I hate algebra! And for good reason: I flunked algebra in the 9th grade and have lived with the stigma ever since. I mean at one time kids would come up to me and ask for help with their homework. But no not now, because the word is out: Pastor Paul flunked algebra in the 9th grade; and so kids avoid me “like the plague!” Frankly, I blame my plight on my algebra teacher: “Vinnie Duvall,” not his real name, but close! I mean “Vinnie” was a meanie, brimming with intimidation, “scaring the willies out of me!” I remember Duvall asking me to stay after class, soon after my “agony with algebra” began. Why I was as “low as low can go,” “shaking like a leaf” -- but the best “Vinnie Duvall” could do was bark at me. “Boy,” Duvall scolded. “Do you want to amount to something?” “Yes sir, I do!” “Well then you better buckle down and get this stuff.” Well, I never did -- barely squeaking through the requirements of a remedial, make-up course. But wow did “the Duvall encounter” spur me on -- to go beyond Vinnie’s “bark and bite” -- to amount to something -- to find-out the truth about me!

Have you noticed there’s a lot of “bark and bite” these days? Translated: there’s a lot of teaching that’s not healthy or favorable. And so a lot of us are yearning, for “the truth about me,” and life’s larger meaning. Is it any wonder, scripture elevates the task of teaching, listing it in Ephesians 4 as a prime gift for church leaders, empowering church leaders to equip, to “…guide…[God’s] people…” (Ephesians 4:11, Phillips). Frankly, the New Testament emphasis on teaching is inspired by the Old Testament, as God reminds Moses in Deuteronomy 6: “… [the] words which I [command]…shall be [first] in your…minds and hearts…sharpen them…make them penetrate -- and teach…them diligently…” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, AMP).

But it’s tough, because other words are also being taught diligently; translated: biblical values, increasingly, are being challenged by secular alternatives. One of the most dominant is consumerism, which in the words of Neil Postman, teaches most persuasively through TV commercials. In fact, Postman notes, TV commercials have become the new parables, advancing their own “…concept of sin… [and way toward] redemption…” For example, Postman notes, there’s “…the Parable of the Person with Rotten Breath; the Parable of the Stupid Investor; the Parable of the Lost Traveler’s Checks; the Parable of the Man Who Runs Through Airports1 or my all-time favorite: the Parable of Potato Chip Piggy Who Can’t Eat Just One! But friends: truth is not found in an inability “to eat just one” -- in woofing life down -- truth is found in sacrifice and servanthood through Jesus. But how do you teach that, in a world “consumed with consuming,” dominated with a 24/7 message of “more by any means?”

For starters we need to Telegraph Boldly, The Remedy For Hunger. In all candor a culture “consumed with consuming” is famished, yearning for “that which satisfies.” Ironically, satisfaction is readily available through the core entrée of biblical faith: the revelation of God, in Jesus. Paul says it best in Colossians 1: in Jesus “…all things hold together…For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him…” (Colossians 1:17; 19 NIV). And so go figure: if Jesus is fullness -- Jesus satisfies. And if Jesus satisfies, we’re to affirm Jesus satisfies -- teaching with boldness the preeminence of Christ until all persons attain, in the words of Ephesians 4 “…the whole measure of the fullness of Christ…” (Ephesians 4: 13, NIV).
In Washington, DC is a marvelous new restaurant called Range, co-owned by members of our congregation. Frankly Range is well named, for diners literally range, sampling from nine different kitchens, spanning the bandwidth of culinary delight, all in an attempt to satisfy hunger. It occurred to me recently Range is emblematic of our culture. For overall, we’re opting to satisfy hunger by ranging from one “kitchen of meaning” to another. This is especially prevalent in spirituality, as increasingly, in the words of Tom Ehrlich “…people… [are]…finding their own pathways to God, their own languages for accessing God…and their own forms of faith community…” And so friends “we’re not in Kansas anymore,” we’ve entered a new era, what Diana Butler Bass calls, “Christianity after religion.” But must this era also be Christianity after Jesus? I pray not, for along with appropriate “ranging,” healthy a la carte, must also be a staple diet, a core entrée, from which we all feast, from which hunger is ultimately satisfied. Jesus Christ is the staple diet; Jesus Christ is the core entrée. Jesus says it best in John 6: “I am the Bread of Life. The person who aligns with me, hungers no more…ever.” (John 6:35, MSG)

But aligning with Jesus, affirming Jesus as the core entrée, is not to be confused with arrogance. Jesus must not be taught with presumption or oversimplification. Thus, as we offer the Bread of Life, we Recognize Life’s Complexity, Bowing To God's Sovereignty. Frankly, this is crucial to grasping Paul’s vision to equip “…the saints.” (Ephesians 4:12) -- for in equipping the saints we’re to build up “…the body of Christ… [empowering the Body to gain]...the knowledge of the Son of God… [becoming mature]…” (Ephesians 4:12-13 ESV). It’s interesting the word “mature” means literally: complete; consummate virtue, and integrity. I like that, for at the heart of authentic equipping is integrity; raw honesty about the complexity of life, going beyond proverbial “Sunday School answers.” There’s a great story about a Sunday School teacher who was teaching a lesson about the importance of hard work; you know, being industrious. “Class,” she began. What’s brown, furry, and cracks lots of nuts; what’s brown, furry, and cracks lots of nuts? Well at first the class was dumbfounded; totally stumped! But then, a little boy sheepishly raised his hand. “Teacher” the boy began. “I know the answer’s Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!” Friends: sometimes we just need “to call a squirrel a squirrel,” because life is squirrely at times! Sure the answer’s always Jesus, but often the process of comprehending Jesus, of appropriating Jesus, is a process, a journey, requiring time.

