinced us that we were important enough to be worthy of all she had to give. Mrs. Calvin ultimately sustained us with a glimpse into the teaching of Jesus Christ himself, who continues to insist on sustaining all of us not with words of immense pressure filled with guilt and shame, but with words of hope and compassion and love, and inspiring us to believe as if we are worth the cross and the empty tomb, no matter the school grades or the adulting level of success. Along the way, we will be inspired to do our own teaching of compassion and love in our homes and workplaces and everywhere else along the way, to be sure. But for every place of the faith journey along the way, we will forever be sustained with the Gospel words that absolutely nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And for the teachers who will do their vital part in convincing us to believe that all over again this year, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!