

This is a short story about a new teacher struggling to find ways to get her students to exhibit Christian behaviour. She really doesn't know how to do that. Or so she thinks. The story is entirely fictional, as are all the characters.

God is in the Details

"Kelly, don't eat the glue stick, please. You know better than that!"

Sometimes being a grade one teacher feels more like being a mother. Which is very strange, because I've never been a mother. And I'm only twenty-four.

Let me tell you about a typical day in my classroom.

It usually starts in the hallway, where I stand by the lockers, helping my students to remove their snow pants, boots, hats, mittens ... and then helping them to put them into the right lockers so they don't get lost forever.

"Miss April, one of my boots is stuck. Can you help me get it off?"

"Of course, David. Give me your foot. No, the one with the boot still on it. Let me just get a good grip on it". I grabbed it and pulled. "Uh, David ... what's all this brown stuff all over the bottom ... oh!"

"Our cows got out into the driveway this morning. My mom made me help round them up. It was fun!"

Once they've visited the washroom and have all been herded into the classroom, I make them sit quietly until O Canada is played.

The quiet time is for me. I need that five minutes to collect my thoughts. Thoughts like 'Did I remember to unplug that hair curler in the bathroom', or 'Why is Rebecca wearing different coloured socks this morning?'

Come to think of it, why am I wearing different coloured socks this morning?

I don't really function well before ten o'clock in the morning.

As a beginning teacher with my first-ever class of fifteen grade one students, I've discovered that I love my job. I can't think of anything else I'd rather be doing. But that isn't to say that everything goes smoothly every day. Like everything else, there are good moments, and not-so-good moments.

"Jared? Wake up, Jared!"

Jared has an hour and a half bus ride every morning. He's usually drifting off to sleep just as the bus arrives. After stumbling into my classroom, sometimes still wearing snow

pants and mittens, he has a little nap at his desk. I don't mind. Some mornings I wish I could too.

My students are all good kids. Some of them have a few rough edges, and their manners aren't always what they should be, but I see it as part of my job to make them more respectful of each other. Sometimes it's hard.

"Miss April, Kenny called me a weasel!"

"Kenny, is that true? Did you really call Bobby a weasel?"

"Yes, Miss April. But he deserved it. He farted on the bus!"

I didn't know what to say to that. But I had to say something.

"Kenny, it's not nice to call people weasels."

"Can I call him a poophead instead?"

"*Kenny ...*"

"OK, I'm sorry, Miss April. But you better tell Bobby to stop farting on the bus. We had to open all the windows!"

This is the way my day usually begins. But it gets better.

As a Christian, I've been hoping that I can show my students that they need to love each other the same way that God loves them. I just haven't figured out how to do it yet.

Math class passes uneventfully, except for one thrilling moment when I realize that every one of my students can count to twenty by two's. We'd been practicing that for a week. We celebrate the moment by taking a snack break.

Next is reading time. I sit them all down in the corner and pull out the book I've chosen for today. It's called 'Noodles: I Can Help'.

Noodles is a dog. No matter how hard he tries, Noodles just can't seem to do anything right! He knocks over blocks, and the garbage can, and flowerpots filled with dirt. But then he realizes that making mistakes is okay.

Sometimes I feel like Noodles. I sure make lots of mistakes.

We're really into the book when I notice Christine.

"Christine, why are you crying, honey?"

“Noodles ... reminds me ...” She stops to wipe away the tears. “Noodles reminds me of my dog Sparky!”

“Oh, that’s nice. Is Sparky a good dog like Noodles?”

“Sparky died last summer. He got eaten by a coyote”.

OK, I didn’t see that coming. I should have suspected that the tears were for something.

“Come up here with me, Christine”.

I let her climb up onto my lap. “Tell me about Sparky”.

“Well, Miss April ... he was pretty old. But ...” She stopped to wipe her nose. I didn’t have a tissue handy, but it didn’t matter. She used the bottom of my shirt.

“But ... he loved to catch a ball when I threw it to him. And he always licked my hand. I loved Sparky”.

