

SLD05.21.06 Sixth Easter Teacher Appreciation
EPC
Acts 10:44-48, John 15:9-17, 26-27
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“The Spirit of Truth”

Our text this morning opens with the line, “While Peter was still speaking....” Well, the people to whom Peter is speaking is a man named Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea, and Cornelius’ family and close friends. You see, an angel had recently appeared to Cornelius and told him to send for Peter, who was in Joppa at the time. And Peter came. But why would Peter, a Jew, travel clear from Joppa to Caesarea to see Cornelius, a gentile?

Well, I’ll tell you why. Peter had recently had a vision, accompanied by an epiphany, that taught him something he didn’t know. He’d been up on a roof, you see, praying, when he got hungry and fell into a trance, a trance in which he saw all these different animals lowered down to him on a sheet. And Peter heard God say to him, “Get up Peter; kill and eat.” And Peter, being holier than God and all, replies, “by no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” To which God replied, three times, “Get over yourself, Peter. What I’ve made clean, you must not call profane.”

So the epiphany Peter has that day is that a) he doesn’t know everything, b) the law doesn’t know everything, and c) the truth belongs to God, alone. So when Cornelius’ men show up in Joppa and ask Peter to go see him, even though Peter’s first reaction is “eeeew, a gentile,” he remembers his epiphany and goes anyway.

When Peter arrives in Caesarea, Cornelius tells him about his vision from God, the one in which God told him to send for Peter. And Peter says, “whoa.” Not out loud, but in his heart, because now he’s feeling yet another epiphany coming on which is: not only does truth belong only to God, but God’ll give God’s truth to anybody God feels like (even profane Roman gentiles.)

Upon which epiphany Peter proceeds to do what disciples everywhere are inclined to do whenever they feel the presence of God and the willingness of people to sit still long enough to listen, which is to tell Jesus’ story and how it leads to where everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

“And while Peter is still speaking...” - that’s where today’s text picks up - while Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit falls on everybody who’s listening, Jew and gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, which indiscretion further blows the minds of Peter and his pals who had been pretty sure the favors of the Holy Spirit were limited to them. But, oh well, there it is again – same thing we heard from Peter, and from John – both John the seminary student and John the Gospel writer – the Holy Spirit, the Advocate whom the Father sends, is the Spirit of Truth, and as Peter discovers, truth belongs to God, and God’ll give truth to whomever God feels like giving it.

Because today is Presbyterian Heritage Sunday, as well as the day we express appreciation to our Sunday School teachers and educators, Peter’s lesson about God’s sovereignty over Truth seems an apt one. A lesson, in fact, that points us to the roots of our own denomination’s commitment to and respect

for truth in all its forms. How was it that Presbyterians came to believe that an educated heart can love God best?

We could begin with John Calvin, but Calvin began with Jesus so let's follow his lead. Of all of his roles, Jesus was best known to his contemporaries as a teacher. From his inmost circle of friends to the Jewish crowds that gathered around him, everyone knew him as "Rabbi," the preeminent model of one who imparts truth.¹ And at the center of every rabbi's concern and teaching is the command set forth in Deuteronomy 6 that "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Jesus repeats this teaching several times in the gospels but with one addition that not only caught John Calvin's attention, but inflamed him with purpose: that "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might, but also, with all your *mind*." (Mt. 22:36, Mk. 12:30, Luke 10:27) And so, as a humanist and a scholar, Calvin spent the whole of his life seeking to glorify God through the life of the mind.

The invention of the printing press in the Western world in the year 1450 led, for the first time in human history, to the availability of scripture to the general public. But Calvin knew that any promulgation of the Word depended upon the general public *learning to read*, a skill possessed by very few people of his day. So as a city father of Geneva, Calvin worked diligently to improve general public education. An overview of Calvin's 16th century core curriculum might prove interesting:

¹ For this and much that follows on the history of the reformed commitment to education, see "Transforming Hearts and Minds" by the Year with Education Team of the General Assembly Council and Vic Jameson's essay by the same name in the 1998 Mission Yearbook.

A 16th century boy in Calvin's Geneva first entered the "college" or Schola Privata, with seven grades, to learn proficiency in Greek, Latin and the study of dialectics. He would read Virgil, Cicero, Ovid, Socrates and Homer (pagans all, incidentally.) After the Schola Privata came the "academy" or the Schola Publica, where elective courses were offered in theology, Hebrew, Greek, poetry, rhetoric, physics, and mathematics.

Despite the fact that, in Calvin's view – and here I quote from his Commentary on Titus – "the liberal arts and sciences have descended to us from the heathen," he gave special status to the humanities because he strongly believed, as Peter and John did, that regardless of the source, no matter who teaches it or in what form it arrives, "all truth is of God". Likewise the Apostle Paul wrote to his young friend, Timothy, that "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." (2 Tim 1:7). Calvin affirmed the humanities and truth in all forms because, like Paul, he believed that Christ, as the creative Word of God, "adorns (us) with understanding, and retains for (us) what measure of light has not been destroyed by (our) fall." As far as Calvin was concerned, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, properly understood, provided the key for understanding "truth," in whatever form it presented itself.

