

At the start of each school year as a teacher greets a new class, most every teacher has the same goal, namely to get the students to learn the material they will be presenting over the course of the year. And so, too, does most every teacher have certain rules they impose on the class, from assignments to due dates to talking in class.

Having a friend who is a teacher, one of the things he's mentioned to me more than once is the importance of adapting to the class. He's said that what frustrates with him in some teachers is they have a tunnel-vision mentality; that they insist on things being done a certain way all the time, when in fact a class may change or the teacher may have to change too. Certainly you need rules and goals governing everything, but you also need to be able to look to what is at the heart of the matter - helping a child to develop a love for learning and a knowledge of the subject that will help them in life.

Jennie Ivey is a real-life teacher who learned this truth early on in her teaching career.

She looked one day at her 11th grade class and, though her file with the students names said "honors" to her, they did not look all that much like an honors class. They shuffled into her classroom, and she had painstakingly decorated it with presidential portraits and colorful maps framed copies of the Declaration on Independence and the Constitution. She said it conveyed an "attitude" that was apparent even to a rookie teacher.

Which is what she was. She was fresh out of college with a history degree, a teaching certificate, but no experience. She was just grateful to have a job, even if it was in one of the rougher high schools in her city.

"Good morning" she said brightly on the first day, being greeted with vacant stares. "I'm so excited to have been selected to teach this honors class," she continued. "They usually don't let first-year teachers do that."

Several of the students sat up straighter and cut their eyes at each other. Too late, Jennie wondered if she should have tried to hide the fact that she had zero teaching experience. Oh, well. "We're going to do things a little differently in this class because I know that all of you want a challenge."

By now, every student was staring at her with a puzzled expression.

"First off, let's rearrange these desks," Jennie said. "I like lots of class discussion, so let's put them in a big circle so we can all see each other's faces." Several of the kids rolled their eyes, but they all got up and began moving the desks out of the traditional straight rows. "Perfect!" Said Jennie. "Now everybody choose a seat and let's play a game. When I point to you, tell me your name. Then, tell me what you hate most about history."

Finally, there were a few smiles. And lots more as the game progressed.

Amanda hated how history seemed to be all about war. Jose didn't like memorizing names and dates. Gerald was convinced that nothing that had happened in the past was relevant to his life. "Why should I care about a bunch of dead white guys" was how he put it. Caitlyn hated tricky true-false questions. Miranda despised fill-in-the-blank tests.

They had just made their way around the circle when the bell rang. Jennie was surprised at how quickly 50 minutes went by.

Armed with the feedback her students had given her, Jennie began formulating a plan. No teaching straight from the textbook for this group. No "read the chapter and answer the questions at the end" homework. These kids were bright. They were motivated. And so Jennie thought they deserved to be taught in a way that would speak to them.

They would study social and economic history, not just battles and generals. They would tie current events into events from the past. They would read novels to bring home the humanity of history. Across Five Aprils when studying the Civil War. The Grapes of Wrath to learn about the Great Depression. The Things they Carried when talking about Vietnam.

Tests would cover the facts, but also require higher level thinking skills. No tricky true-false questions. No fill-in-the-blank.

At first, she was surprised by how many of her students used poor grammar and lacked writing skills. And some seemed to falter when reading out loud. But they worked on these skills while they were learning history. Jennie found that many of the kids were not only willing, but eager to attend the after-school study sessions she offered and to accept the help of peer tutors.

Four of her students came to love the subject matter so much that they formed their own "History Bowl" team and entered a countywide contest. Though they didn't get first, they were excited to take home a trophy for an honorable mention.

The school year came to an end more quickly than Jennie could have ever imagined. Though she had grown fond of many of her students, the ones in the honors class held a special place in her heart. Most had earned As and Bs; no one had averaged lower than a C.

During the final teacher workday before summer recess, the principal called her into the office for the end-of-the-year evaluation.

"I want to congratulate you on a great rookie season," she said with a smile. "Especially how you did so well with your remedial kids."

"Remedial kids?" Said Jennie. "I don't understand. I didn't have any remedial classes?"

Mrs. Anderson looked at her in a strange way. "Your first period class was remedial. Surely you saw that indicated at the top of the roll." She pulled a file folder from a drawer and showed it to her. "And you must have suspected that the students in class were below average by the way they dressed and the way they carried themselves. Not to mention their terrible grammar and poor reading and writing skills."

Jennie opened the folder and removed a copy of the roll from her first period class. There at the top. Plan as a day, was the word "honors." She showed it to Mrs. Anderson.

"Oh dear" she said. "What a huge mistake. Well how did you ever manage treating slow students as though they were..."

Jennie couldn't help but finish the sentence for her. "As though they were right?"

The principal nodded, looking more than a little sheepish.

"You know what Mrs. Anderson? I think we've both learned a lesson from this. One they didn't teach in any of the education courses I took. But one I'll never forget."

"Nor will I" said Mrs. Anderson, circling the word "honors" with a red marker before placing the paper back in the folder. "Next year, I may just have this printed at the top of all the class rolls."

