

“Life-Long Learners”
Exodus 24:12-18; Acts 18:24-28;
John 7:14-17

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Astonished. It says they were astonished as they listened to Jesus. It made me think about the first time they were amazed with Jesus as they were discussing things. When he was 12 years old he went to the temple and had that conversation, and they were amazed at the questions he could ask, at the knowledge he had. Now he's an adult, and again they are astonished at Jesus. He had never been taught, they said. He was just a laborer, after all. How could he have such knowledge?

There is that question that it brings up. Where does knowledge come from? What kind of knowledge does he have? He responds to that. He says, “My knowledge is from the One who sent me. My teaching is his who sent me.” He's saying he is receiving this word from God, which brings up something for me—that question about how we know what we know.

I tend to think I know what I know because somebody has observed something and through their imagination has figured out how things fit together and then tested that, and then we have knowledge. But what if that's not the only kind of knowledge? There is this idea that Jesus is receiving his knowledge not by going out and doing a lot of testing or even a lot of logic. He hasn't come up with it all on his own. He is receiving it from God.

Receiving knowledge directly from God is often called a revelation. The idea of revelation is somewhat of a struggle because it feels to me like there is this belief that there is no longer revelation. We know all there is to be known, or we can simply learn it, or we can figure it out, and we don't need anything coming from beyond. We are capable. We can be taught everything that humans know. Isn't that what the leaders were telling Jesus? How did you learn this? You weren't taught.

I believe in teaching and I believe in education, but I wonder if we have lost track of the possibility of God speaking into our lives. How does God's light shine into our lives? Does God's light sometimes shine in and reveal things we wouldn't have known had it not been for God at work?

We certainly can think about how at some level we have believed that scripture is somehow a revelation to us—the unique and authoritative word of God is the way our denomination has talked about it. But how is that possible? Somehow God has been at work in lives of human beings in a way that has brought us this scripture, this text. This text is a way that God speaks into our lives. It is in some way revelation. It is a text for us. But is it a textbook, or do we simply make it into a text book full of ideas? Is it a great piece of literature, or is it a good book of ethics? Is it simply a book we learn from like every other textbook? How do we decide what book is the text we need to look at?

How is God continually speaking in to our lives through scripture and through prayer and through worship and through song and through service—all the ways God speaks into our lives? Why do I struggle with revelation, the idea that God might be continuing to do that? I think it's pretty straightforward to me why I continue to struggle with that. I struggle with it because I don't know how to make sure it's God. Because I have lots of thoughts, lots of my own desires, lots of things that I've been taught, the way I grew up, and sometimes I have a hard time distinguishing whether that's my mother's voice or God's voice. It is about distinguishing.

I was walking through the Farmer's Market yesterday, and I saw a sign that said, "Life is too short for obedience." Then I found this quote from Thoreau that said disobedience is the way to go; obedience messes everything up. That's not quite how he said it, but that's the gist of it. I think this is out of context, because it's not really about obedience or disobedience, it's about what we're obedient or disobedient to. It's almost impossible to be obedient to Thoreau because if we're being obedient to Thoreau, we are all of a sudden in this logical conundrum. We're no longer disobedient, but he's telling us to be disobedient. Only people who like logic will like that one.

It's not about obedience or disobedience. It's about what we are obedient to. How do we decide which is which. It's that same old question. Is it God speaking into my life? Or is it the state? Is it my education? Is it my family? Is it my desires? What is speaking and how do I determine that?

I was interested in what Jesus had to say about that. It seems that what Jesus had to say was this: Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know if the teaching is from God. How do I determine whether it's from God? I have to start by determining what's behind my trying to figure that out. Is it because I really want to know what God might be speaking into my life? Or is it because I really want to do it this way and I want the teaching to agree with it? What I want God to be saying is that this person should be smited because they are bad, not God telling me to love them even though they are my enemy.

But how do I do that? How do I resolve to make God's will important? How do I know what God wants for us? That's what Jesus seems to be saying. That's how we begin to notice what God is doing—God at work in our lives. It's about what we make central. So I have to check what's central in my life. Is it something I want? Is it something somebody else wants? Is it the way my social group tells me I should want things? Is it my culture that suggests that this is the right thing to do? Or am I listening to what God wants, what God teaches?

We get to that scripture of Apollos. He had learned about Jesus. He was convinced by his understanding of scripture and the story of Jesus about who Jesus was and he was passionately teaching about that. And yet when he encountered Priscilla and Aquila it says they taught him more accurately. Now, Apollos could have said, "I'm not going to learn from that ministry pair. A woman shouldn't be teaching *me*." He could have said, "This doesn't work. I already know the way of Jesus. Who are you to tell *me*?" I can only assume that because he really wanted to do the will of God, because

he wanted what God wanted, because he cared about how God came through in what he said that he listened. Maybe there was even a stirring of the Spirit at work, but he heard them. He heard them. Do I have the willingness to be able to hear, to know that it's not my idea but to be able to reach out and accept an idea that comes to me, and to test it by whether it fits with the will of God? Whether it's hearing it through scripture, or through God's people, or in prayer or in worship, how do I accept that which comes to me?

Throughout scripture, the people of God are invited to hear again, to receive that new idea. When the people went down to Egypt and later were brought out and were moving into a new place, they needed a new foundation so Moses went up and got it from God—the Ten Commandments—the beginning of a community founded on a way of living together, a teaching from God that continues to be foundational. That teaching didn't stop with Moses. It went through the prophets. God kept coming to his people to instruct, to guide. God continues to come through Jesus, and Jesus says he will send the Spirit who will continue to teach. There's that continued opportunity to learn.

So if we have the continued opportunity, I know taking advantage of that opportunity involves being resolved to do God's will. For me there's actually a step that needs to be taken to get there, to try to really resolve to do God's will. And what I think about is that passage from the psalm that said He leads the humble in what is right. He teaches the humble in his way.

When I stand under the night sky and look at the Milky Way, when I look at the wonder of this world and the complexity around me, I can't help but be humble. It's a realization that I need, that the universe is more complex than I can ever understand, than I can ever figure out. It's a reminder that in coming to God, I am not coming to ask God to do what I want, but to ask God what God wants, and to recognize that God will continually work with us, shining the light into our lives.

It's interesting Peter walked with Jesus all the way through his life, heard all that Jesus was teaching, and then even after Jesus had returned there is a continual teaching as they sit together and Jesus asks, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." There is a sense in that passage that Peter is still having struggles with learning. But you see, God continues to work and guide and come into our lives and reveal to us the opportunities we have, the way of God. We can say it in lots of different ways. We can say it's an opportunity to be a life-long learner, learning from God through resolving to do God's will and to pay attention to what God wants. Or we can say that it's about following Jesus. It's not that we followed Jesus; it's that we are following Jesus. It's a continual interaction and movement.

We are invited to be life-long learners by paying attention to what God wants and thus being able to distinguish what is God's will, to see how God is shining the light into our lives, to notice how the Spirit stirs us, God reveals to us, God leads us. I am ever left with questions. Am I humble enough? Have I resolve? Am I listening? Am I going to let that light shine into my life? Are we? God is present. The light is shining. Amen.