



Suzy was my school bus driver during my elementary years, when I had to wake up at some ungodly early morning hour, being the first stop on a route that seemed to go all over the countryside before reaching our learning destination. And, yes, of course, it mattered more that I had to wake up so early as opposed to however much sooner Suzy needed to: to take care of whatever at home before getting to the bus garage to make sure everything was in working order and then having to pick up some of us rather self-centered children to drop off at school, and several hours later, have to do it all over again. And yet, for some reason beyond comprehension, Suzy seemed to always have a smile on her face for all of us who walked up the steps into her bus. She seemed to appreciate us. She seemed to think we mattered to her or something, and that it was a responsibility she took with the greatest enthusiasm to get us to the place where we could learn and grow. I doubt any of that was in the handbook or the training she received, but I have a feeling she believed that was all just as essential as any other part of her job. The ungodly early morning hour wasn't quite as unbearable because of Suzy.

And so, as the years went by from kindergarten to the fifth grade, yes, I grew a little attached to Suzy, but I was still in elementary school. I did learn a few things, and grew ever so slightly in the maturity realm, but come the last year at that school, all of us soon to be junior highers thought we ruled that building and perhaps could...get away with a little more. So, in order to prove coolness or something, before getting on Suzy's bus for the rather lengthy ride home, I would sneak into the make-shift teacher's lounge in that countryside school, and get a can of pop for the road, which, of course, was not allowed on Suzy's bus. And perhaps to prove further coolness or something, I poked a hole in the seat in the back of the seat in front of me to stuff trash inside. I might have grown ever so slightly in the maturity realm, but obviously not nearly enough looking back on those days.

However, for some reason beyond explanation, I started to feel guilt and shame not so much about what I did, but because I did it to Suzy. She got to me. That whole smile every ungodly early morning. That appreciation no matter how much I acted my age. That enthusiasm that I could not in any way grasp she could have being a bus driver for all of us. And so, I have no idea why, but one day before walking down the steps off her bus, I confessed to Suzy what I had done. Of course, with the tongue of a teacher, in a sense, as described in the Isaiah reading, she gave me the talking to that I so richly deserved, and I had to sit in the front of the bus for a while, to say the least. But it was the strangest thing what happened that first day after the talking to: there was still that smile, still that enthusiasm, still as if I mattered to her. That evidently the tongue of the teacher wasn't just about trying to improve behavior patterns or grammatical skills or mathematic problem-solving, but it was as if convincing the child, who wasn't so sure how to navigate coolness and maturity and all the academic matters, that they were still worth compassion and joy through it all. It's quite possible that one of the most powerful moments of grace that I ever experienced in the years that I had no idea what grace was about, came from a bus driver, who morning by morning insisted on coming to our home with whatever emotions or baggage we brought up her steps, and she knew exactly how to sustain the weary with a word. She may not have been any of my elementary school teachers necessarily, but she very much was.

And on this day as we give thanks for the teachers and support staff and the bus drivers and everyone else who are called to not only use their tongues to improve the academic realm,

but to do so with compassion and joy, in spite of all their own emotions or baggage that they bring into the schools; we are also called to remember that Christ sets us all free from having to worry about perfecting any of the above, so that from time to time we all may be teachers of grace and love and the very Gospel of Jesus Christ. The teacher who certainly needed to remind humanity of the ways they did not live up to taking care of all of God's children, to be sure, but would still for some reason beyond mortal understanding, still looks at us all with a smile and an enthusiasm as if we still matter to the Divine each and every day.

And so, in a sense, the teachers, support staff, and bus drivers, and everyone else in the education realm are pivotal extensions of that Gospel proclamation to every student who comes into their midst. Morning by morning, they are called to waken to opportunities to sustain any young person who may be weary with a word of hope: as if they are worth all the compassion and joy we have to muster.

And so today, we offer our blessing to them: for the most pivotal work they provide not only to students, but the effects of which reach the entire community and beyond. We offer our blessing to those often overlooked, those whose impact may never be fully realized by the young people they shape for the better. Some of us take a while to process such things and all. Nevertheless, over and over again, they show up with selflessness and dedication and a belief that no child is beyond the love of God. The educators of all forms just might one of the closest embodiments we have to the very Gospel of Jesus Christ: that, in their own way, they remind us that nothing can happen in this life to separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So, for that Greatest News, that it may sustain all the weary with that word of relentless grace, we certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.