

Tradition Turned Over

Inspired by Mark 7:1-23

When the tenure team gathered in the teacher's lounge, they shared the unusual things they had observed since Ms. Warren, the new English teacher, arrived. In the center of the crowd stood Jonathan Baker. He had seniority as the school's head English teacher for 40+ years, and they all looked to him to lead the way.

The children circulated ridiculous rumors that he had been there since the school was built over 70 years ago. Nothing had changed in all these years, including Jonathan's wardrobe and the school's decor. Both were adorned in those lovely mousey browns, pale greens, and muted golds. Mr. Baker wore a suit and bow tie to school everyday, rotating his blue, grey, and brown versions. His pointy nose, large eyes, and very round face earned him the nickname "Owl Man." The female teachers on staff still wore dresses and pantyhose, since the school and Jonathan considered that to be most appropriate.

Ms. Warren had been added to the English Department due to a growing student population. She wore pants and flowy tops in bright, exciting colors.

Her outfits had movement and flair. Hers was not a traditional teaching style. Some days, she brought her students outside for class. Students sat in the grass and took off their shoes. Jonathan and the wise old owls who were gathered wondered how she could possibly cover the classics and instill proper discipline in such an environment. They were very concerned this problem was on the verge of becoming scandalous. If school board members drove by and saw such a sight, what would they think?

Ms. Warren grew up in this town and had attended this very school. She graduated top of her class at University and decided to return to teach in her childhood community. They thought she would be a good fit since she knew the ways of this school. -- For Jonathan's classroom, and in fact, all the classrooms, do not begin class without first achieving proper order, keeping the tradition of the school. The students were trained like young soldiers to walk in a single file, orderly fashion. They were expected to enter the classroom in silence and stand next to their desks until all were present and accounted for. Then, the teacher would give the command to be seated. Each day, Jonathan's class recited the school motto in perfect unison -- Be kind. Be on time. Do your best and achieve success.

Mr. Baker posted his classroom rules on all four walls of his classroom. They had been there since the beginning and the white background was a little yellow and faded. But, the wording of the rules was still very prominent -- No talking out of turn. No cheating. No failing. No wasting time. No eating in class. No personal items on

your desk. No excuses...the list droned on and marched on in its own field of boredom. Jonathan liked order and found it a great help in teaching. So, the other teachers questioned him, "Why does the new hire not follow the traditions of this school's teaching style but instead encourages unruliness and changes to the way we do things here?" He responded, "Well, let us give her a try. I have observed her closely to be sure she is abiding by her contract and following the school rules as written. I have noticed that while my students can perfectly state the rules of kindness, promptness, and alertness with their lips, they aren't forming friendships and their hearts aren't in their work. It seems we mainly teach commandments and cling to tradition. She is doing something more."

Ms. Warren was rather surprised at how much things looked and sounded the same as when she was a student there. Her vision as a teacher was not only to instill a love for language and the written word, but also to instill a love for each other. She understood that being kind is so much more than memorizing a statement about being kind. It's so much more than being quiet and obedient to rules. Kids can't learn kindness simply by being told to be kind. True kindness comes from within. It has to be nurtured so that we can overcome the evil, prejudice, and negativity that is so prevalent in our world. That kind of thinking, no matter how small, can come unbidden and needs to be overcome.

Ms. Warren wanted to show them the way in the safety and smallness of the school so that they can live it in the brutality and bigness of the world.

It was decided that once a week Mr. Baker and Ms. Warren would merge their classrooms and learn much more than basic English lessons. When they noticed one student often came to school hungry, and another child seemed to not have any friends, morning snack break was added to the morning routine. Snacks are provided for the whole class and served picnic style. Each day, every student has to find a new friend to sit with. The students were instructed to write papers about their family traditions and life experiences, then they swap papers and get to know and appreciate each other better. Once a month, all students were invited to stand and share a favorite fun memory and one fear. They developed a homework buddy system to compare answers and help one another learn and succeed.

The school administration felt their eyes and minds opening. You could almost see the hard shells dissolving from both the students and the teachers, and unique personalities oozing down the halls and flooding the school with something new and better than ever. The positive change was palpable and contagious! Mr. Baker even bought a new, bright red, yellow polka-dotted bow tie!

###