

*Standards of Learning**

Exodus 20:1 - 3, 12 - 20; Matthew 25:14 - 30

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“Who can imagine how the things we call ideas live in the world, or how they change, or how they perish, or how they can be renewed?”¹

Standards of Learning² meet the tragedy at Columbine High School. It is my privilege to introduce you to each other.

I decided to bypass all the usual suspects this morning: the prevalence of guns, violence-saturated media, and the role of parents. Instead we will consider, in the light of scripture, what I suspect underlies the grisly, pathetic events which have captivated us since April 20th. You might have guessed my approach from the scripture lessons, which speak to us of law and stewardship, themes dear to all Christians, but especially dear to us who speak Christianity with a Presbyterian and Reformed accent.³ It is an accent, by the way, which more than any other, has been responsible for the way we understand education and governance in the American republic. Concepts of education and governance (deeply deficient and destructive ones, I dare to claim) are also revealed in the gunshots that still echo from the library at Columbine through every school corridor, cafeteria, and library in the United States.

I’m going to begin by telling you a story about myself at age fourteen. I had not remembered it for years and years. It’s a shameful story. A friend and I were hauled up before the principal for being ringleaders in tormenting the class nerd. He was also the pet of many teachers, and he made the best grades in the class. We had a circle of followers who laughed at everything we did and egged us on, but we were the ringleaders. We called him names; we made sounds (catcalls in the halls I’ve long since forgotten) that humiliated him. We loved to see him become frantic when we hid his book satchel. None of us carried book satchels. He was weak. We were strong. We did worse things which I will not tell you. We had the acquiescence and applause of our peers. All three of us shared the same school bus, so his anticipation of the rides home must have filled him with fear and loathing. He always sat next to the teacher who drove the bus.

One morning we were called out of class right after homeroom to go to Dr. Pressly’s office. Dr. William L. Pressly was the principal.⁴ From him we learned that our parents were being notified about what we were doing, that we were on probation for six weeks, and that we were going to be in detention for I’ve forgotten how long. Then Dr. Pressly, who had a startlingly red complexion, a shiny pate and white hair, and intense blue eyes which could see right through you, launched into a speech intended to shame and humiliate us for our actions. He said that such torture as we dished out was exactly what the Nazis did when they persecuted Jews. We were like Adolph Hitler who came to power and popularity by scoffing at the best and the brightest, bringing them down, intimidating them. Then we were dismissed from his

* This sermon was preached in the spring of 1999 following the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

presence.

It was painful to sit in class all day. Then I had to go home. Here I was, one of the stars of the Junior High Youth group at my church, and madly in love with the preacher's daughter. I had behaved shamefully, and I knew it. My parents were waiting for me. I cannot remember whether they already knew, or whether I confessed it when I saw them, but they were wonderful, both of them. They welcomed me with love and understanding, and reminded me, as they did on more than one occasion, that there wasn't anything I would ever do that I couldn't tell them, no matter how bad it was. Then they made it indelibly clear that what I had done was intolerable to them, even shocking, and utterly dismaying. Remember who you are, they said. They supported the school and they supported me.

I look back on Dr. Pressly with deep gratitude, though it was weeks before I could pass him in the hall without blushing, feeling red heat creep over every inch of my face and neck. I was in the hands, you see, of a good steward. He knew the law of Israel as well as the gospel of Jesus Christ. He understood and valued the boundaries that are necessary if education and human well being are to flourish. Dr. Pressly knew how to walk the fences of human conduct, and to repair them when they had become rotten. He was handing down to me a received tradition, not one that he had created through his own intelligence and ingenuity, but one that had been bequeathed to him by his teachers, through all the ironies, and tragedies, and hopes of Western civilization, a tradition that only twenty years before had been monstrously violated with the terrorizing, torture, and extermination of six million Jews. (The Holocaust took centuries of anti-semitism to unfold within European, Christian culture, but we had only recently experienced it as a monstrous violation.) Dr. Pressly reminded us that day in his office that many people had died so that such things might no longer happen. He wasn't far off the mark in his heated outburst at my friend and me. He had caught a glimpse of Cain in us, alive and well, preying on the weakness of another to build up ourselves. It's one of the oldest stories in the human canon. And it is a sign of God's mercy in human life when people and institutions have the wit and the will (it takes both) to tame and reorder such impulses.

