

What We See in a Mirror, Dimly
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First Congregational United Church of Christ
I Corinthians 13: 1 – 13
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This sermon is a retelling of Frank McCourt's first day of teaching, as told by him in his excellent book Teacher Man: A Memoir, published in 2005 by Scribner Publishing. With great humility, I attempt here to reshape an already perfect story told by one of the world's finest storytellers.

Frank sits at the desk assigned him, the new teacher, his very first day of teaching his very first students. Before him are the materials the McKee Vocational and Technical High School, Staten Island, New York City, has deemed necessities for this English teacher on his first teaching assignment: five manila folders, one for each class of 60 students each, paper, a bundle of crumbling rubber bands, white note cards, a worn chalkboard eraser, an attendance sheet and a note, from the assistant principal, instructing him and all teachers, “to use these materials sparingly due to slim budgets.” But wait a minute: they told him that the most powerful tool with which to keep control of the many high school students he would be teaching was the red pen paired with the notecards, with which he was to record with great fanfare their wrongdoings. But as he looked through the materials on his desk, Frank found no red pen. Panic rose up within him. He hadn't even met the students and already he was at a disadvantage.

Because it seemed that this teaching assignment, as described to him, was a battle for control, a test of wills. The teacher he was replacing quit mid-year, and told him, “On the first day you teach, look out that window — see that river? — watch carefully and you will see the first cruise ship of the day pass by on the river and I will be on it, waving good-bye. Smiling.” She was done. Gone! She couldn't do it anymore. And here he was, standing, sitting rather, precisely in her place. How would he reach these students, all 11th grade vocational students who had plenty of years to grow resentment for the thread-bare educational system that was their inheritance? They were the students who, by choice or by lack of choice, would work in trades that were necessary to keep society functioning. And they knew it. What need would they have for English literature, these future plumbers and hairdressers? Frank had been warned that many were angry, disillusioned, ready to snap.

The door slams against the chalk shelf on the blackboard and a cloud of chalk dust fills the room. They have arrived. Frank quickly stands up. In come the students, loud, jostling one another, voices heavy with accents and skin tones reflecting their immigrant parents who came from many continents. Some of the students notice him and laugh out loud; new teacher, young one, scared. Frank can't help the look in his eyes, nor what he sees. No one leads with kindness here, no weight-bearing love to be seen. These teen vocational students in Staten Island New York in 1958 do not expect nor show caring in these classrooms, nor is there any evidence of its existence in the scuffed desks, or peeling paint. Here there is boasting, arrogance, rudeness, irritability, resentment.

Their young teacher, an immigrant himself, recognizes the look of betrayal in their eyes. How it feels when the world doesn't believe in you, doesn't even recognize you, doesn't take the time to learn your name. In the impoverished family and community in Ireland from which Frank came, there was no such thing as a teenager. To be a teen was an unspoken luxury; one went from childhood to responsibility, family life, work, adulthood, with no detours in between. He sees the anger in the positioning of jaws and crossed arms, the

smirks and nudges as they notice him, one by one, but the noticing is interrupted by a desk turned over and shouting in the back of the classroom. The first minute of his first day of teaching and already a fight has begun.

A snide comment was made, and then an even more snide retort, and a scuffle ensued. Frank moved toward the source of the conflict, but the students' eyes were on the fighting students. And then Frank uttered the first word of his teaching career: "Hey!" He wouldn't have believed that was what came out of his mouth if he hadn't heard it with his own ears. A student next to him snorted with laughter and the two young men at the center of the conflict were not deterred.

"Hey!" he said a little louder, trying to get closer to do, well, to do something, he had no idea what, about what was happening with desks sliding and chairs turning. Should he try to physically restrain one of the students, put his body in between the violence? They were bigger than he was. Should he sternly threaten, or heroically protect, or simply quit this job before it got any worse? Should he notify the front office of what was going on, and if so, how was he to do that? Some students, and then more, excited that something interesting was happening in this barren high school land, started chanting "fight, fight, fight" and it was right about then that the weighted, brown paper lunch sack went flying. Across the room, dropping, between chalkboard and the front desks.

Then was when Frank spoke, actually yelled, the second phrase of his teaching career as he moved now to the front of the room: "Don't throw sandwiches!"

As soon as the words departed his tongue he was filled with wrenching regret. He knew well enough that nothing was sillier than a teacher telling you not to do something after it was already done. Now he not only seemed powerless, he was ridiculous. One of the students, a guy in the back row, slouched in the seat that was too small for his large frame, said, "Hey Teacher, no sense in telling him not to throw the sandwich when the sandwich has already been thrown. There is it, right there on the floor." And so it was.

But by some miracle this exchange interrupted the fight and diverted everyone's attention to this new teacher who told people not to do things after they had been done. Someone whispered, without trying very hard to be quiet, "Stupid" and he knew that was for him. But all eyes stayed on him. What was he to do?

The scuffle had stopped, he knew the gift was fleeting. What was the new teacher going to do? What was he going to do, he wondered himself. How was he to command their obedience and respect, wield enough power over them to put them in their places, control their behavior, silence their protest in this harsh and uncaring world?

He looked down at the lunch bag on the floor. The propulsion of the throw had forced the sandwich out of the brown bag and partially out of the carefully folded wax paper that protected it. All eyes were on him: Frank's eyes were on the sandwich. He could see, though the sandwich was only partially exposed, that this was no ordinary sandwich. He picked it up. Carefully, carefully he finished unwrapping the thick, dark, fragrant, obviously homemade bread baked by a skilled hands, this bread firm enough yet tender enough to hold layers upon layer of carefully sliced, slow roasted, succulent meat, juicy tomato, thinly sliced, crisp onion; a lovely, luscious sauce-garlicky-generously holding all of this very special sandwich together. Was that a pepper relish? It was, vinegary and dotted with flecks of freshly ground pepper, and if he put his nose just a little closer, he could smell fruity olive oil, drizzled on in just the right measure. In this callous, break-your-eardrums

loud, mean, underfunded, paint-peeling, red pen world of vocational high school, there was this sandwich. Filled with caring and creativity, delicate labors for the sake of hunger, but more than just to fill a basic need. This sandwich that Frank held in his hands was a work of art. For just a moment, Frank closed his eyes, took a deep breath of that sandwich, and remembered all the missed lunches of his own teen years, of eating food that was tasteless, even spoiled, because it was all that there was. This sandwich that Frank held in his hands was a work of love.

Such a gesture of love, created with great intention and humility, the hours of labor not intended to be repaid for there is no way to repay such a gift as this. A sandwich like this, created with such sacrifice, each layer a story of skill and kindness, of sacrifice and generosity, cannot be wasted.

30 years of teaching later, he would reflect on this moment as his defining moment, a moment in which he would choose the tone and intention of his craft. The final exam on his first day of school.

He felt the eyes of 60 teens on him, and he knew that there was only one answer, in this moment, of what to do next. He straightened this beautiful sandwich, this abundant gesture of love, and he took a bite...and then another. In fact, in front of those students on his first day of teaching, he did the only thing that made any sense: he ate the whole sandwich. It was delicious.