Needless to say all of us could be considered remedial students, and perhaps if Jesus were a teacher he would be wondering kind of group he was given when he chose the apostles. But just like Jennie, God has a plan for us too to help us become not honors students, but saints. And every day of our lives, class is in session. So do we want to become a saint? Hopefully so if we are here!

The plan is called the law of God. And it's the theme throughout our readings this week.

In the first reading from Deuteronomy we hear: "Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say. This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people." The answer as to who these laws and rules are given to us is reflected upon in our second reading, where Saint James says: "Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls."

Sometimes like the kids in Jennie's class on the first day who didn't see the importance of learning history and shared why they thought so, we can be the same way with respect to the law. As kids we might want to stay up all night, eat dessert first, and not like being told what to do when it seems parents have more freedom. But as we age, we might look back and see there was wisdom in being told to help out around the house, to share our toys, to get a decent night's sleep and all that. But as we age, sometimes

we can revert back into not wanting to get direction, or think that freedom is doing whatever we want. Well on the one hand, we should be free to pursue our dreams and to enjoy life. But think of all the rules that surround us. From games like bowling, baseball and golf, you don't just show up at the baseball field or bowling alley and do whatever you want. You follow a plan so you can really enjoy the game. And isn't being an excellent human being far more important than being an excellent athlete? Hopefully we'd say so, but this is where society can have a big problem with the "I'm OK, you're OK" mentality we call relativism. No rules means we'll never reach our potential.

Jennie's class certainly had rules, plenty of them. There was homework. There was participation required. There was an accountability to learn the material. And because of the rules, those kids were able to find so many gifts inside of them that were there all along, but couldn't come out without a bit of effort. This is why we are given the law of God. The 10 Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the moral teachings of the Church. All of it is there to help us reach our potential. And this is why it's so important to read the rule book if you will, the Bible, the catechism, to learn our faith, and to listen to the Church's guidance, and to examine our conscience. It's worth looking at where are we falling down, what are we struggling with, rather than making excuses or saying "who is the Church to tell me what to do" or "the Church needs to get with the times." Because when we listen to God's law, when we try to grow in virtue by following it, just as we grew from childhood and look back and say "mom knew what she was talking about," one day we can do the same thing in heaven because we see that God's law was there to help us grow and reach our potential. Learning the law, it should be second nature to us in how we treat people and live out our faith.

But the thing of it is though is there is always this balance with the law and becoming excessively legalistic to the point where we forget about the law in the first place and why it's there. Mrs. Anderson I'm sure was a fine principal, but notice she had a little bias towards the "slower" remedial kids, thinking they couldn't learn. Perhaps if she were teaching, she would have followed the same remedial class playbook she had used before just to survive and get through the year and move the kids on to the next grade. But would the kids have really learned? Probably not. That's where Jennie was able to get creative, and fine-tune her class so the kids could succeed. The Pharisees are stuck on the playbook if you will, not understanding the heart of the law. So Jesus calls them out when they observe that the disciples aren't washing their hands properly. "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites..." says the Lord. "You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." The point here isn't to be a cafeteria Catholic. But the point is that the law should always focus on the heart of it, which is, remember, love God with your whole heart, mind and soul, love your neighbor as yourself. As for how we live this out, I think what it comes down to is being like Jennie, and emphasizing what we'd call the law of gradualism. Gradually bringing people to understand the faith, ourselves included. If you get too impatient with someone for not going to Mass, or shame them for how they are dressed, or get preoccupied with the fact that maybe they disagree with the Church for instance on contraception or same-sex marriage and this is all you talk about with them, we can do damage and push them away. But that of course goes for us too. Perhaps you struggle with something the

Church teaches. The struggle is a good thing; it means you are thinking. It means you are still in the classroom. But at the same time, it's important to see the big picture. Perhaps you really love the Latin Mass and have a hard time with the Mass changes since the Vatican Council. Or perhaps you are really upset that while some theologians might make a case for birth control and it's accepted in other faiths, our Church still preaches against it. Others are upset when a parish makes a change too. Well if these things lead one to the point of breaking with the Church and heresy or schism, I'd suggest there is a preoccupation with a particular point of the law. Instead, accept the struggle. Keep an open mind. Listen to the Church. And be patient with others who may be having that same struggle. Just as Jennie's students didn't learn history in a day, we don't necessarily learn our faith in a day - or a lifetime - but God is always there to help us learn. Our job is to open our minds to seeing the big picture, because when we do we'll see how the law all goes back to what Jesus told us it was about, loving God and one another.

Eleven years ago our class gathered for a dinner at a steakhouse to celebrate the fact that we were no longer in seminary. It was to coincide with the "welcome back" dinner at the seminary, and it was kind of fun to mark the fact that we were no longer in school and finally priests. But I think it's safe to say since that point, we've also realized that our learning is never over. All of us from the seminary class of 2007 are learning how to become better priests, and that will continue throughout our ministry. But hopefully all of us here also realize that whether we are going back to faith formation class this year or not, we are all students in God's kingdom. Our file might say "remedial," but God reads it as "future saints." So let's listen to the Master and the Church that He gave us, knowing that while as Jesus says all evil comes from within, grace, which comes from above, can help us to overcome all evil, but only if we listen and trust that the law will truly set us free and never hold us back.