We human beings are not instinctively nice people. We never have been. We must be taught to be kind and loving, long-suffering, gracious. We must be crafted by people willing to correct error and wrongdoing for the sake of the persecuted, to be sure, but also for the sake of the wrongdoer, and for the flourishing of the entire community.

The school I attended had standards of learning. Those standards required us to take courses in math and English, history, science, Latin — and Bible. That school also understood what it took (in Dr. King's famous phrase) to give content to our character. The teachers were watching, and when the normal human cruelty that persists among all teenagers spun dizzily out of control, and became the organized terrorizing of a fellow student, they put a stop to it.

The school had standards of learning. The teachers were grounded in more than competition with other schools, or the schools in other states. They were not particularly concerned with whether I could express myself, except in so far as I could demonstrate that I had learned what they taught me. They had high expectations of us, especially that we not cheat, lie, or steal, and that we do the best we could, in the classroom and on the playing field. Thank God they did not care one iota whether my

rights were violated. I don't remember having any rights as a fifteen-year-old, but I surely had responsibilities. Rights were something I earned, and I'm grateful. The school assumed a responsibility for civilizing and training me, not only in the content of the subjects I had to master if I intended to go to college and then to medical school (at the time I was headed into medicine). The school also took responsibility for my conduct.

What is so hard about that? Why have our schools become institutions that are helpless? Why, among our young, can we not protect the weak from the strong, and demonstrate to them in action as well as rhetoric, that such ordering of society is the bottom line of civilization? Not the market, not success, not achievement, not standards of learning designed to make Virginia first among her peers. No. The mark of civilization is the protection of the weak from the strong. We have received five and ten measures of freedom and learning, of self-discipline and competence, of responsibility and compassion. Why do we cower in fear while barbarians redefine our culture and educational policies? By barbarians I do not mean Buddhists or Hindus, those of other religious persuasions than ours. I mean those who consistently dump gallons and gallons of trash into our culture. I saw a reference to some media mogul⁵ who inveighed against the calls for censorship that he believed are sure to come after Littleton. He said that Jerry Falwell is the spiritual descendent of Oliver Cromwell. I am willing to bet one hundred dollars that the damage done by that media mogul alone is already far, far greater than any damage perpetrated by Oliver Cromwell during the English Civil War and afterwards.

Moments ago we took part in a ritual that reveals a similar understanding of governance and education in the body of Christ. We did not ordain and install Nelle Pender as an elder so she may express herself. We have very clear standards of learning in the Presbyterian Church. Nelle made promises before God and to you, the congregation, that she would govern you, together with the rest of the Session, including Janet⁶ and me, according to scripture and the confessions of our church. She was not elected simply for her creativity and energy, her ability to follow through on the projects she undertakes, for her winsome personality — or even because she is a nice person. She was required to attend class and learn the standards with which she will perform the duties and responsibilities of her office. She was examined by the Session as to her acceptability in faith and knowledge before she could be ordained. Nelle does not deserve to be an elder, and I do not deserve to be a minister. But we are adequate, up to the task, she and I, so long as we submit our wills and minds and hearts to the traditions that have been, at great cost, handed down to us. We do not make them up as we go along. And while leadership is important, it is the content (Bible and Confessions) which informs that leadership, and which is much more important than the leadership itself. After all, Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin were extraordinary leaders; but to which standards of learning did they submit themselves?

Why is it so difficult for us to see the connection? Just as school boards and administrators, principals and teachers are responsible for teaching and traditioning our young — so are we who govern this congregation responsible for you: for your growth in faith, for the fruits of the Holy Spirit flourishing among you, for your Christian citizenship, for your knowledge about God and Jesus Christ, and yes, for our learning better to speak Christianity with a Reformed and Presbyterian accent. John Calvin and his spiritual descendants had no patience with our private spiritual

journeys, or with our continual wallowing in the grace of salvation, as though we were not headed anywhere but heaven. Instead, we are people for whom salvation means obedience. A Roman Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, has observed that, for all our excesses, we Calvinists have been more responsible for the establishment and progress of Western democracies than any other inheritors of the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷

Part of that inheritance from the seventeenth century is the Westminster Larger Catechism. In the catechism are expansions and explanations of the Ten Commandments, some of which were read just minutes ago. The catechism explains the commandment, “Honor your father and your mother so that your days may be long in the land which the Lord has given you.” (Notice — so that *our* days may be long, not theirs!) The catechism explains the commandment in terms of inferiors and superiors, and superiors, in addition to being our parents are:

. . .not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts,
and especially such as by God’s ordinance are over us in places of
authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth.

