

If You Love Me, Learn

May 17, 2020

I have two simple points for us today. The first is that Jesus said, according to the Gospel of John: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And I say to you, today: “If you love me, learn.” And my second point develops this first: all learning comes from God. God is the ultimate teacher.

How did you learn to love learning? Now, love may not be the first verb that comes to mind when you think of your schooling. If you had a harsh teacher or teachers, that may have created some negative associations with learning for you. My 6th grade teacher, Mr. Hartkopf—literally, “hard head,” made us do straight leg raises for what felt like hours at a time—and you couldn’t lift your feet more than six inches off the ground. It was grueling. I suppose it gave us all good abs that I now can only look back upon, fondly....

For many, schooling can be painful. But schooling is not the same as learning. Ideally, learning is at the *heart* of schooling, and for most educators that’s why they get into the field: they love learning, and they want to communicate that love to others.

I know that’s why I became a professor. As many of you know, I grew up in the Missouri Synod Lutheran tradition. There were many wonderful things about that upbringing; it gave me a good foundation in memorized Bible verses. But it didn’t encourage me to think critically. That came in college—and I have to admit it was a liberation. I will forever be grateful to the professors who opened my mind to scientific rationality, critical study of the Bible, and what I call critical wonder—the capacity to think and yet to wonder at beauty and mystery at the same time. They loved to learn, and they taught me to love learning. I wanted to convey that same love of learning to others—so I followed in their footsteps.

If you love me, learn. So let me ask it again—how did you learn to love learning?

I’ll give you another example from my life. Some of you know that I love to play the saxophone. It’s a source of great joy to me to be able to read music, and to improvise, along with other musicians, or even just to play along in our living room with the backing tracks from the Hal Leonard RealBooks blaring on our stereo (check it out—those tracks are a great way to get better at improvising!). So, I’ll tell you the story of how I learned to play the sax.

Growing up in Appleton, we could start to play an instrument in band in the 6th grade. We’d have a director come into our school one day a week, as I recall. I don’t remember his name. And I played the clarinet. I played that instrument because my Aunt Joanie had played the clarinet, and was willing to pass it down to me, saving my parents the expense of renting a horn. I was terrible.

When I moved to junior high, in 7th grade, I took my clarinet with me to band class there, which as I recall met three days a week. I could play all of one song well: “Little Brown Jug.” And here’s where my learning took off. My 7th grade band director, a fine trumpet player by the name of Rand Skelton, took me aside one day and said, “Jon, you’re not very good on the clarinet, and you don’t seem to be enjoying it. Why don’t you try the saxophone?” Now, Rand loved jazz. And we had a jazz band where he needed saxophone players. I started on the baritone sax—provided by the school. It was a huge instrument for a slightly built (skinny) 7th grader. But I learned to LOVE playing jazz. I got better.

That summer, I started private lessons with Rand—who lived in an apartment on the south side of Appleton; our home was on the north side. The two locations were about two miles apart. And on the morning of my lesson one of my parents would drop me off at Rand’s house on their way to work. After my hour-long lesson, I’d have to walk home—dragging that huge hunk of brass in its heavy hardboard case. I schlepped it, hoisted it, threw it over my shoulder, put it on my back, pushed it in front of me, dragged it behind me. I crossed College Avenue, Wisconsin Avenue, Richmond Street—sweating in the July sun. And I probably DO exaggerate the labor, just a tad—but it was a load to haul.

And I learned to *love* playing jazz, as I learned to play jazz—practicing etudes and scales, learning to follow melodies as written, listening to changes, learning and practicing blues scales. By the Fall of 8th grade, I was playing the alto sax—and for the next nine years of my life I sat 1st chair in big bands through junior high, high school, and college, and played in all kinds of rock ‘n’ roll, gospel, and blues bands that gave me not only incredible musical experiences, but also some of the deepest friends of my life. I learned, through love, to love learning—a virtual circle, or spiral, of love leading to learning leading to love, and on and on in a never-ending pattern.

Now, I’m willing to wager that the story of learning would be similar for you, too: you learned to love, and then you learned something else, some content, some skill, that has stayed with you your entire life: “If you love me, learn.”

But that sounds kind of prescriptive—kind of scary. If you love me, LEARN! It’s an imperative; a command. So here’s my second point: all learning comes from God. God is the ultimate teacher. God’s grace comes to us any time we learn.

The Jewish tradition is quite clear about this, and Jesus of course was a Jew. There’s a reason so many amazing innovations in the sciences (think Einstein) or arts (think Seinfeld) came from Jews: the tradition values learning, and Jews are inclined to see God at work in and through learning. After all, the leader of a Jewish community isn’t called a pastor—which means “shepherd.” The leader of a Jewish community is called a rabbi—which means teacher. And that was probably the first, and most consistently understood, title for Jesus, too: our rabbi; our teacher.

But it's not just the Jewish religious tradition that has stressed the love of learning. In early Christianity, during the Roman Empire, there was a group of theologians who wrote what they called 'Apologies' for the Christian faith. As you may know, early Christians were occasionally persecuted in the Roman Empire, as members of an illicit religion. They weren't Jews, they weren't pagans—and if the Emperor needed a scapegoat, the Christians (who were growing rapidly) often served that purpose.

