

“Growing in Faith—*Faith Community as a Place of Learning*”

Luke 4:14-21 – January 24, 2010

INTRO: Not quite a month ago, the story we heard was about Jesus hanging around the synagogue in Jerusalem, while his parents headed home after Passover and left without him. Today, we hear another story of Jesus in the synagogue, although we believe this is now an adult Jesus teaching in the synagogues in the Galilee area and also in the synagogue in Nazareth, his home town. Today’s reading is made up of two parts, the second part we will look at next week.

This week, a group of adult mentors from our church began their work with our confirmation students. They will meet together for a number of weeks, as they share together about what it means to be a part of a faith community and what church membership means. The adults and youth shared some things about themselves with the whole group, and one of the things I heard was their report on where they were educated. Many in the group have spent their whole life in the Tosa area, so repeated answers about what schools they attended were: Wauwatosa High School, Tosa East, Tosa West, Hawthorn, Longfellow, Whitman. And what was interesting to me was to hear that across the generations, they have attended some of the same schools.

We are fortunate in the Milwaukee area, to have lots of schools from which to choose, for education beyond our high school years: UW, Marquette, Mount Mary, Alverno, Concordia, Cardinal Stritch, MATC. We have a number of options if people want to continue learning.

Sometimes we may not think further than a degree program, but someone the other night said they were continuing their education through Elderhostel. Which is a good reminder that learning should just never stop.

When we think of the settings for our education, I wonder if we also include in that list, the church? This may be the community where we first heard the stories of the faith, and then were mentored and tutored in the faith by others who knew those stories well and taught us. This may be the place where we once took a Bible study class, that convinced us we could actually understand some things in the Bible and could find something interesting there.

Jesus, when answering where he was educated, might well have said the synagogue. “All that Jesus says and does is grounded in the tradition of Judaism. By his faithfulness, Jesus affirms the Sabbath, the Scriptures, and the synagogue. Jesus not only attends synagogue services regularly but he participates, as all male adults were permitted to do, by reading Scripture and commenting on it. The synagogue was not only an assembly for worship, but also a school, a community center, and a place for administering justice. Among relatives and friends, in the synagogue Jesus is at home.” (Fred Craddock)

So, it’s probably not surprising that when Jesus went back to Nazareth, his hometown, he headed to the synagogue—his synagogue, probably the one where he had learned from his elders. And we hear that “Jesus stood to read, as was the custom, then sat down while he taught. In their worship, various people might have been asked to read and pray.” (R. Alan Culpepper)

Perhaps someone else read the Torah readings, from the first five books of the Bible, and Jesus then read from the book of Isaiah—a text that had familiarity for him—my goodness he had probably heard these words many times in his lifetime. He may have known them by heart. And he began to talk about these words, to interpret them, for this Isaiah text was literally his mission statement—it defined for him, the character of his ministry.

So, we have in front of us Jesus’ mission statement, as we reflect on the middle phrase of our own church mission statement—“Growing in Faith.”

We hear the passage from Isaiah, which we can read in our Bibles, and right now in downtown Milwaukee, we can actually see it with our own eyes. A full-size reproduction of the 24-foot long Great Isaiah Scroll is on display at the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit. It is one of the earliest and most complete scrolls found, and the original scroll is housed at the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem. This scroll contains the entire book of Isaiah that we read today—all 66 chapters! And John Trever who was born in Milwaukee in 1915, was instrumental in helping educate the rest of the world that this really was a scroll of Isaiah. “This Milwaukee native is the Dead Sea Scrolls’ (version of Indiana Jones.” (*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, 1/17/10)

He had done his doctoral dissertation on Isaiah, and had been teaching Old Testament at a college here in the states. John “determined that to be an effective teacher in his field, he must

have a year of study in the lands of the Bible. He was on a year's fellowship at the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem." (*The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Personal Account*)

Fortunately, he had done his homework, and his findings helped the rest of the world learn what had been found in the caves at Qumran in 1947.

We obviously won't have this amazing exhibit around for more than a few months, but we will still have our Bibles, with stories to dig into, understandings to be found, and each other's company along the way. The church needs to do all it can, to help raise our curiosity about this book of our faith.

We need to encourage and support learning among our children when they are first able to hear the stories. These need to become stories that are familiar to them.