“I’m sure he loved you too, Christine”. We sat quietly for a moment. “Why don’t you get down and join the others, and we’ll keep reading the story, OK?” I paused. “Bobby, why are you crying?”

“I can’t help it, Miss April. That’s so sad. I feel sorry for Christine. I hope my dog never dies!”

I was touched. Bobby normally doesn’t show that kind of empathy. He’s usually more concerned with making sure no-one steals his Spiderman pencils.

“It’s very nice of you to say that, Bobby. I’m proud of you!”

“Ewww! Miss April!!!”

“What, Amy?”

“Bobby farted!”

When the story was done, we talked about some of the words that the author had used, and I wrote them on the whiteboard. Then it was time for recess.

I usually love recess. I get to have ten minutes all by myself in my classroom. I usually use the time to plan lessons. But not today. Today I had recess supervision.

If you remember recess from when you were in school, you probably think back on it fondly. It was a time when you could run and play and have a good time, without worrying about learning anything.

Recess looks a lot different from the other side.

“Jessie! Stop jumping on David. You might hurt him!”

“But we’re playing cowboys, and he’s the horse!”

“I know, but he’s such a *little* horse! Here, climb up!”

I spent the rest of that supervision giving piggy back rides to all of my grade one students. The grade sixes wanted to join in the fun, but I said no. Some of them are taller than I am. They can be their *own* horses!

As the kids were coming in from recess, I held the door for them and reminded them about how it’s not polite to push and shove. I made Bobby go back outside and come in again, trying to be more courteous this time. He did a wonderful job the second time, and I told him so.

“Bobby, you were very polite that time. Thank you!”

“You’re welcome, Miss April. Can I practice some more?”

“Maybe tomorrow, Bobby. Go take off your snow pants. And help Kenny with his, too, OK?”

Kenny was wearing snow pants that were two sizes too small for him. Yesterday I’d spent ten minutes trying to pull them off. My back was still sore.

Back in the classroom, we did some more math. We were working with partners; each student was supposed to draw a picture of seven things, and then count them out to his or her partner .

Andrew was having trouble. And his partner Brittany wasn’t helping any.

“Miss April, Andrew doesn’t have seven things!”

“How do you know, Brittany?”

“Cause I counted them. Look! One, two, three ...”

“That’s good, Brittany. But can you count them out with Andrew? He needs to learn this too!”

“Well, OK, Miss April. But Andrew’s not very good at this!”

“Andrew, would you like Brittany to help you?”

“Uh ... all right. But only if she’s nice to me!”

“Of course she’ll be nice to you. Won’t you, Brittany!” I smiled at her. “You can be a good teacher if you try. Can you help Andrew?”

“Oh, OK. I can do that!”

I left the two of them and moved on to listen in on the learning. Part of the plan was to get the students talking about numbers by helping each other. This class was good at it ... mostly they liked to help each other. I would only intervene when one partner was having trouble explaining something.

Or to settle disputes.

“Miss April, Danny’s seven cows look like spiders!”

Danny’s drawings did indeed look rather spider-like.

“Sandra, you should try to say something nice about Danny’s drawing. Look, the spiders ... er cows all have four little legs. Isn’t that cute? I think they’re nice cows. What do you think?”

Sandra thought for a moment. “Well, if they were spiders, they’d be pretty scary!”

I figured that was the best I was going to get.

“See, Danny. Sandra likes your drawings! You’ve got some pretty scary cows there!”

Danny looked pleased.

Before we knew it, it was lunch time, and after sending the kids off to the washroom, I pulled my own lunch out of my book bag and sat down at my desk. I’d been looking forward to lunch all morning. I’d been in such a rush before coming to school, as usual, that I hadn’t had time for breakfast.

I was about to take a bite of a thick peanut butter and bologna sandwich when I noticed Jared staring at me.

“What’s the matter, Jared?”

“My mom forgot to make me a lunch!”

Jared’s mom was always forgetting to send his lunch. And when she did, it was usually a bag of chips, a chocolate bar and a can of pop.

