

**WHY LEARN?  
2 Timothy 4:9-13**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on September 15, 2019, the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a fall sermon series entitled “Why...?”*

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*Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.*

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Let us pray:

*Lord Jesus, think on me  
Nor let me go astray;  
Through darkness and perplexity  
Point Thou the heavenly way.<sup>1</sup>  
In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

This past Wednesday, as our nation commemorated the events of 9/11 eighteen years ago, like many of you, I thought back to my experiences of that day. I was living in Iowa at the time, the pastor of a downtown church on the city’s public square. After the initial shock of the morning, I spent the afternoon both calling members whom I knew to have college or young adult children living in New York and planning what kind of worship response our church would have both for the community and for our upcoming Sunday service. We ended out having a service of readings and music at noon on Friday, which because of the time difference, allowed me to race home and watch the service held here at the National Cathedral.

That evening, the local news opened its telecast from inside the worship center of a local “mega-church,” scaled down to Iowa size. The minister and congregants were speaking in tongues, lifting their hands toward heaven, expressing in what was doubtless a cathartic way the deeply felt and varied emotions running through all our veins that day.

At lunch at a Presbytery meeting a few weeks later, I remember sharing the story and saying that the services we had in our congregation and the service at the National Cathedral were moving to me, and they reminded me that in our tradition we have both a theology and a liturgy that can encompass – in a way that speaks to both the mind and the heart – an event such as 9/11. It reminded me that despite all our troubles and decline in membership in older Protestant denominations, I am still nourished by the Presbyterian Church and glad I have given my life to furthering its traditions. I truly love the way we worship.

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<sup>1</sup> Synesius of Cyrene, approximately 430 CE. Available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/1/o/j/lojthink.htm>.

## I.

At the heart of our tradition – and intimately tied to the way we worship – is our strong commitment to *learning*. In the Presbyterian Church:

- We learn the songs of faith as children, the hymns as youth and adults.
- We learn the individual stories of the Bible embedded within the larger narrative arc of the Old and New Testaments.
- We learn basic theological affirmations and understandings, through reciting creeds and confessions in worship.
- We learn prayers and liturgies which – across several millennia – have expressed the greatest joys of the human experience and carried us through our darkest hours.
- And we learn the world around us: literature, the arts, history, philosophy, economics, political science, international relations, and the hard sciences of chemistry and physics, biology and zoology, astronomy and other disciplines whose names I know but whose content is well beyond me.

Our primary forebear, John Calvin, opened his massive theological treatise on what Protestants believe – *Institutes of the Christian Religion* – with these words:

- “Without knowledge of *self*, there is no knowledge of *God*”

*Followed by*

- “Without knowledge of *God* there is no knowledge of *self*.”

When we learn of the world through all its systems of knowledge, we learn of self and we learn of God; when we learn of God, through liturgy, music, preaching, and teaching, we learn of God and we learn of self. Calvin’s purpose was to show “how [the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God] are interrelated,”<sup>2</sup> we might say “inextricably intertwined.” Our theology and liturgy encompass what we *know* and experience in the world, in its *created* beauty<sup>3</sup> and its fallen sadness.<sup>4</sup>

## II.

In the brief passage we read today, the Apostle Paul is imprisoned, near the end of his life, knowing that he is about to be “poured out as a libation” and that “the time of his departure has come.”<sup>5</sup> Facing another cold winter in which he will shiver in his cell like some prisoners in our state still do today, Paul writes Timothy, asking him – twice to “come before winter,” for Paul does not expect to survive another winter.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume I*, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, MCMLX) 35, 36, 36 note 2.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1 and 2.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3 and forward.

<sup>5</sup> II Timothy 4.6.

He asks Timothy to retrieve a heavy cloak that Paul has left in Troas, and to bring “the *books* and *especially* the *parchments*.” This request to Timothy may have constituted the *final* words Paul ever wrote.<sup>6</sup> We have no proof of what books Paul was longing to read nor the content of the writings on the parchments he “*especially*” requested.

- But the word Paul uses for “parchments” is the same word that Luke and John and the writer of Hebrews and Paul<sup>7</sup> himself used for the scrolls of the books of the Bible at the time – books we have as the Old Testament.
- “Parchments” may indeed refer to “the sacred writings Timothy [and Paul] ha[d] known since childhood” which had “instructed [them both] for salvation.”<sup>8</sup>
- It is even possible that Paul planned to bequeath these parchment writings to his colleagues they would replace his own writings as objects for use in worship and study.<sup>9</sup>

The bottom line is that from a cold and dark prison cell, Paul is asking Timothy to bring him his Bible. To his final breath, Paul never stopped learning about self, learning about God, and passing on what he learned.

My friends, for Christian tradition to be carried forward from our world into its next 2000 years, at least in our culture, the church needs to honor the deep desire for the mind to learn, for faith to seek understanding, and for us to “think on Jesus” as we ask him to “think on us.” The basics of our faith have to be learned and re-learned generation to generation.

### III.

I invite you to recall and re-experience for a minute some of the things we have learned from our tradition, things that have provided our faith with not just *catharsis* but *content*.

Think of what we say at the beginning of life – in words Whitney brings to life for us through the baptisms she conducts:

Little child,  
For you Christ Jesus  
Came into the world;  
For you he did battle and suffered;  
For you he endured the agony of Gethsemane  
And the darkness of Calvary;  
For you he cried, “It is finished.”  
For you he died;  
And for you he triumphed over death.

