

## THE GOOD TEACHER

What's in a title? In the gospel of John the risen Christ calls a grief-distracted Mary by name and she cries out in joy, "Teacher!" That's more than a title; that's a life-forming relationship. Teacher. It's the title I revere most that we find in the gospels. My preference is probably because I belong to a tribe of teachers who think that teaching is a holy, human art.

It's also one of the few titles of respect that Jesus accepted. Our difficulty in appreciating the power of that title may be due to our lack of esteem for public education and educators. It could also be the hard lessons we find in the gospels about the disciples and ourselves: we are slow learners. Put another way, the labels we use in a classroom apply to our lives as students of Christ. Most of the time we're learning challenged, behaviorally disordered, and spiritually impaired. When it comes to being faithful to our Teacher, we suffer from an attention deficit disorder, and are oppositional defiant.

Yet it is the Teacher of Mary, and Peter, of Thomas and Lydia who tells us that we're "gifted" and the beloved daughters and sons of God. It may help to explore the word "Teacher" through a language other than English to show this learning relationship in a new light. Since the gospel of John was published in Asia, we turn to an Asian language to gain insight. I am grateful to Dr. Yakuko Grosjean for the following lesson.

In Japan the one who teaches is called “*sensei*”. This title has no exact English translation. It is somewhat like the word “mentor”, but it is not limited to an academic setting. It is a description which shows great respect, trust, and closeness of relationship.

The *sensei* is not a professor of knowledge; rather the *sensei* is a model of knowledge, wisdom, and personality. The relationship of *sensei* and student is life long.

Regardless of how much the former student achieves in the world, the obligation to the *sensei* remains, because the *sensei* led the student each step along the way.

After the student graduates and leaves the place of learning, the student refers to this teacher as *onshi*. *On* means debt. Thus, *onshi* is a teacher to whom the student is indebted throughout life. *Onshi* communicates one of the essential truths about this essential relationship we have with the triune God, our maker, redeemer, and sustainer.

We owe a debt that we can't discharge, only acknowledge. This is a debt of honor, Christ's honor. We have been redeemed through the work of the Teacher. To “redeem” means to purchase back that which has been sold into slavery. Christ is our one and only *onshi*. Christ is our Teacher in life, in death, in life beyond death. We, like Mary, will stand in the light of our resurrection and shout with joy, “Teacher!”

Dear Teacher,  
You are Wisdom, Word, and Wonder.

Teach us to pray.  
Be the heart of our heart,  
and the mind of our mind.

Let our yes be yes.  
May no mean no.  
May we say what we mean  
And mean what we say.

Teach us to feel as keenly as we think,  
and think as deeply as we feel.

We are all slow learners  
of your lessons of life.

Call us by name.  
Tell us the truth.  
Show us how to start over again.

Heather Murray Elkins, April 2006