“OK, Jared. Would you like to share my lunch?” I looked longingly at my sandwich.

“Sure, Miss April. Thank you!”

I gave him half my sandwich and my container of milk. While I was getting him a napkin, he managed to finish the half sandwich. He still looked hungry.

“Would you like the other half, Jared?” I said, resignedly.

“Yes, please”. Well, he certainly was polite. “Miss April, your sandwich needs ketchup. Do you have any ketchup? I really like ketchup!”

“No Jared, no ketchup. Sorry”.

I ate my apple and waited for the kids to finish their lunch so they could go outside for noon recess. My stomach was rumbling.

After the kids had gone outside, Jenny stopped by for a visit. Jenny is the grade two teacher whose classroom is just across the hall. She’s been teaching for four or five years, and has given me lots of help. She’s also a Christian like me.

“Hi, April! How’s it going?”

“Oh, OK, I guess, Jenny”.

“You don’t seem as chipper as you usually do. Cheer up ... the day’s half over!”

“Chipper? What’s with ‘chipper’? Nobody says ‘chipper’”. We laughed. “And no, I don’t feel very ‘chipper’”.

“What’s the matter?”

“Well, I’m still trying to figure out some way I can help my kids see that God can do wonderful things for them, if they’ll let Him. Without actually ... you know ... talking about God”.

It was an unfortunate fact that teachers weren’t allowed to talk about their faith in school. No religious teaching was permitted. Oh, I could talk about what I believed if someone asked, but even that was frowned upon.

I could see the logic in that, I guess. In a large city school, the students would come from all sorts of backgrounds, and there would be many different faiths. Parents would resent having a different set of beliefs thrust on their kids.

But here in my small rural classroom, most of the students and their parents were either Christian ... sort of, or ... nothing. I thought it would be a good thing if they learned some Christian values. I just didn't know how to go about it.

"Well, April ..." Jenny paused to think. "You know that a lot of your kids don't go to church. Neither do their parents. But they're all pretty nice people."

"I know, Jenny. It's just that, as a Christian, I feel like I have so much more to give them. If I only knew how."

Just then Mrs. Stevenson, the Principal, stuck her head into the classroom. "Hi, April. Hi Jenny. How are things going?"

"Just fine, Barbara. It's been a good day so far".

She was pretty nice. She stopped by my room at least once every day to make sure everything was OK. Maybe she thought I needed checking up on.

But no, she was just being a good Principal. And she'd helped me to get this job. I'd made a complete mess of my interview ... nervousness, I guess ... but she must have seen something in me that she liked, because she'd let me start over and answer all the questions again.

"Barbara, are you finished looking at my Unit Plans? I really need them back".

"I'm sorry, April. I'll get them back to you tomorrow. I promise".

"That's OK. I know you're busy".

The afternoon unfolded just as I'd planned it. I was a meticulous planner. I spent several hours most evenings making lesson plans, even going so far as to write out the questions I was going to ask during each lesson.

I really looked forward to the day when all of that would come naturally, and I wouldn't have to write everything down. First year elementary teachers are definitely overworked. They should pay us more!

In mid-afternoon we did some science. The students were in the middle of building things. They were supposed to select the materials they would need, and build something they might see in our community. Most of the kids were building houses.

I'd had to buy most of the materials myself. Our small school doesn't have a budget for stuff like that. I'd purchased three huge bags of popsicle sticks, a thick stack of multi-coloured heavy cardboard, and some beads. I wasn't sure why I'd bought the beads. Maybe they could use them for door knobs.

Jessie, as usual, was having trouble building her house. She had very poor eye-hand coordination. The walls would go up, but they wouldn't be straight. And they'd fall over before she could apply the glue.

"Hi, Jessie. Would you like some help?"

"Yes, please, Miss April. I just can't seem to make my house stand up!"

I looked around. Bobby was nearly done his own house. But it sort of resembled ...

"Bobby, what sort of house is that? It looks a little unusual!"

