

LEARNING

Matthew 22:34-40

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My husband Doug and I both enjoy the rare occasions when we are driving, and are not in a rush, and have the opportunity to explore. We love taking the back roads, even getting a little lost. Two Saturdays ago, we were driving home from Dayton. We had no reason to hurry home. It was a bright sunny spring day. We decided to drive through every small college town in western Ohio that was remotely on our way home. We saw Wittenberg, Urbana, Ohio Northern, Bluffton, Findlay, Tiffin, Heidelberg. Doug used to take these kinds of drives before we were married, with his sons in the car, and it was a particular form of torture for them. I know they're happy that I'm the one making these trips now, and I enjoy them as much as he does. We both love college towns.

But when we were first getting to know each other, we discovered that we each have biases when it comes to institutions of higher education. I attended a small liberal arts college and absolutely treasure the experience I had there. I think there's nothing better than a school where your professors know you by name. Doug started at a small school, didn't like it at all, and so he has his own bias. His strong preference is a very large school, in Columbus, Ohio, that starts with the word "The."

The college I attended has a plaque prominently displayed on campus with this quote, which has become the unofficial slogan of the school, "The end of learning is gracious living." What does that mean? I don't think it means that the goal of education is to get a good job, make a lot of money, and live in leisure. But that slogan also reminds us that the goal of education is not simply to stuff one's head with knowledge either. A life of learning is a full life, a life

lived well, a life of grace. I've always thought, perhaps naively, that the goal of formal education is to teach people how to learn, and to instill in them a joy and passion for life-long learning.

Today we are celebrating the Christian Education ministry of this church. And we are doing it on Mother's Day, acknowledging the fact that, for many of us, our first teachers are our parents and other influential relatives.

It's tempting to turn Mother's Day and Father's Day into sentimental holidays, to act as if all of our family relationships are always positive. But there are many in this room who had or who have troubled relationships with parents and children. Sometimes what we learn is what NOT to do. Sometimes we learn, much later, that our parents were flawed in their love for us because they never received it themselves. Some tried their best and failed, and some didn't try, for a variety of reasons. In the church we don't have to pretend that our lives are perfect, on this day or any other day.

Just as home is our first learning environment, the church, too, is a learning community. We teach in formal ways, in Sunday School classrooms, and Confirmation class, and Adult Education settings - and there is a teaching element to sermons. Learning happens through other experiences, too - through worship, through music, through mission. There is a new term that many people who work in Christian Education are encouraging churches to adopt. The term is "faith formation." Because Christian Education is not just about the head, it's not just about learning the books of the Bible, or facts about church history. Christian Education is about learning how to live as disciples of Jesus. We are being formed by what we learn and what we do. When our children go to Sunday School, they learn the stories that are in the Bible. But they also learn that there are adults in the church family who love and care for them. I remember Sunday School as a child. But I don't remember any particular lesson plans or crafts or even stories. What I remember are the teachers whose love for the children in their classroom was visible. I remember the ones who taught us silly songs, the ones who gave us Lifesavers

as we walked from the sanctuary back to the education wing, the ones who remembered our birthdays. You can read about God's love in a book but the lesson is far better if it's lived, if it's embodied.

Our experiences in the church form us. Next Monday night, our junior high students are volunteering at the Second Harvest Food Bank. They may learn a few facts about hunger in Lorain County, but they will also become people who have helped to feed the hungry. As they stack boxes and cans, they will be formed into different people. Mission trips form us. Church camp forms us.

We need all kinds of learning experiences in order to become the people God created us to be. We need the kind of learning that comes mostly through the head and we need the kind of formation that touches our hearts. The most exciting time in the Christian life is when the head and the heart come together, when something you learned through the pages of a book, or discussed in a classroom, somehow becomes real and compelling for you.

In this church we believe that the best learning comes not through being told what to think or what to believe but in asking questions. There's nothing I like better in Bible Study than when someone says, "This may be crazy, but let me ask it anyway." That's when I know that we are about to embark on a journey together that will lead to some new insights. There is not just one right way to interpret the Bible. We learn because we each bring to the table our own stories. Each of us looks at a passage in a slightly different way. About six weeks ago, a woman walked into Bible Study whom I'd never seen before. She asked if this was the Bible Study class, and could she join in? Of course. I asked her how she knew about us. She said she lives in Lakewood. Last December, she happened to be attending an event at the Avon Lake Library and saw a poster for a concert we were hosting here. She came to the concert, picked up some information about the church, read about Bible Study and three months later, wan-

dered in. She's been a great addition to our group and has a unique perspective I appreciate greatly. She is helping to form me and my faith in a new way.

Jesus tells us to love God with our hearts, our souls, and our minds. Open minds, minds not afraid to doubt, to question, to explore, to meander back roads. It's how we grow and learn, in life and in faith.

There are people who will disagree. If you talk about this sermon with a relative or neighbor, or coworker, you might encounter someone who will tell you that the Bible is a book of rules and answers, not a book that should cause you to question. A friend of mine from Texas grew up in a conservative church in which the purpose of the sermon was to give authoritative answers. The purpose of Sunday School was to memorize verses of the Bible. My friend was expected to go to a church affiliated with his denomination, but he chose not to.

Just before he left for college, a man in his church who was disappointed in his choice took him aside and said, "Brett, you're about to go to college. They will try to teach you things that you've never heard before. Promise me that you won't let them change your mind about anything." I wondered if he would give the same speech to a six-year-old: "Brett, you're about to go to the first grade. They will try to teach you things you've never heard before, but don't let them change your mind about anything."

We shouldn't be threatened by knowledge, but by ignorance. Sometime we want to think that we know enough and have no further need to learn; but when challenges come, we need as much understanding as we can get.

Some argue for a narrow approach to learning that decides the answers before the questions have been asked, but there's no virtue in uniform ideas without any thought behind them. The narrow approach forgets that no knowledge is outside of the realm of God's knowledge.

Did you know that the title most often given to Jesus in the New Testament is not "Master" or "Lord," as you might expect, but "Teacher"? On a number of occasions, we read that the crowds were astonished, not by miracles, but by his teaching. When Jesus called disciples, he called them to be learners. The Greek word *mathates*, usually translated disciples, could just as easily be rendered students.

If we don't include our minds in our love for God, we end up worshipping simple ideas about God rather than humbling ourselves before the Infinite. When we think hard, we begin to realize the ways in which we might be wrong. We learn to factor in a lot of uncertainty. We ask harder questions.

The best teachers help us understand that God calls us to learn, because learning is one of the ways we find our way to the most meaningful life.

I like the term faith formation. Things that are being formed are pliable, they're elastic, they're open to change. They're not hardened or set in their ways.

I also like the term faith journey, which speaks of faith as a way of life, not a destination. We learn from each other as we walk together, work together, and wonder together, with our minds wide open.

We live in a rapidly-changing world. The solutions that helped to address problems yesterday aren't the same solutions that will work today. We need people who are quick on their feet, agile in their thinking. We need people who are imaginative and creative, yet deeply rooted in God's values of love and compassion. We need people who are open to the process of being formed. So I am grateful for the learning that takes place in our homes and in this church home, and I am grateful that we have begun the process of searching for a new Associate Minister who will devote himself or herself to developing our programs of learning, for our children and for all who seek to understand what it means to live the way of Jesus.

*Credit: Quotes and inspiration from a sermon delivered by Brett Younger.