

Let All Teach with Boldness

April 10, 2021 Scott Gunn

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. —Acts 4:13

There's a lot to read into the description of Peter and John. The authorities seem surprised that "uneducated" people should be able to teach so effectively. It's remarkable to the powerful people that "ordinary" people can be so bold, so effective.

In the last few years, I've been thinking about how we raise up leaders in the church. Ordained leaders are sent off to graduate school or to a substantial local formation program, but that's almost always in addition to a full college education. This kind of learning is costly, both in time and money.

Many lay leaders are expected to engage in extensive learning programs such as Education for Ministry. In most Episcopal congregations, the leaders are nearly all college educated. Our congregations tend to skew toward the middle class and wealthy.

At least in the Episcopal Church, we don't end up with many leaders who could be called "uneducated and ordinary." Now, as a well-educated person, I certainly have nothing against education! And I am glad we welcome people of economic means into our churches.

I also know there are exceptions. Some leaders with diverse backgrounds have been celebrated in the church, and some congregations are more welcoming than others of the uneducated and ordinary people who seek to know Jesus. But all the data suggest that we have work to do for the body of Christ to match the diversity of society.

I'm left wondering if our church would be richer for celebrating the leadership gifts of "uneducated and ordinary" people. After all, wisdom is rarely correlated with educational attainment. Some of the best teachers of the Gospel I've known are people whose knowledge came from studying the scriptures and listening to sermons, not from seminars and graduate-level courses.

This is not a zero-sum world. We could still savor the learning that comes from a corps of clergy with graduate degrees while also savoring the teaching of those of different educational backgrounds. We could still welcome the wealthy while also making space for the poor. It shouldn't be remarkable among the followers of Jesus that "uneducated and ordinary" would teach with boldness. I hope to see the church more open to a variety of gifts and backgrounds one day.