

Never Too Old for a Book Bag

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Matthew 4:23-5:2 Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues.... Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them. (v. 23a, 1-2).
- Proverbs 4:1-13 ²⁹ If you stay calm, you are wise, but if you have a hot temper, you only show how stupid you are.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Being a life-long learner enables us to grow in our ability to live and share our faith.

On Tuesday I got together with five former classmates for a “Boy’s Day Out” in Pittsburgh. About 15 years ago the six of us had done our Doctor of Ministry studies together. Even though they were from Toronto, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Columbus, and Youngstown, the classes were all here in Cleveland. Since graduation we’ve had two informal reunions – both in Cleveland.

Finally, two of the fellows who are pastors in Pittsburgh made good on their word to host a get-together there. So on Tuesday we toured the Andy Warhol Museum, walked to the Point where the Ohio River begins, had dinner in a restaurant named for a former Pittsburgh Steeler, went to a Pirates game (and being polite, I rooted for the home team), and laughed a lot.

As we were getting caught up on each others’ families and churches, my friend Rex from the Niagara region of New York told us something that amazed us. We knew that his wife had earned her Ph.D. recently. But Rex added that his mother-in-law was finishing the last chapter of her dissertation for a Ph.D. His mother-in-law is 89 years old.

Getting your Ph.D. when you’re age 90! That is an extreme example of what we often call a “lifelong learner.” But life-long learning certainly isn’t unusual.

The Bible offers precedent for life-long learning. This morning’s abbreviated reading from the Gospel of Matthew suggests that Jesus *expected* people to be life-long learners. Matthew reported that wherever Jesus went, he taught. As we heard, sometimes Jesus was in a synagogue where people expected the rabbi – the “teacher” – to impart lessons about life based on the scriptures. Most of the time, though, Jesus wasn’t in a synagogue; Jesus was just out in public.

One of the best-known examples of his public teaching begins in Matthew Chapter 5. Matthew said that on at least one occasion Jesus took a look at the crowds that had gathered near the Sea of Galilee and realized he needed to do something. He climbed a hill so everybody could see and hear him. He sat down. That was significant. In ancient times, that’s what teachers did: Homer, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Jesus.... When a teacher sat down, that was an unspoken signal that he was about to impart wisdom. He was ready to teach. Matthew wrote, “Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them.”¹

What Jesus taught them in that one sitting fills three chapters of Matthew’s gospel! He taught the crowd about their role as examples for others. Jesus addressed topics like:

¹ Matthew 5:1-2 Good News translation

- managing your anger and managing others' anger;
- the foolishness of seeking revenge;
- making promises;
- being generous;
- the need to have an active prayer life;
- being kind.

Those all sound like lessons that everyone from children to adults would benefit from hearing. But Jesus also taught about the role of holy writings in guiding one's thoughts, speech and actions. In his teaching Jesus took on touchy, real-life issues like adultery and divorce — lessons that were not aimed at children and youth. Jesus was intentionally addressing grown-ups, too, because he knew that just like school-aged children, adults have things they need to learn. Simply because we have the years of life experience, we don't know all we need to know; we don't have all the answers.

The Book of Proverbs is a compilation of inspirational and cautionary sayings. Some of the saying are attributed to King Solomon, the Israelite whose thoughtful, sound judgment inspired the expression "the wisdom of Solomon." The Book of Proverbs seems to be particularly enamored with proverbs about wisdom and learning. This morning we heard from Proverbs, "Getting wisdom is the most important thing you can do. Whatever else you get, get insight. Love wisdom, and she will make you great. Embrace her, and she will bring you honor. She will be your crowning glory."² Those are not promises available only to children; the benefits of education and learning, knowledge and wisdom are available to all of us for all our lives.