Every now and then, I read some children's letters to God. Here are a couple that recently caught my eye: Dear GOD, Of all the people who work for You I like Noah and David the best. --Rob Dear GOD, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother. -- Larry

We don't know the ages of Rob and Larry, but I'm impressed that these children knew about Noah and David, Cain and Abel. I hope we're doing as well with our children.

"We teach our children the things of God one hour a week; seldom do we require homework or accountability for what is learned. If we taught mathematics or reading in the same way that we teach religion, parents would rise in a furor, demanding change. But seldom do parents protest that education in Christianity is not rigorous enough; knowing little themselves, they require little of their children." (Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki)

We need to let our youth know there's something here that could make a difference in their lives, and if the Bible seems impossibly boring to them, we may need to work harder at placing those stories into contemporary settings. Our mentors and confirmands are going to be reading through the Gospel of Luke, and then discussing what they've read. I'm sure there will be some gnashing of teeth from some, but I also believe that these caring, friendly adults, will be able to help these young persons find something there they can relate to. They may find that the stories of Jesus can become their stories.

And we need to find new avenues for adults to learn, who can spend some time thinking about their meaning for us today. "Followers of Jesus mature in faith by learning together in community. God may be best able to form disciples when people do this together and not by ourselves. This kind of learning helps people explore possibilities that God may have for them that they never would have considered on their own." (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*)

Some of the most memorable and moving learning experiences I've had in the church, have been in DISCIPLE Bible Study—a disciplined, 34 week study where a group of people makes a commitment to weekly gatherings, and reading a fair share of the Bible. I know many of you may have been in such a group. That format may not work for all, but I do know there is just nothing better than a small group of people studying, sharing, and praying together—for 4 weeks, or for 34 weeks.

"As we consciously appropriate the stories of faith with others, we discover that our questions, doubts, temptations, and missteps are not unusual but are part of the journey. A seminary professor once said, 'Everybody *wants to want to* study the Bible.'" (*5 Practices*)

At some level, we know that the Bible is the central book of our faith, and we have the best intentions when it comes to learning more about that book, but our follow through isn't always the best. "How many people each year resolve to read the Bible, start with Genesis in January, and give up all hope of seeing their way through to the end by the time they reach Leviticus in February?" (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*)

Bishop Schnase says: "Bible study changes churches. When church leaders take their own spiritual growth seriously and immerse themselves in the study of Scripture, in prayer, and in fellowship, they understand the purpose of the church and the point of ministry differently. And these study groups don't survive long without the support, leadership, and help of the laity." (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*)

In other words, it's great to think that our staff can help lead various studies, but laity have many more gifts for teaching than we have tapped into.

Some adults may need to every now and then be reminded that if we were confirmed in the seventh or eighth grade, and if we've not done some serious kind of study of the faith and of the

Bible since then, we may still have that 8th grader's understanding of the faith. We attend continuing ed seminars for our jobs, we develop new hobbies and learn all about them, we dig for the details of our family tree. Then, why would we do any less, when it comes to learning more about our faith?

When Michelangelo was 80, he was met by a friend in front of St. Peter's in Rome. The friend asked him, "Where are you going?" Michelangelo replied: "I am going to learn."

Mitch Albom, the author of *Have a Little Faith*, grew up in the life of the synagogue, yet like many young adults, he wandered away and only showed up in his home synagogue for the high holy days. Yet, he knew he would be welcome there, it was a place where he felt like he belonged. It was his home. He still knew many of the people there, and the rabbi who had been his rabbi as he was growing up, he was still there—no longer serving in the same way, now a part of the congregation. Mitch had learned much from that rabbi, and from the people in that synagogue, that made its way into his heart and soul. And even though his attendance may not have been as faithful as it once was, his community of faith had made a difference in his life.

His aging rabbi once told him that the faith is important to connect generations together. Rabbi Lewis said: "It is a rope for us all to grab, up and down the mountain. I may not be remembered in so many years. But what I believe and have taught—about God, about our tradition—*that* can go on. It comes from my parents and their parents before them. And if it stretches to my grandchildren and to their grandchildren, then we are all connected." (*Have a Little Faith*)

It's our responsibility together, as a church, to make sure that rope doesn't unravel among any generation. And, when we are at our best, when we are growing the faith among us, a young man or young woman, maybe the age of Jesus or of Mitch when they walked into their synagogues, will someday walk back into our sanctuary and remember that they learned something here, and they still have a place within the family of faith.

--Sue Burwell