

[Illustrate] Would you believe me if I told you there's a 98% chance you're a creative genius? It's true... at least according to George Land and Beth Jarman. In 1968, they tested 1600 persons in what's called divergent thinking. Divergent thinking tests creativity - subjects receive questions like, "How many uses can you think of for a pencil?" An average person would list 10-15 answers. A genius would come up with more than 100, and they do it by thinking outside the box - does the pencil have to be small? Can it be 100 feet tall and made of lasers?

Land and Jarman tested this group of 1600 persons and 98% of them scored genius level. You know what they all had in common? They were all in kindergarten.

[Let's add in each set of results in a sort of bar graph] Even more fascinating, this was a longitudinal study, so Land and Jarman tested these kids again every five years. When the kids were 8-10 years old, only 32% scored genius level. Five years later, only 10% did.

We've repeated this test with adults over 25, and in a group of over 200,000 adults, only 2% qualified as creative geniuses.

When we were in kindergarten, only 2% of us DIDN'T qualify. By the time we're grown, only 2% of us *do*. What happens? We go to school.

It's almost cruel to pick on education - an institution nearly everyone in our country believes is broken. Over the last two generations, the USA has fallen further and further behind other developed nations in terms of test scores. Despite having integrated our schools three generations ago, sharp gaps remain between urban and suburban schools, gaps that remain disturbingly correlated to race. Everyone has someone to blame, with politicians blaming teachers and tenure while teachers point to administrative practices and governing policies. Parents are split when they're involved at all, and every year sees more charter and experimental schools as non-government agencies try to crack the education code.

We have a sense that the whole system is broken - that the problem with education isn't bad teachers (because for every bad teacher, you can find 5 great teachers). The problem with education isn't politicians who don't get it (though they certainly exist). The problem isn't parents who don't know how to be involved in their kids' education (though parental involvement is key to a good education).

The foundational problem that gives rise to every other problem is that our educational system was built on a wrong understanding of what it means to be human, and that system continues to form us to value things that no longer matter (that maybe never mattered).

[Fish/Ocean Graphic] These big systemic evils - like those woven into the fabric of our educational system - are what we're examining during Lent. Lent is the season in the Church year where we confess Sin, repent and ask for God's rescue. Our Lent this year is System Failure. We're considering Sin bigger than individual bad actions individuals do. These are the

powers and principalities of the Scriptures, larger patterns of death and injustice that shape our culture and every individual who's part of them. These big systems are deeply broken, so participating in them stunts our growth and robs us of life.

We can call these big patterns of sin institutional sins - they're cultural artifices so deeply ingrained in "the way things are" that most of us never notice them, let alone think to question whether they're good or bad.

On Ash Wednesday, we saw that faith can function in two ways - Faith can act as a release valve that eases the pressure injustice creates in our lives and lets us continue to participate in these big sins. But Faith can also mobilize us to resist these sins. The Church can be a counter-community who embodies a better way - the way of God's Life. The habits of a life of faith can form us as God's people.

So with that in mind, let's dive into the Educational system. What is the liturgy of the educational system? How is it forming us in ways that are toxic to our humanity?

[See [this video](#) for ideas for illustrating this] First, we need to know that free public education is a relatively new phenomenon - it only dates back to the 18th century. The way we educate everyone is shaped by two major forces: the culture of the Enlightenment and the economics of the Industrial Revolution. The Enlightenment prizes academic knowledge above everything else - it taught us to think of people who are good at "book smarts" as intelligent. Which means that all the other ways people might be particularly skilled - athletically, emotionally, spiritual - don't count. And the Industrial Revolution is all about efficiency - it's the movement that gave us the factory, capable of churning out thousands of identical items one after another cheaply. The Enlightenment and the Industry. The mind and the factory. These are the forces that shaped our public education system.

Once you know that, it's disturbing how much our schools function like factories. The stuff of education is rows of desks, textbooks (or iPads) and chalkboards (or smartboards). The day begins with an opening bell, and students begin shuffling from room to room, subject to subject. The students are grouped by age - as though what matters most is their date of manufacture. In the classrooms, learning is intellectual, the goal being transferring information from the teacher's head to the students' (at least long enough to pass a test whose goal is intellectual assessment). Teachers are encouraged to move all students as quickly as possible through the process.

[A human with only the brain being exercised?] What's missing from this factory model is humanity. I don't mean individual teachers - most teachers feel stymied by the very system their serving in. I mean we know that human beings are more than just minds in meat sacks. A fully human experience involves our minds, bodies, emotions and spirits. Education that is fully human, that is training us thrive in the world can't treat us like we're all different paint jobs on the same car. Some people learn better in desks in rows from a lecture (not many, but a few).

Others learn best in circles, through discussion. Or in small groups. Or alone, through reading. Others are hands-on.

Dr. Robert Sternberg out of Cornell University poses there are three areas of intelligence which should be developed: creative, analytical, and practical. Curriculum in the core areas tends to only address the analytical and not the practical or creative.

When schools suffer, what's the first to go? Arts - the programs designed to nourish creativity, emotional health and feed our spirits. What's next? Athletics - the programs designed for our bodies. And what is the core curriculum, the non-negotiable stuff? The intellectual pursuits. This all teaches us to value a certain kind of person - the intellectual. To devalue our emotional and spiritual selves, to have complicated relationships with our bodies. We're taught to assume that everyone's more or less the same, that if someone doesn't succeed in school, they must be defective because the system outputs other kids who excel.

