Column – Planting good seed in the lives of others

Someone, I don't remember who, said "teachers plant seeds that bloom decades later." This dictum came true in the life of America's 34th President, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

On a cold December day in 1957, President Eisenhower's childhood Sunday school teacher, Eleanor Mitchell from Abilene, Kan., showed up at the White House unannounced and asked to see the President.

Ike's secretary was more than a little hesitant in interrupting her boss as he reviewed the budget proposals for the coming year, but she did. To her surprise, he got up from his desk, raced down the hall and swept the 73-year-old woman into a huge bear hug. He then set aside his agenda for the afternoon to have tea with her.

Mrs. Mitchell, you see, was one of those teachers who planted seeds, and the President had never forgotten her. According to the account I read, she had taught young Eisenhower Bible verses,

principally from the Psalms and Proverbs, every Sunday from 1907 to 1911 in a tiny church basement. More than that, her concern for him continued through his rise to the rank of Supreme Commander in the military and his election to the highest office in the land. During those years, continuing to address him as “Dwight”, she would write him letters in which she would remind him that “character matters more than rank.”

During her visit, Eisenhower told members of his staff that Mrs. Mitchell once made him apologize to the entire Sunday school class for being prideful after he had bragged about winning a spelling bee. The lesson she instilled in him concerning humility, he said, shaped his leadership philosophy.

During his long and distinguished career, the President never forgot Mrs. Mitchell’s admonition: “Dwight, you're going to do important things someday, but never let success make you forget where you came from or who helped you along the way.”

“This woman taught me everything that matters,” Eisenhower told members of his staff. Before personally walking her to a taxi, he pressed into her hand an envelope with a check for her church along with a note reading: “For the place that built my foundation—thank you for seeing potential in a troublemaker farm boy. Your student always, Dwight.”

There are teachers, and there are teachers. Perhaps you have had a Mrs. Mitchell in your life, someone who helped make you? If so, give thanks to God for that person. If he or she is alive, let that one know of your appreciation.

In my own life, I remember my sixth-grade teacher Mrs. S. T. Bryant. Once, while responding to a question, I hedged by saying, “If you want to know the truth . . .” Before I could continue, looking at me with piercing eyes, she said, “I would expect nothing less.” Needless to say, I have never used that expression since. It is indeed meaningless and unworthy of a follower of Jesus whose ‘yes’ should be yes and whose ‘no’ should be no.

Mrs. Mitchell and Mrs. Bryant leave us with a challenge. More people who plant good seed in the lives of others are needed. Why not be one?

LORD, we beseech thee to keep thy household the Church in continual godliness; that through thy protection it may be free from all adversities, and devoutly given to serve thee in good works, to the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect, 22nd Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer).

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