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A Teacher to the Last

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A, John 1:29-42

January 15, 2023

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

When Mitch came for a class in his professor's large office, he was disappointed there were only a dozen or so students. He thought it wouldn't be easy to cut a class this small. He thought maybe I shouldn't take this class. 'Mitchell?' the professor said as he called the roll. Mitch raised his hand. The professor asked, 'Do you prefer Mitch?' Mitch thought, 'I've never been asked this by a teacher.' He did a double-take on this old guy in his yellow turtleneck and green corduroy pants with silver hair that fell on his forehead, above a sly smile. 'Mitch,' the student replied. 'Mitch is what my friends call me.' 'Well, Mitch it is then,' said the professor. 'And Mitch?' he added. 'Yes.' 'I hope one day you will think of me as your friend.'

The professor was Morrie Schwartz and the student was Mitch Albom, and that story is the beginning of 'Tuesdays with Morrie,' a book that has changed lives for over 25 years. At his graduation from college, Mitch had been so inspired by Morrie's classes that he gave Morrie a briefcase with his initials on it. Morrie gave Mitch a hug. Then Morrie asked Mitch for a more important gift. He asked Mitch to stay in touch with him. Without hesitation, Mitch said, 'Of course.'

One of the most striking things about our passage from the Gospel of John today is the intimacy of the relationships. It recounts Jesus being baptized by his cousin John. Andrew's first inclination after meeting Jesus is to find and bring his brother Simon to meet him as well. A key word appears in both these stories and links the two stories together. Did you catch it? It's the word 'remain.'

As John the Baptist recalls the baptism of Jesus, he doesn't just say the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. He adds, the Holy Spirit remained on him. The dove of the Holy Spirit was not making a quick 'fly-by.' The Holy Spirit would be an enduring presence in his life, his ministry, and his teaching from here on out.

In the second story, John the Baptist pointed two of his followers to Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following him, he asked, 'What are you looking for?' They didn't answer that question. Perhaps they didn't know what they were looking for. Instead, they gave Jesus a name – Rabbi - which means Teacher. They asked him, 'Where are you staying?' And instead of answering, Jesus said, 'Come and see.' Then they remained with him the rest of the day.

After graduating from college, Mitch Albom didn't remain with much of anything. He lost touch with most of his friends. He didn't keep in touch with Morrie. Mitch tried his hand as a musician

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for a time, and then became a sports writer, bouncing around from city to city. He buried himself in accomplishments, because with accomplishments, he believed he could control things.

Then, while flicking through TV channels late one night, Mitch heard a familiar voice and saw that sly old smile. There, on Nightline being interviewed by Ted Koppel, was his dear and wise professor, Morrie. Mitch arranged to go see Morrie at his home near Boston. When he arrived in his rental car, Morrie was waiting for him outside in his wheelchair. But Mitch took a call in the car from a TV producer and stayed on the phone five minutes. He finally got out and told Morrie that he had lost his keys. Morrie simply hugged him and whispered, 'My old friend. You have come back at last.'

Morrie answered Mitch's questions about his journey with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, and his newfound celebrity after appearing on Nightline. But Morrie turned the conversation to Mitch. He asked,

'Have you found someone to share your heart with?'

'Are you giving to your community?'

'Are you at peace with yourself?'

'Are you trying to be as human as you can be?'

As Mitch attempted to answer these questions, a question bubbled up in his own spirit, 'What happened to me?'

Morrie's phone rang and his helper Connie answered it. She asked, 'Morrie, can you talk?' Morrie said, 'I'm visiting with my old pal now. Let them call back.' In that little exchange, Morrie taught Mitch what it means to remain with someone. Morrie believed in being fully present. When he was talking with someone, he was focused only on what was going on between them. At the end of their conversation, Morrie hugged Mitch again and said, 'Come back and see your old professor.' Mitch again said yes, and this time, he kept his promise.

Andrew was one of the two followers of John the Baptist who stayed with Jesus that first afternoon. There was something about those hours together that made Andrew not only want to come back to Jesus, but to bring his brother to meet Jesus. Perhaps Jesus asked Andrew some penetrating questions as Morrie did with Mitch. Questions that saw right into Andrew's soul. When Andrew located his brother Simon, he told him, 'We have found the Messiah.'

But what sort of Messiah? Certainly not a warrior, quickly dashing from place to place, from battle to battle, seeing his followers as temporary means to an end. Instead, Andrew found a teacher - a teacher who was willing to stay with his students as long as it took to impart and share some wisdom, even if it took forever.

We credit Andrew with being the first missionary because he brought the first person, his own brother, to meet Jesus. When Jesus met Simon, he called him by his name as Morrie did with Mitch. But he also gave Simon a new name. 'You are to be called Cephas, which is translated Peter.' Renaming him right from the start was a sign that Simon's whole being was going to be changed dramatically as a result of his time together with Jesus and his friends. Andrew gave Peter the best brotherly gift of all time. He gave his brother a teacher.

When he could not work due to a newspaper strike, Mitch began flying from Detroit to Boston on Tuesdays to spend the day with Morrie, often having topics and questions in mind for his teacher. Before Morrie died, they had fourteen Tuesdays together. Morrie asked Mitch to make one last promise to him – to come and visit his gravesite. But Morrie added, ‘Not the way some people come. Don’t leave your car running, get out, put down flowers, get back in. Come when you have some time. Bring a blanket and some sandwiches. You’ll talk. I’ll listen.’

Mitch has kept that promise to visit Morrie over the years, always on a Tuesday. Mitch also became a teacher himself. He founded an orphanage in Haiti and he and his wife Janine brought home a five-year old girl with a brain tumor. Just as Morrie died with him, Mitch has taken the time to impart whatever wisdom he has with his precious student.

‘What are you looking for?’ Mitch, Andrew and Peter found the answer to that question not in words, a doctrine, or a mantra, but in a living, breathing person – a Teacher. I think that’s what we’re seeking too, whether we realize it or not. We’re looking for someone to bear wisdom with us over a long stretch of time. Perhaps we’ll be given opportunities to be wisdom-bearers as well. That’s how we become Jesus to each other. Our prayer for Margot, who we will baptize in a few moments (a child we baptized at the 8 o’clock service), is that she has wise teachers along her spiritual journey, namely us, who remain with her for many, many years.

Morrie asked that five words be put on his tombstone, words that epitomize the kind of Messiah Andrew found - and the different kind of Messiah Jesus is. The five words are these - **A Teacher to the Last.** *Amen.*