Growing up we didn’t travel much. But one day my Dad announced: we’re going to Atlantic City! And boy was I excited, pestering Dad all the way to New Jersey: “can I get salt water taffy; will we see the diving horse at the Steel Pier?” But there was one question I asked over and over again, repeatedly: “are we there yet?” I mean we were barely out of Hagerstown and I asked: “are we there yet?” We had just gotten past Baltimore, and I asked: “are we there yet?” We were barely over the Delaware line, and I asked: “are we there yet?” Well each time, as you might imagine, Dad got pretty ticked; but each time, Dad managed to get out a reply: “no Paul we’re not there yet; we’re not there! But we are making progress. Trust me: we’re on our way!” Friends: sometimes that’s the most honest thing we can say: we’re on our way. I mean as we tackle life’s toughest episodes – premature death, unexpected job loss, insidious injustice -- our best teaching might be confessing: we don’t have the answer, we haven’t arrived, we’re still piecing-together the “threads of faith” -- confidant, however -- God will in the words of Ecclesiastes 3:11 make “…everything beautiful in its time…” (Ecclesiastes 3:11
NIV) -- God’s time. And so our teaching must never be presumptuous or arrogant, but surrendered, to the Sovereign bearing, and orchestration of God.

For God is making everything beautiful in God’s time, working all things together into an incredible tapestry of redemption and meaning. And so our teaching is not done as an end in itself or just to convey information, but to spark transformation as we Anticipate Rousing, Radical Life-Change In Jesus. Frankly the words “rousing and radical” are intentional, because we never know the fullness of Christ named in Ephesians 4:13, until we know the foolishness of Christ named in I Corinthians 1:25. And so our teaching is not tame but rousing, filled with what John Updike calls “octaves of passion,” as we enter both the highs and lows of life, with radical abandon. For it’s true: “…the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:25 NIV) And so yes, sacrifice and servanthood appear foolish in a consumerist age; but sacrifice and servanthood is the wiser route, leading to truth and meaning. Jesus says it best in Matthew 10:39, “If your first concern is to look after yourself, you’ll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you’ll find both yourself and me.” (Matthew 10:39. MSG)

Look to Jesus, and find both yourself and God! Not an a la carte God that you select, but a definitive God, who selects you. Who “…by his own action has given us everything…necessary for living the truly good life” 2 Peter 1 notes, “…in allowing us to know…[Jesus]…[who empowers us] to escape the inevitable disintegration…[of]…the world…” (2 Peter 1:3-4, Phillips). Friends, that is what we teach: that life is radically transformed in Jesus, as we’re consumed by Him, and not the “stuff,” dogma and circumstances of this world.

One of the most beloved teachers in our congregation is Elizabeth Wastler. For years Elizabeth taught in our Sunday School faithfully instructing scores and scores of children. Well this past Maundy Thursday we got word during Love Feast, that Elizabeth had had a stroke, a bad stroke. And frankly, we’ve been adjusting ever since; but true to her legacy, Elizabeth has been teaching us ever since. An especially memorable moment occurred in early April, right after I got back from a mission trip to Haiti. Eager to see Elizabeth, I bolted up to her hospital room, but even I wasn’t prepared for her instruction. After exchanging pleasantries, Elizabeth looked me “straight in the eye.” “Pastor Paul, did you hear the news? Margaret Thatcher died,” as in Margaret Thatcher the British Prime Minister. “Yes.” “And did you hear how she died?” “No.” “Well, she died of a stroke.” Well with that, I got nervous, real nervous. “Pastor Paul,” Elizabeth continued. “I had a stroke. But Pastor Paul, I didn’t die. You know what that means Pastor Paul? God isn’t finished with me yet – there’s still more for me to do!”

Talk about someone consumed by Jesus! I mean Elizabeth Wastler could have easily been consumed by her circumstances, but Elizabeth chose to be consumed by “another way of living”: the presence and call of the Savior. Friends, may we be consumed by the presence and call of the Savior. Sure there are lots of voices available: the voice of cynicism – the voice of militarism – the voice of syncretism -- the voice of hedonism. But one voice must dominate: the voice of Jesus and His countercultural way.
May the voice of Jesus dominate and His countercultural way! May that voice teach us, as we aspire to teach others. In a world that lives by the “Parable of Potato Chip Piggy, Who Can’t Eat Just One,” may we lift-up “The Parable Of The Potato Chip Servant, Who Gives His Chips Away.” Give your chips away! Sacrifice and serve! In a world “consumed with consuming,” be a fool for Christ. For it’s true “…the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:25 NIV)

You know: I’m still lousy at algebra; never, ever, ask me to help you with your homework! But I’m doing better with Jesus and His teaching. In fact, I’m now teaching others. For in a world that ranges from one “kitchen of meaning” to another, persons are eager for that which fulfills and satisfies. Friends: Jesus fulfills and satisfies! For Jesus is the staple diet. Jesus is the core entrée! Jesus is the Bread of Life! And so teach it Church -- don’t you be tame about it Church! Jesus is -- the Bread of Life!!

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2 See: [www.voltrange.com](http://www.voltrange.com)
3 Tom Ehrlich, “Commentary: The Revolution Is Upon Us,” Religious News Service web-site: [www.religionnews.com/2013/05/21/commentary-the-revolution-is-upon-us/](http://www.religionnews.com/2013/05/21/commentary-the-revolution-is-upon-us/)