

“The Longevity of Learning”

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II Timothy 3:14-17*

The Kindergarten class was graduating to first grade. The students decided that they would each buy their teacher a gift. The first student, whose parents own a florist shop, gave her a present. She held it and said “I guess that it is flowers.” “How did you guess?” asked the little boy. She laughed and thanked him. The second student, whose parents own a candy store, gave her a present. She held it and said, “I guess that is some candy.” “How did you guess?” asked the little boy. She again laughed and thanked him also. The third student, whose parents own a bottle shop, gave her a box, which was leaking. The teacher touched the liquid with her finger and tasted it. “Mmmmm is it wine?” she asked. “No,” said the little girl. So she tasted it again. “Is it champagne?” she asked. “Noooo,” replied the little girl, “It’s a puppy.”

Live and learn.

Well, we are in the season of graduations – from kindergarten to high school, to college, to post-graduate, to doctoral degrees. It’s a wonderful time for students and family. I can still remember my graduation. This August in fact I hope to attend my 40th High School Graduation Reunion, in Butler, PA.

I also remember that when I was a youth and young adult I thought that once I graduated from college, and certainly from Seminary I would have learned pretty much all that I needed to know. How naïve! How unlearned!

Graduations are great! They are markers for our lives. But they are not the end of learning! By no means! There is longevity of learning. Not something to dread, but to embrace!

Just this past week I’ve begun to read a new book on religion and violence. It’s breaking new ground, and challenging, supposed truths on the subject, delineating thoughts I’ve considered over the past few years.

The longevity of learning.

Let’s look specifically at a particular issue of continued learning – not from today’s pages, but from the long past – that continues to speak loudly.

Young Timothy is a third generation Christian. Recall his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice in the opening verses of II Timothy; “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you.”

Timothy is a student of Paul. And Paul has left him in Ephesus to lead the faithful and to protect them from false doctrine.

In II Timothy, Paul is in prison in Rome, and is expecting to be executed soon for his faith. Paul continues to encourage Timothy in his Christian work. Timothy, the student has “graduated” and is active in his “disciple” – Pastoring a Christian Community. Paul has taught him well. He has been an excellent student, learning his lessons and applying them. At one point Paul declares to Timothy, “...continue in what you have learned...how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

How fortunate Timothy was to have been brought up by his family in the ways of God. From a young age he had become familiar with the “sacred writings,” the scriptures – their stories, their poetry, their morals, their values. He had teachers, family and community that instructed him, opened his eyes to the past, and also challenged him to envision the future.

Today, our day is different for many of our children and youth. Many of our American children have no religious training. They seldom if ever enter a church. Their education is largely lacking in terms of religious literacy. And my friends, this lack is not just some worrisome concern for sectarian adherence. No. Today, more than ever we, our children need to be literate, educated, learned, in the discipline of religion! For both personal and civilizational reasons!

One professor recently wrote that for years he had been trying to establish a department of religious studies at this university – but to no avail. But, that was until September 11, 2001! Subsequently his voice and many others began to be heard. Americans need to know about religion – their own and the others! Especially those that are impacting on us as a civilization and a nation, from Islam (and its radical branch) to those religions that recent immigrants practice in our neighborhoods. And, of course we need to learn about our own religion – Christianity!

Not just sound bytes.

Not just anecdotal tidbits.

Not just subtle digs, and not so subtle digs!

But substantive! Historical, cultural, theological learning about our own faith! This is a must! Not only for now but for our children’s future, the world’s future!

Beyond the specificities of our faith, there are universal truths, universal ethical norms, universal anthropological realities that will guide us into our future, if we learn them, know them, and inculcate them!

Again, Paul to Timothy, “...continue in what you have learned...” and it is certainly within reason, upon reading Paul here and elsewhere, that there was an expectation that young Timothy continue to learn, continue to take in knowledge, continue to read, discuss, and debate. Paul believed in the longevity of learning.

No matter what you may have heard, Christianity has never placed a premium on ignorance. Instead, our faith, from its beginning, and throughout it’s history – learning from Judaism (Jesus’ religion), Greek culture and philosophy, to the building of great universities in the late Middle Ages, to the renaissance, the reformation, counter reformation, enlightenment, and modernism, to now – our faith has been a tremendous source and guide to the values that have been foundational to our civilization!

We have much to learn and to teach. Boston University Professor Steven Prothero, recognizes the strong religious (Christian history in America, declares that our nation is today “...deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion...”

- The majority of Americans cannot name even one of the four gospels.

- Only one third know that it was Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.
- Ten percent think Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.
- Many high school seniors think that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife.

And the younger a person is, the less they understand about the Christian faith. No matter when we graduated, not how many times we've graduated – there is much more to learn!

Paul reminds Timothy about learning and the importance of what is learned. “All scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

What a sentence!

As Christians, the scriptures are of prime importance and value. They have guided us and primarily formed our view of the world, of existence. Western Civilization cannot be imagined without the Bible.

Yes. Yes. It's been abused. It's been used for hurtful, destructive purposes, but the truths therein have shined forth and exposed the evils to be excised.

So much of who we are; our stories, our myths, our legends, all that is formative for a civilization is derived from our scriptures and the creative imaginative thinkers who have learned the scriptures, compared them with their lives and the life of their contemporary culture.

There are those who denigrate and dismiss the Bible, as destructive, harmful, ignorant and not worthy of any consideration. Their ignorance is overwhelming! So much of what they themselves hold dear, the “higher values” they espouse – from whence did these come? They without a thought (apparently literally) don't realize those values were discovered, formed and made intelligible through the Bible and its historic interpreters.

There is much to learn!

Professor Renick of Georgia State University declares:

Religion is undoubtedly important to public life. One can hardly enter a debate about gay marriage without hearing an appeal to Adam and Eve or that other famous biblical husband and wife, Sodom and Gomorrah. One cannot fathom the challenges of the situation in Iraq without coming face to face with the complexities of Islam. But since most Americans don't know Sodom, Shiites or Sunnis from Adam, the debate is reduced to empty sloganeering and appeals to emotion, and citizens are increasingly disenfranchised by their ignorance. How can Americans formulate concrete opinions about what should be done in Iraq when they have no understanding of the situation more nuanced than a perception that lots of people are killing each other?

As I have shared on multiple occasions, thank God for the first amendment, for the disestablishment of religion in our nation. But it is naïve to think that religion stops at the exit of the church, synagogue or mosque. Values define us, all of us worldwide! Where do these values come from? Religion. Our faith.

Learning our religion. Learning about other religions.

These are musts in our society today!

James Madison put it this way; “A people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

Knowledge is power! Who is going to wield this power? The ones who learn. But we must go further. The ones who learn perennial values, as depicted in these ancient yet living texts, our Bible. Profitable for training in righteousness!

Graduations are wonderful! Markers of endings, and new beginnings! And the learning should never stop! Our God has given us a vast, limitless universe, with mysteries galore.

It’s our challenge, joy, consternation, delight to keep learning and learning and learning!

But as for you continue in what you have learned!

Amen.