

WD October 11, 2021  
Pastor Matthew Woods

## “Learn From Me”

This morning I have learned that two of my mentors have passed away. One was my Tae Kwon Do instructor, Mr. Joe Sanders who died at the end of August and the other was my DCE from my home congregation, Mr. Richard Schempf who died last week. Back when I was young, I called both of them Mister and to this day would have a hard time thinking of either without referring to them as such. These were two people from the earliest chapters of my life and were very influential to me. These were two people who were very different and they never met one another expect for their impact on me. They bring to mind the words of Philippians 4:8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. <sup>9</sup> Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

First, let me share a little about Mr. Sanders, My Tae Kwon Do instructor. He and his family lived in our neighborhood. My first impression was that Mr. Sanders was intimidating. I would later learn that he liked looking the part of a strong person. It was a kind of persona that you got used to after a while. In reality he was a good-humored man with a very compassionate heart, especially for his students and their families; for our family. For a few years, twelve/thirteen or so he hired me to help him around his yard moving rocks for his garden. He dressed up his yard with much like a Japanese style Zen garden vibe. We were always moving rocks and placing them for just the right look. I can't remember if he ever finished it but I got plenty of pinched hands from those stinking rocks.

When Mr. Sanders and his family moved to the area because of his job he had to move away from his students back in Cleveland, Ohio which he proudly called, “the Cleveland Wrecking crew.” I never really knew if he embellished on, (which he was known to do), or if the Cleveland students were really good. By the mid-80s, I was fifteen. He started a new school at that time and invited me to join and I did. The classes taught us to break fall, block, punch, and kick—lots of kicking, hours of exercise that would leave my body feeling wrung out like a wet towel. After class back then we would all go to Burger King for supper where he would let down his hair. I think this was his favorite part because he could talk our ears off. He loved being social. For the next fifteen years he would push me to my limits physically and mentally. Over those years he taught me confidence, boldness, and lots of discipline. Everything about the class was structured by rank. The higher belts also got called Sir as Mr. Sanders did. “Yes Sir!” Respect and honor were highly regarded in class and it was enforced. When we got out of line we did our share of duck hops, pushups, and running. In the end it was all meant to sharpen us and it did. Oh, I could go on about the tournaments, and how he made sure I had a class to go to in St. Louis with one of his instructors; more than I have time for here. Let's just say, I learned a great deal from Mr. Sanders and his impact will be with me all of my days.

The second person I mentioned is Mr. Schempf. I met Mr. Schempf when we moved to a closer Lutheran Church in Clarkston, St. Trinity in 1985. Little did I know how that move would literally shape the course of my life. It was during the same exact time table as I came to know Mr. Sanders. A little afterward but roughly the same time in my life. I was fifteen when my sister, cousin, and me met Mr. Schempf. He could not have been more different from my Tae Kwon Do instructor! He was not intimidating nor tried to be. He made you instantly feel welcome and comfortable. He was in many ways one of the godliest people I had ever known and was a great encourager for a very youth man with a very immature faith. He was very gifted with people because he made them feel welcome and that always caught my attention. He was also a very confident man but humble and unassuming. He did not boast or brag except when it came to the work of our Lord.

He had a huge heart for his youth. Month's after arriving at St. Trinity he made sure we had a place on the youth trip to Mackinaw Island for the Michigan District Youth Gathering. We knew no one and nothing about their youth program. But he was eager for us to become comfortable in our new group and knew that we would benefit from being together with the other kids on this trip. He was right. I would come to know them very well and enjoyed. He was a teacher. He was a leader. And he believed in me as someone who could be a Pastor. He made sure I got speaking parts when the youth did plays and skits in front of the church. I mumbled back then so occasionally he would have to stop me at practice to get “the cotton out of my mouth.” Talking with clarity and with volume started under his watch.

At the age of seventeen Mr. Schempf drove me and another youth to Concordia Ann Arbor where he introduced me to professors who talked with me about their pre-seminary program. He seemed to know them well. We sat in a class and ate lunch with those professors who filled us in college life at Ann Arbor. Mr. Schempf made sure we returned

home with a packet of information and with the application papers. The next thing I know I am headed to Ann Arbor and later to the ministry. That one act kick started in me a journey that has led me here to Grace. Mr. Schempf was a great support all through college and Seminary.

Neither man was a saint and I don't want to give that impression. However, both Mr. Schempf and Mr. Sanders maintain my greatest thanks and my deepest gratitude. In these last 25 years I did not see much of either and lost touch with them. I'm not proud of that really but this is how things have gone. I know that Mr. Sanders taught many more students and continued to find adventure in it. I know that Mr. Schempf went on to teach others and in retirement got take his little travel trailer to many new places.

What I would like you to note this morning is this; when Paul encourages us to think of whatever is true, noble, right, lovely, and admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, I remember these two men who helped a teenager reach into parts I didn't know I had. I am grateful to have known them and grateful for the foundation they helped to create. They were strong mentors and good teachers.

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice." And the God of peace will be with you. Well, I don't practice my kicks and punches any more but I haven't forgotten how to focus my mind on what counts. I have taken what I have learned and applied it to learning the Word and becoming a teacher myself.

It's funny how the things you remember are more like a highlight reel than a plain memory. I have fondly taken those things passed down and made them my own. I have put into practice many of the things I have learned from these two. I have tried to put into practice their confidence, their compassion, their desire to teach others what they have learned, their joy in seeing their students succeed, their passion for their work, and their ability to inspire.

So, I hope that you don't mind too much my little trip down memory lane this morning. And if any of this should be passed along to their families, please note how grateful I am to have known them. Lord willing more of our youth could find and benefit from such men. Peace to you in and through our Lord Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Matthew Woods  
John 3:30