So Calvin's aim was not just to teach people to read, but to raise the standard of thought and discourse in every dimension of the life of the city. His was a "typical humanist confidence in the value of education, not only to train the mind but also to inculcate virtue and shape character."² In fact, Calvin went so

² Bouwsma, William J. John Calvin, A Sixteenth Century Portrait. Oxford University Press, 1988, p.80.

far as to label “doubly mad” anyone who did not deign to learn because they imagined they knew enough already. Look at Moses, he argued, who remained open to God’s instruction even forty years after he had been given the law! ³

To Calvin, the human mind and the ability to think were gifts from God, and we have him to thank for the fact that to this day, Presbyterians continue to affirm principles of academic freedom. Indeed, it is because of Calvin’s view of education that when Presbyterians first arrived on the shores of this land two hundred years ago, they promptly set about establishing a church and a nation built upon these same principles. Wherever Presbyterians established churches, they established schools – boarding schools, colleges, training schools, seminaries and Sunday Schools, providing the cornerstone of both public education and higher education in this country.

Listen to Calvin’s vision echoed in Princeton Seminary’s mission statement written in 1811: the purpose of this institution shall be “to unite...that piety of the heart which is the fruit only of the renewing and sanctifying grace of God, with solid learning; believing that religion without learning, or learning without religion...must ultimately prove injurious to the Church.” ⁴ And, Calvin might add, to society at large.

Following Calvin’s belief that solid learning should be available to *all* persons, Presbyterians provided strong leadership in the education of women, establishing academies that later became highly respected colleges, including nearby Agnes Scott in Decatur, Ga. Later forward-looking initiatives included the

³ Ibid. p. 187.

⁴ Gillespie, Thomas w. “Education in the Church,” Reformed Liturgy and Music, T&WCMD, PCUSA, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, p.4.

establishment of institutions committed to the development of leaders among racial and ethnic minorities, as well as schools for children and youth in areas where no other public education was provided.

By 1860 our denomination had established over *one quarter* of all church-related colleges in this country, with 70 remaining to this day. Eleven theological institutions across the nation currently bear the Presbyterian banner, plus two in covenant relationship. Tens of thousands of students still attend institutions established by our world-wide missionary movement. And no survey of Presbyterians' commitment to education would be complete without highlighting the Sunday School movement which took root in 1816 in New York City with the formation by Isabella Graham, of the Female Society for the Promotion of Sabbath Schools.

A final and very important dimension to Presbyterian involvement in education is the ongoing role of our denomination in advocacy on behalf of public education. Nearly half a century ago, a General Assembly declaration called for "adequate public educational opportunity for all children in our country and favored federal aid to public education."

Three years later, as courts began to desegregate school systems and private schools were organized to thwart integration requirements, the General Assembly decried "zealous individuals and groups seeking to undermine or destroy public education." Subsequent Assemblies urged better salaries for all school personnel, building new educational facilities, and increased respect for teachers.

Since the very beginnings of our Reformed heritage, Presbyterians have valued and cultivated the life of the mind as a means of loving and glorifying God. We believe that all truth is God's truth, and therefore we celebrate it in all its forms. Because the greatest deterrent to ignorance and fear is a sound mind, we have consistently advocated for the availability of quality education to all people. And it remains the position of our denomination today that the search for truth in any discipline is no threat to Christian faith.

At the same time, it is important to remember that for Presbyterians, knowledge is not an end in itself. As stated in our Book of Order, "truth is in order to goodness." The highest use of knowledge in the Reformed tradition is to help God's people discern the will and nature of God, to discover the vocation to which God calls us, and to glorify God through the use of our gifts in service. In his Commentary on Philippians, Calvin remarks that "the true growth of Christians is when (we) progress first in knowledge and understanding, and then in love. For the more we make progress in knowledge," he says, "the more love should increase in us."⁵

The more educated the mind, the more loving the heart – that was Calvin's aim. As much as the Reformed tradition values education, its higher aim is always wisdom, love, and service.

You know, this is a highly educated congregation here at Emory Church, what with our slew of scientists and teachers, computer whizzes and Ph.Ds. Many exhibit their valuing of a sound mind through the leadership they offer in Sunday School, Worship Readiness, Confirmation class, and our Youth program,

⁵ Ibid.

through our newsletter, Bible Study, and missional experience, through specialized training (as for elders), and church-wide retreats. We value the life of the mind here at Emory Church, and can be proud of our commitment to the Spirit of Truth both in our denomination and in this particular church.

At the same time, many of us could do more. If you don't already participate in a Sunday School class, for example, I encourage you to join or start one. Ask anybody who attends the Questers' Class or The Spirituality and Prayer class how important their involvement is to their sense of community as well as to their personal faith development. For the same reason, if you don't make a habit of attending our Wednesday Night program, reconsider when it starts back up this fall. It is unusual for a church our size to sustain a weekly gathering of this nature. But the reason why we keep doing it is because it continually feeds our minds and deepens our relationships with one another and with God.

But to those who already commit their time, energy and creativity to teaching in the church, to you go our and Calvin's special thanks, as well as God's blessing, for you are the ones dedicated to educating our hearts better to love God.

To the glory of God. Amen.