[Maybe how these practices feed the whole person?] The liturgy of the Church has long worked to form the whole person, not just the mind. We do prioritize the lecture (oops I mean sermon!), but our gatherings are filled with experiences that engage the rest of our persons. We sing to connect emotionally and spiritually. We pray together. We clap, pass peace and receive communion to engage our bodies. Outside the worship experience, we encourage spiritual practices like fasting, sabbath and giving that emphasize the tangible nature of spirituality. We encourage methods of prayer like the examen that nourish our spirits. When we gather in C-Groups, we emphasize relationships, not learning. We serve together.

Our schools are slowly making these shifts, too - at least in some arenas. We recognize the problems of large class sizes and lament the loss of arts in underfunded districts. Even so, the problems facing our educational system seem too big, too deeply ingrained to change. We deeply care about our children - even those of us who don't have kids or grandkids recognize that to quote Stevie Wonder, "I believe children are the future."

We recognize that the educational system in our country is out of date, that it's not preparing kids to succeed in college (and that college may not even be necessary - leading companies like Google have stated publicly they're not particularly interested in college degrees). Fixing education seems like a hopeless cause.

Can faith lead us to resist a system that forms us to value only a certain type of ability? Can faith help us fix a system that forms us to deny much of what it means to be fully human, a system that teaches us to value conformity over diversity and achievement over flourishing?

[Scripture Slide] Since the Bible was written a few millennia before public education was a thing, we have to approach the question obliquely. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Genesis 15. This is the very beginning of Israel's story, before there was any sort of people we could identify as God's people. God has called a man named Abram to follow him, promising to make his

descendants into a great nation. The problem was that Abram had no descendants. No children. No future.

Let's read this scripture as a people who shares Abram's anxiety about the future. Let's listen to God's promises to Abram and ask how these promises invite us to think about our children.

Some time later, the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great." But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir."

Then the Lord said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"

And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith. -- Genesis 15:1-6

God promises a miracle - Abram in his old age will receive an heir. But God isn't finished:

Then the Lord told him, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession."

But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?"

The Lord told him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." So Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side; he did not, however, cut the birds in half. Some vultures swooped down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away.

As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction."

After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. So the Lord made a covenant with Abram that day

and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt\* to the great Euphrates River. -- Genesis 15:7-18

God promises that Abram's children will possess land and be a nation. Abram wants assurance, evidence God is going to make this happen. Abram *doubts* God's promises.

So God tells Abram the truth, a truth we know as students of history: the road Abram's children must walk to inherit God's promises will not be an easy one. They will suffer at the hands of an evil institution - in their case, the Pharaohs of Egypt. But God will not leave them alone.

To assure Abram (and all of us listening to this story millennia later), God enacts a ritual strange to us but very familiar to Abram: the cutting of a covenant. In a pre-literate world, there was no such thing as a legal contract. So to formalize a contract, the two parties would do a sacrifice together. They would cut the animal in half (hence "cutting the covenant") and the person who had less power walked between the halves of the animal.

Symbolically, this communicated to everyone watching the ceremony that the person walking through the sacrifice was saying, "May this and more happen to me if I break this covenant." That's why the lesser person always walked through - the king or warlord or patriarch wasn't about to make such a promise to an underling. Which makes this story so strange because God walks through the sacrifice (well, floats through). God - the more powerful party - walks through the covenant, declaring to Abram that if God fails to uphold God's end of the covenant, God will suffer the consequences.

What this means practically for Abram - who God just promised *would not* suffer much - is that he can be sure his descendants will survive the evils of Egypt. Abram's descendants do go to Egypt, of their own free will, because Egypt offers them a safe haven from famine. Only later does the very structure that offered them haven become a place of slavery. We could say the same of our educational system. It was not built to be evil. It was designed with good intent - free public education, making kids ready to be citizens of a burgeoning national economy.

But the world has changed. We have a better understanding of what makes us human. We live in a global economy, not a national one. And the factories of the industrial revolution have been replaced with the computers of the information age. Today, the educational system forms us to be people who value productivity over flourishing. To focus on results rather than beauty. To reduce humans to minds, rather than mind, body, heart and spirit.

Like Abram, we look at the institution looming over our children and feel despair. We wonder what can be done. But like God did with Abram, God promises that neither we nor our children are resisting this institution alone. By walking through the sacrifice, God committed to going to Egypt with his people. And God is in our educational system, working with our administrators, our teachers, our parents and students - even with our politicians. The good news of Lent is that

God has not abandoned us to these institutions. God has entered into them with us, taken their sin upon his shoulders and shows us the way out.

So what does that look like in Education? Let's hear from two of our own who are following their calling to reform education to be more just:

[\[Interview with Kris and Sue\]](#)

Friends, the problems with education loom large. And none of us can escape how our educational system has formed us and is forming our children. But we can commit together not to value only academic learning. We can choose to value art, athletics, spirituality, social and emotional health and to teach our kids that excelling in art, theater, writing, music and more is just as valuable as an A in Chemistry or a touchdown. We can refuse to measure our worth by productivity. We can refuse to deny our full humanity, insist on flourishing for our minds, bodies, hearts and spirits.

### **Communion SetUp**

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