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<sup>6</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “The First and Second Letter to Timothy and the Letter to Titus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume XI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 856-857.

<sup>7</sup> See Luke 4:17, John 20:30, Hebrews 10:7, Galatians 3:10 and Revelation 22:7-19.

<sup>8</sup> II Timothy 3:15.

<sup>9</sup> From John Chrysostom, Homily on 2 Timothy 4, found at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230710.htm>. Translated by Philip Schaff. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 13. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230710.htm>>.

Yet you, little child,  
Know nothing of this;  
But thus is confirmed the word of the apostle:  
“We love God because God *first* loved us.”<sup>10</sup>

Think of what we often learn at Confirmation, when we are entering our teenage years:

I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Aaker of heaven and earth;  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;  
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,  
Born of the Virgin Mary,  
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified, dead, and buried;  
He descended into hell;  
The third day he rose again from the dead;  
He ascended into heaven,  
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Ghost;  
The holy catholic church;  
The communion of saints;  
The forgiveness of sins;  
The resurrection of the body;  
And the life everlasting.<sup>11</sup>

Think of what we say when we confess our sins:

Eternal God,  
In whom we live and move and have our being,  
Whose face is hidden from us by our sins,  
And whose mercy we forget in the blindness of our hearts...<sup>12</sup>

Think of what we recite when someone we love asks us to read scripture as they pass from this life

The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want....<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This liturgy comes from the Reformed Church in France. The Biblical reference is I John 4:19.

<sup>11</sup> The Apostles/ Creed.

<sup>12</sup> The prayer grows out of Acts 17:28.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 23:1.

Recall what we pray standing over the grave which awaits the coffin and body or the urn and ashes of someone dear to us:

O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in Thy mercy grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>14</sup>

It is not that by saying these we are being *doctrinally pure*, claiming to *understand* or even *believe* fully – all the phrases we recite. But we say them *liturgically*, because they are part of who we are, and by saying them, they often become more a part of us. They give the yearnings of our hearts – out of which our faith grows – some positive content *on* which – and sometimes *against* which – our minds can grow. “Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God....Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.”

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On the little-known island off the coast of Maine where Maggie and I vacation, there is a summer tradition of a hymn sing held every other Sunday evening at one of the three, small Protestant churches on the island. There are usually thirty or forty people gathered, some locals, some summer people. There normally are two pianists, a teenage guitarist, and of course a song leader who has been leading for no telling how many decades.

In the crowd of summer people is a New York City special education teacher who has been coming each summer for forty years; the “lapsed Unitarians” who in their former lives were an attorney and economist in DC and whose guest house we rent on the island but who welcome us as if we are family; a couple from Cleveland who seem well-fixed and well-educated, who bring their two troubled teenaged sons with them to each hymn sing, sons who were troubled elementary children when we first met them, but who seem to be getting better each summer. There are college kids from California and New England who have grown up on the island in the summers and who seem to have no other religious exposure but the hymn sings; and there is wife of one of the senior lobstermen on the island who belts out “How Great Thou Art” in a voice that makes recordings of George Beverly Shea sound like a muffled whisper.

What this crew of believers and non-believers, searchers and finders share together are Protestant hymns that have shaped our culture:

- The Old Rugged Cross
- Onward, Christian Soldiers
- In the Garden
- Blessed be the Ties that Bind
- Trust and Obey
- We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations.

The theology within these hymns isn’t always the greatest, but sometimes it is. Most of all the *content* of the faith is taught and learned, expressed and absorbed, passed on generation to generation, to traveler and resident alike.

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<sup>14</sup> This is known as the Prayer of Cardinal John Henry Newman, long used in Presbyterian graveside services.

### III.

Learning the Faith has been a hallmark of Westminster for the nearly eighty years we have been in existence. Through strong men's and women's groups, through circles and studies, through Karen Blomberg's Authenticity groups, through trips and retreats, through the years of adult classes taught by leaders like Ralph Surrette, Bruce Douglass, Tony Tambasco, and in the New and Old Testament surveys I offer and in which you continue to enroll, we seek to "learn well."

With the due date for our expansion to four pastors only a few weeks away, we are about to enter a new phase of learning as a congregation and as individuals. Fresh breezes have already been blowing:

- In what our youth and their families have been sharing (some of which I alluded to last week)
- In that which emanates weekly from the people sitting behind me
- In recently added groups on grief and mental health and writing and through congregation-wide book reads and guest authors, political leaders and scientists at Dessert and Dialogue.

As we move forward, we will likely explore and implement some new ways concerning how preschoolers and elementary children learn, what we want youth to know when they graduate, what issues on which we want to focus our hearts and minds as adult. We will want to compare what children and youth who attend private schools, Catholic schools, classic Christian schools, and more secular schools public and private know and bring to us, as well as children and youth in our midst who may be in or out of home schooling. We will doubtless explore ways we can learn together across generational lines and beyond traditional classroom settings. Yet we will always be rooted in that knowledge of *self* and knowledge of *God* that are intertwined, as our faith seeks understanding and grows in the process of such seeking and finding.

Why learn?

To know self.

Why learn?

To know God.

Why learn?

To have faith that encompasses all of human experience, in both our created beauty, our fallen sadness, and persistent hope for the healing of this world and the world to come.

Amen.