"It's an outhouse, Miss April!" He opened the little door. "See, there's the wood with the hole in it and everything". He seemed quite excited, and proud of his creation. I wasn't going to tell him that there weren't any outhouses in our community. At least, as far as I knew.

"Bobby, could you help Jessie with her house? She's having some trouble, and I think you're an expert house-builder!"

Bobby beamed. "Sure, Miss April!"

They went to work trying to get Jessie's walls to stand up. I went to see how Michael was doing.

Michael can be a pain sometimes. He doesn't work well with others. He can be a little bossy, but mostly the other kids don't like to work with him because he is always criticizing everyone. Even me.

"Miss April, why are your socks different colours?"

Nothing gets by Michael.

"How is your house coming, Michael?"

"Look, I'm almost done! I'm going to paint it red. Not blue, like David's. David's house looks stupid!"

"Michael, do you remember what we talked about yesterday?"

"Huh?"

"You know. About saying nice things".

"Oh. Yeah. Uh ... if I can't say something nice, then ... uh ..."

“Then you shouldn’t say anything at all. That’s right. So, do you think you could say something nice about David’s house?”

“I don’t think so. It’s pretty stupid ...”

“*Michael* ...”

“Oh, OK. I guess the roof looks pretty cool”.

“Thank you, Michael. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

He looked at me. “I guess not. But you’re not going to make me paint my house blue too, are you?”

I decided it was time for recess.

I did some clean-up in the room. As the kids were trooping back in fifteen minutes later, Jenny motioned me over.

“I’m exhausted! I spent the entire recess giving the kids piggy back rides. Who started that, anyway?”

I managed not to look too embarrassed. But I asked Jenny a question.

“How are my kids behaving out there?” It was something I always worried about.

“Are you kidding? April, your students are incredibly polite! They’re respectful of each other, and they always say please. You should be proud of them!”

“Oh, I am!” Were these my students she was talking about?

“And that little Jared is so cute. He asked me ‘Please, Miss Jenny, may I have another horsey ride?’ It was his third. How could I say no?”

“Yeah. Uh ... sorry about that.”

We laughed, and Jenny returned to her classroom.

The last period of the day was our Social Studies class. We were learning about our heritage. Today we’d be discussing aboriginal lifestyles.

The lesson went pretty well. But I could see that Christine had a question.

“Miss April, are you aboriginal?”

I wasn't sure where that was coming from. "No, Christine. My family was originally from Ireland. So I guess you could say I'm an Irish Canadian! Why?"

It's just ... you're really nice. And you know a lot of things. Sort of like my grandma".

Christine's grandmother was Cree. And one of the nicest people I'd ever met. I'd invited her into my classroom to talk to the kids earlier that month, and she'd been good for them.

"Thank you, Christine. Your grandma is a nice lady. And she is really smart".

The day ended with ten minutes of mayhem in the hallway while my students attempted to get their winter clothes back on. I'd avoided this chore earlier in the day; Jenny and I usually took turns.

"Danny, you have your boots on the wrong feet!"

We solved that problem. But then I had to deal with Kenny's snow pants.

"Maybe if I hold them and you jump up and down, we can get them up!" But I wasn't expecting any miracles.

After about five minutes of wiggling and squirming, Kenny got them on. But then Kenny said "Miss April ... I really gotta go to the bathroom!"

I knew it!

Kenny looked at me as if he expected me to get angry. But I just laughed.

Ten minutes later Kenny made his way onto the bus, fully dressed and not at all concerned that the bus driver was looking at him indignantly. I looked at the bus driver and shrugged. "When you gotta go, you gotta go!" He smiled.

So that was my day. Or at least, the in-school part. When I got home, I'd have some marking to do, and planning for tomorrow.

But dinner first.

I'm still trying to figure out how to get my students to behave in ways that would be pleasing to God. I'll have to think about that some more. It's a puzzle.

Of course, April is already doing that. The example she sets in everything she says and does is modelling for her students exactly how to behave as a Christian. Maybe she'll figure that out one day.