Listen to these standards of learning in the answers to questions about the responsibilities and sins of superiors:

Q. 128 What is required of superiors towards their inferiors?

A. It is required of superiors, according to the power they receive from God, and that relation wherein they stand, to love, pray for, and bless their inferiors, to instruct, counsel, and admonish them . . .protecting and providing for them all things necessary for soul and body. . .and so to preserve that authority which God hath put upon them.

Q. 130 What are the sins of superiors?

A. The sins of superiors are. . .an inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit or pleasure. . .counseling, encouraging, or favoring them in that which is evil; dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good. . .careless exposing or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger. . .or in any way dishonoring themselves, or lessening their authority, by unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remiss behavior.

Who can imagine how the things we call ideas live in the world. . .or how they perish, or how they are renewed?

I suggest that rather than being simply helpless and grief-stricken, numbed by the school shootings, that we begin asking questions of our educators and administrators, of our principals and teachers. The schools belong to us, even the private schools, for they are chartered in Virginia by the General Assembly of this Commonwealth.

Why does something like Columbine High School even exist? What destructive ideas about education and learning produced these large ungovernable warehouses? Why are there drugs and weapons in our schools? How can we get them out and keep

them out?

We need standards of learning all right. Dr. James P. Comer of Yale University, quoted in an editorial in the *New York Times*, said: “It is hard to single out our high schools for being status obsessed, hierarchical, and savagely competitive. In the culture outside the school we like winners and losers. Look at pro athletics. [Look at college athletics, for goodness sake. Look at Jimmy Connors, again! At law schools and business schools.] We even like it when the winners stick it in the faces of losers.”⁸ It is a Darwinian hierarchy, the survival of the fittest, and our culture revels in it.

On a website created for Columbine graduates to e-mail their reactions to the killings/suicide, one girl wrote of the taunting she faced every day, and of the time her mother spent at Columbine “trying to find someone who cared about me.” She expressed her disgust that all they can do is “hire more security guards. Hiring more security guards will only limit the means by which kids can harm each other.”⁹

If we need standards of learning for children, surely we also need them for legislators and the captains of industry, so that the standards forced upon our children are designed not just to turn out human widgets for the professional schools and economic institutions of our burgeoning technocracy, but also designed to shape persons of moral judgement and character, who know how, justly, to prevent the strong from preying on the weak!

Why, for so long, have the strong been allowed to intimidate the weak, and even intimidate teachers and principals? Why do we tolerate bullying in our schools, in our churches, throughout the warp and woof of our culture?

Do you remember this from the seventies: “How many deaths will it take till we know that too many people have died?” The answer, my friends, is not written on the wind that blows the waves up on the shore, or the grains of sand across the desert. The answer is found in the wind which the Spirit blows through God’s word. The answer is found in God’s gracious law for the ordering and safety of human life. That law is good for us. It keeps the Cain who lives in us all in check, and for us who belong to Jesus, it shapes the eyes of our hearts and minds unto everlasting life.

As stewards of such grace and order, can we not begin to make what we know so very well, available to all people, as was the custom of our forebears, until there is peace again in this land, not for the few, but for the many, to the end that no more children will die? So that no more children will die!

Standards of Learning, Columbine High School, I trust that by now you have become very well acquainted.¹⁰

Notes

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 226.

² Standards of Learning have been adopted by the Virginia Board of Education for every school in the Commonwealth, and they have become the subject of much controversy.

³ This wonderful image was used in a Consultation on Reformed Theology sponsored by the PCUSA’s Theology and Worship Division, held at Williamsburg, Virginia, May 12-14, 1999.

⁴ Dr. Pressly was actually headmaster at The Westminster Schools in 1953, the time of this incident, but “principal” is easier to communicate in a sermon.

⁵ The mogul is Gerald Levin, head of Time Warner, quoted by John Leo in an editorial: “Flicks Carry Viewers Through Rivers of Blood” in *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, Commentary Section, Sunday, May 9, 1999.

⁶ Our Associate Pastor. Only Nelle Pender was ordained and installed by herself on May 16, 1999, because she was out of the country when the rest of our officers were installed.

⁷ John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 72.

⁸ Peter Applebome, "Two Words Behind the Massacre," *The New York Times*, Sunday, 2 May 1999, sec. 4, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ This was not in the preached version of this sermon.