My maternal grandfather finished his formal education with 8th grade — that was the last grade at Pleasant Hill School at the top of the ridge behind the farm. To continue his education he would have had to travel to a high school elsewhere in the county, and his father needed his help on the farm. So after 8th grade my grandfather Daniel was never back in school... but he was always a student. He read the newspaper and his Bible every day. He listened as Walter Cronkite reported the evening news. He read books and devotional pamphlets constantly. He was always learning something new. Daniel was a life-long learner.

There have been people in this church, and probably people you know from elsewhere, who were extreme examples of life-long learning because each came to a point in their lives where they felt called to change what they were doing and go back to school to finish an education or obtain an additional degree or certification.

- Some years back we had a practicing attorney in this church — a deacon — decide that in addition to four years at Princeton and three more at Emory Law she needed to enroll in a Master of Divinity program at a seminary. Now Elizabeth's pastoring a church in Maryland.
- At about that same time we had another member of this church decide that he needed to leave a secure position as a successful corporate executive earning a six-figure salary. Reed felt the need to go back to school, earn a Master's and Doctorate so he could teach accounting to college students.
- Right now deacon Kathy Hartzell is beginning the process of pursuing seminary studies that may lead her becoming an ordained minister so she can serve as a chaplain.

² Proverbs 4:7-9 Good News translation

Life-long learning usually isn't so dramatically disruptive in a person's life. Nor does life-long learning have to focus on one's career path. You may not realize how many opportunities there are right here in your church to support you in your desire to be a life-long learner, because you're never too old – or never too young – to learn something new. It starts, of course, in our thoughtful, imaginative, compassionately-taught Sunday school.

Then for adults, the most obvious opportunity is in our Adult Education class that occurs on Sundays from 9-10 a.m. starting in two weeks. The topics change every three or four weeks. No participant feels like an expert; everyone's in the same boat, expanding their awareness and knowledge on topics like these coming this fall:

- The role of religion at various points in the history of the United States;
- How religious stories, themes and beliefs have been expressed through art and music through the ages;
- How the beloved stories of Dr. Seuss explore Christian values of ecological and social and economic justice;
- A study of who, exactly, was this "John Calvin" who developed the form of church governance that characterizes the Presbyterian Church even today?

In addition to the Adult Education class, our annual Lenten classes are designed to appeal to a wide range of religious experience and theological background. And we have occasional opportunities like the one last week when nearly a dozen of us had dinner and conversation with a Presbyterian missionary from South Africa, learning about the success and struggles of the Christian church in different parts of the African continent.

The Presbyterian Women organization has periodic events and retreats intended to broaden knowledge and awareness about global issues. Our local PW group here includes two circles that engage in monthly study as well as fellowship and occasional service projects.

Men have outlets for life-long learning, too. On Friday mornings a group of men meet at a local coffee shop to engage in study and discussion of various books and ending with a time of prayer. Our Senior Men's group meets at the church semi-monthly for study and prayer (and breakfast!).

I know from personal experience that the way to grow in knowledge about a topic is to teach it. Every time we introduce our newest confirmation group to you, one of the things we hear over and over from the adult mentors is how much they learned and grew through the process of mentoring a young person. I wonder if you ever considered that serving as a confirmation mentor, or Sunday school teacher, or youth fellowship advisor is an opportunity to engage in life-long learning. Trust me – if you get to know our youth, you will learn new things!

Our congregation's simple, six-word mission statement is "Praising God. Teaching Faith. Serving Others." As a church we've been putting a lot of energy into exploring the mission aspect of serving others and the worship aspect of praising God. That middle part about teaching faith presumes that we are learning about our faith. We need to be life-long learners in order to understand and embrace our faith. When we begin to understand and embrace our faith, we are prepared to teach it – to pass it along to friends, relatives, neighbors, as well as to rising generations. As we heard from Proverbs Chapter 4:

⁶Do not abandon wisdom [*i.e., don't stop learning*], and she will protect you; love her, and she will keep you safe. ⁷Getting wisdom is the most important thing you can do. Whatever else you get, get insight.³

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³ Proverbs 4:6-7 Good News translation