In response, some theologians (who were also philosophers) wrote books that they called "Apologies." Now, the technical meaning of the word *apologia*, in Greek, is not what we understand when we hear the word apology, you know, "I'm sorry." The technical meaning of the word *apologia* is defense. And so that's what these theologians wrote—learned defenses of the Christian faith that they penned, in many cases, in long letters that they sent to the Emperor. Because they wrote apologies, these theologians became known, collectively—there were dozens of them, as the Apologists.

One of the most famous of the Apologists for Christianity lived in Rome in the 2nd century CE. His name was Justin (and Lisa and I actually named our first son after him). Anyway, Justin's First Apology was sent to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (who was a particularly learned Emperor—Aurelius was a devotee of the Stoic philosophy). And Justin's argument—hundreds of pages long, boiled down to this idea: "Anyone who is reasonable is a Christian. Being a Christian is reasonable—a Christian will be a reasonable citizen. Anyone who lives by reason is a Christian."

The word that Justin used for "reason" was the Greek word *logos*. It was a word the Stoics loved. It's the word from which we get our word logic. And it's also the word which the author of the Gospel of John used to describe Jesus: In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word (*logos*) was God. Jesus is *logos*; Jesus is reason. To follow Jesus is to be reasonable, to follow reasoning. If you love me, learn. God is our ultimate teacher.

Of course, not all Christians have taken this path of following learning. We need reminders. In the middle ages, especially as people were dealing with plague, a tendency emerged to develop what we might call magical thinking, or superstitions. Lots of ideas about the devil and hell began coalescing in response to plague times. The devil loves fear, after all. Conversely, plague also gave birth to lots of ideas about heaven as an escape from plague, which makes sense if you're living in fear of it. These ideas could get pretty wild: angels and demons and the devil were everywhere for lots of medieval Christians, as they navigated their way through plagues whose scientific causes they did not understand.

But the heart of medieval Christianity was found not in cities, interestingly, which was where early Christianity flourished (think Corinth, Ephesus, Rome). The heart of medieval Christianity was in monasteries—largely separated out from places of plague. And in monasteries, women and men preserved the belief, as historian Jean LeClerc put it, that "the love of learning is the desire for God." Monasteries then preserved learning

across Europe, preserved civilization, really, and eventually this emphasis on learning gave birth to universities, like the one in Paris, or Oxford, or Berlin. When we learn, these medieval Christian theologians asserted, we find a loving God there. To learn IS to love God, they might say.

And this conjunction between God and learning is at the heart of every modern theology, including many in Islam. For modern theologians, there is no conflict between science and religion. Indeed, there can't be, for how can truth conflict with itself? For instance, the Muslim theologian Fethullah Gülen, whose biography I wrote last year, put it this way—and I paraphrase: Science and religion are two different aspects of God's revelation to us. Science is God's book in nature. The Qur'an (and he would also add the Hebrew Bible and the Writings about Christ) is God's book in words. The two don't conflict, and if they do—the problem is in our interpretation. When science and religion appear to conflict, it's up to us to learn more in order to understand. Science without religion can be brute, destructive materialism. Religion without science can be superstition and extremism. Science and religion work together; we need them both. If you love me, learn. God is our ultimate teacher.

Over the past two months of safer-at-home, all of us have had to learn many new patterns of behavior, and we've also had to learn some new ways of understanding the world. That learning can be unsettling. Whenever we learn, we leave some comfortable pre-understanding behind.

But facing this plague can be an extraordinary opportunity for us to learn some new things that will have a big impact on our world. I have three brief applications for us as I come to a close.

The first application of our new learning is: follow the science. In a time of plague, fear is our worst enemy—but ignorance is a close second. To ignore what experts are telling us about how to protect each other isn't an act of faith—it's folly, magical-thinking, superstition. That isn't the kind of faith we practice here at Union. Our faith is informed by the faith of Jesus, the Logos; the faith of the Apologists; the faith of those medieval monks for whom the love of learning is the desire for God. If you love me, learn the science.

The second application of our new learning is: celebrate solidarity. In a time of plague, isolation is painful. Last Sunday, we took a trip after church to Appleton to see our son, daughter-in-law, grandsons, and then to visit my parents, where I gave my mom some plants I'd grown for her. And I must say—it was painful. We're a close family, so we hug a lot. Especially those grandsons. But I can't hug them right now. I couldn't hug my mom, either. I've cried a good bit since this pandemic, but last Sunday was particularly tough. Still, we celebrated what solidarity we could have—six feet apart.

Similarly, many graduates have experienced the loss of a crucial rite of passage due to COVID-19. We grieve for these losses, and we will find ways to affirm and to celebrate graduates moving forward. Indeed, as tough as these losses are, they can create new

kinds of beauty. We may not get to march to Pomp and Circumstance, but maybe our sense of loss will lead us to become more compassionate, more connected, not just to a graduating class, but to all people who struggle, who are lonely, who are left behind. If you love me, learn and celebrate solidarity.

The third application of our new learning in this age of plague is: live sustainably. It's impossible for us to say that we love God when we are harming our neighbor, and no neighbor is closer to us than the Earth. So let's learn to live more sustainably—not only because we HAVE to during this pandemic, but because we want to, because we know that living more sustainably is the right thing to do, for the rest of our lives. If you love me, learn sustainability.

God wants us ALL to live. After all, God is love. So when we learn to love learning, when we love the gritty details of nature we learn in science; when we love the solidarity we can experience in so many ways with other people (music, play, art); when we love the Earth and learn to sustain it for future generations through our children and grandchildren—whenever we love, God is there. So, let's change that imperative to a declarative. If you love me, learn, then becomes: When you love me, you will learn. Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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