

August 23, 2020
Twenty Third Sunday of on line worship

Rev. Dr. Susan DeWyngaert

Love God with your Mind!

Romans 12: 1-2
Matthew 22:34-40

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. – Romans 12: 2a



A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 22:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When I was ten years old my mom put me in Mrs. Rhodes' fourth grade Sunday school class. I was mad; most of my friends were in the other 4th grade Sunday school class, so I didn't want to be in Mrs. Rhodes' class. Yes, back in the day there were two Sunday school classes for each grade at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta -- a church about the same size as Woods. The difference? Mrs. Rhodes' was the homework class...kind of like being in AP Sunday school.

Mrs Rhodes gave assignments, homework projects, and memory work. Does that sound awful? It really wasn't; it turned out to be one of the best experiences of my elementary years -- because of Mrs. Rhodes. She didn't just know all about the mighty acts of God in the Bible -- she knew God -- personally. She'd been around that long! No, not really. The truth is that Mrs. Rhodes loved God with all her heart, and all her soul and all her mind and that's what she taught us to do too.

All that knowledge she'd accumulated over the years never made her narrow minded or proud. Questions and honest doubts were always welcome in her class.

We'd ask her everything, "Mrs. Rhodes," we'd say, "did Noah actually take two of every species on the whole earth into that ark?" or "How exactly did Jonah survive for three days in the belly of that whale?" That was the kind of stuff we asked her, and she patiently explained what

an ontological story was, and she did it in words we could understand. She'd say: "I don't know precisely how it all happened, but I know it's true."

I will always be grateful for Mrs Rhodes and the other teachers at Trinity. They were willing to hear our honest questions and doubts. I have friends who grew up in different circumstances, in less open-hearted times and places. In their experience, questions were discouraged, higher learning was considered dangerous, and doubt was thought of as faithlessness.

Not so at Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church! Struggles, doubts and questions are welcome here. We practice a thinking faith.

"Faith seeks understanding."

That's a famous phrase from the 11th century theologian Anselm of Canterbury. It means that an active love of God always looks for a deeper knowledge of God. God is, of course, a mystery. God is truth that is higher and wider and far greater than our minds can comprehend -- nevertheless we seek God, and because God is good and God made us for love, to honor and praise God forever we pray.

"Take my heart and form it.
Take my mind transform it.
Take my will conform it,
To Yours, to Yours, O Lord."ⁱ

Our hearts are formed; our minds are transformed and our wills conformed as we immerse ourselves in God's word, and seek to live as faithful people.

Faith seeks understanding. We love God with our minds by spending daily time in prayer and scripture study, by engaging in Bible and topical studies alone and with others. We love God with our minds by entering into creative dialog and action in response to the needs of our community and the world, and by doing our very best work -- all our work, both sacred and secular, to the glory of God.

That's our heritage. John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Way, said that teaching any subject to the glory of God is a religious vocation. Science, scripture, math and theology -- all stand side by side as sacred work when they are undertaken in love for the benefit of the world.

In the Presbyterian Church we embrace science, and we study history and other disciplines. We read scripture paying attention with historical and literary context. We require higher education for our clergy. You probably know that Harvard, Yale and Princeton Universities like so many other universities -- including our 62 Presbyterian related colleges and universities, were founded for that purpose. Those black robes the pastors wear during the colder months of the year -- those are academic robes. They indicate our commitment to learning, a thinking faith.

A.W. Tozer, not a Presbyterian but a renowned minister in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, grew up in poverty. He had no opportunity for formal education; he was self-taught.

Still he influenced a generation with his books and sermons. Tozer said, “What ...we *think* about God is the most important thing about us,”ⁱⁱ because it influences everything. “People and cultures can never rise above their religion. We will always move toward our mental image of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ So, if you think of God as a kind of cosmic grandparent who makes all kinds of rules but doesn’t really care if you obey them, then you are going to behave one way. If you think of God as punishing and vindictive, you’ll behave in another way. If your image of God is as an aloof and uncaring God, you will not expect much in the way of divine guidance; but if you understand God as present in everything, you will have a very different experience -- every moment. In other words, theology matters.

I think Tozer is right, but I’d take it a step farther and say that it’s more than simply what we think about God, it’s also how we love God. Let me explain.

All of us want to love and be loved. We are wired that way. The people who came to Jesus in our gospel reading for today had a particular way of loving and pleasing God. They were thinkers -- well credentialed, educated students, teachers, and lawyers -- people of authority. It’s likely that these religious experts saw Jesus as a threat to their positions. So they tried to trip him up and get him to say something that would get him into trouble or pit one political faction against another.

“Rabbi (he called him Teacher) which commandment of the law is the greatest?”

Without missing even a beat Jesus replied with the word of the sacred Shema, the creed of God’s oneness. It’s an affirmation of faith that religious Jews say twice each day, to this day. But – here’s a surprise -- Jesus did not quote it precisely. Look:

Deuteronomy 6:4

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.’

Matthew 22:37

Jesus said to the lawyer, ‘You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind.’

He changed it! Jesus rewrote the sacred Shema! He changed “might” to “mind.” This is great news to those of us whose abilities are more ... let’s just say... more mental than physical, but to change the Shema! This would be something like Nancy changing the Lord’s Prayer as she leads it today, or like a social studies teacher hanging a red, white and green American flag in the classroom. We cling to our symbols and protect them for good reasons. Our symbols both guide and define us. You can bet that Jesus didn’t just forget the words to the Shema. This wasn’t accidental. How do I know?

Stop and think about it. Jesus was always taking the things we think we know and understand and turning them just a bit to infuse them with meaning and challenge. For example, he said:

“You have heard it said, ‘You shall not kill,’ but I say to you, if you are angry ... if you insult, a brother or sister you are liable for judgement.”

-Matthew 5:21-22

“You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

– Matthew 5:44

Jesus changed everything! He kicked it up about 1000 notches! What he did was he took the gifts of God’s commandments and held them up like a prism, revealing the light that leads us to God.

And what is the greatest commandment? That’s easy.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your strength, and all your mind. The gospels of Mark and Luke include all four: heart, soul, mind and strength.

On this Education Sunday it is worth considering how we can love God with our minds. Doug Oldenburg, my beloved friend and mentor in faith said:

“Only a thinking faith can survive today, and only a thinking faith can help the world survive.”^{iv}

I don’t have to tell you that we are living in crisis times. The three-fold emergency we are facing: the public health, economic and racial/cultural crises we must meet are enormous. Our situation demands our best thinking – scientific, historical, and theological imagination. Today only a thinking faith will do.

The problem is many of us are not equipped to do that. So many are unfamiliar with the Bible’s teaching, so when told “the Bible says this, or the Bible says that...” they believe it, having never read or studied it for themselves, they are easily led astray.

I’m asking you today, on Education Sunday and throughout this urgent season --commit yourself to loving God with your mind. Engage in a thinking faith. Read...study...join a Bible study or a small group if you are not already in one. (Not just one of those exercises where you fill in little blanks, but an actual dig-in-and-get-to-know God’s word study.) Set up a schedule of daily reading and prayer, even if it’s just a few minutes a day. If you need resources we have them for you!

I’m proud that on Wednesday night at our Session meeting on Zoom, Woods’ elders approved three new adult studies to begin in September. These are in addition to the regular classes, groups and studies we already offer.

Because faith seeks understanding, we are striving to fulfill God’s greatest commandment -- to love God -- with our minds.

Let me give you a great example of what this looks like. When I returned from sabbatical this week, Woods youth director, Elizabeth Baril told me that members of the rising 8th grade confirmation class sought her out during the summer and said, “Will you please teach us the Bible?” I’m serious – that’s what they said!

So Elizabeth and the 8th graders have been meeting outdoors, masked and socially distanced in the Amphitheater every Saturday. They are discovering the Bible together – going from Genesis to Revelation, looking at the great themes of scripture and at specific verses.

My teacher, Mrs Rhodes would be proud of you all. You are loving God with you minds! Ask Elizabeth the hard questions. Make her work for it! It’s all about getting to know God. Like anyone else, the only way to grow in your love for God is to spend time with God. The best way to know God is to listen to Jesus. All truth is his truth, and he is perfect love.

Continue to learn and grow whatever your age, wisdom and experience. I heard a story which I think it’s true, about one of Mahatma Gandhi’s followers in India. She came to him and said:

“I can no longer trust you. Last week I heard you say something and today you are saying something different. How can you justify that contradiction?”

Gandhi replied, quite plainly:

“It’s simple, my daughter. I have learned something since last week.”

Today, and each new day, may we be the ones who learn.

ⁱ Scott Underwood, “Take My Life (Holiness)”

ⁱⁱ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, HarperCollins, 1961, 2. Emphasis mine.

ⁱⁱⁱ i.b.i.d

^{iv} Douglas Oldenburg, *Day1* radio broadcast, first aired, January 2, 2000. Day1.org