

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Unlearning... Again, and Relearning”

Hebrews 5: 1-10
Mark 10: 35-45

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Jesus said to them, “You don’t know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

Prayer: God, you call us to be a part of your will and way. May we be inspired to do so by these words of scripture through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Coming up a week from tomorrow, I am attending a continuing education seminar which will be held at First United Methodist Church in Camp Hill. On the days that I make homebound calls to Carlisle, I’ve driven by the First Presbyterian Church on Hanover Street numerous times. I am aware of that there’s a First Baptist Church on Locust Lane in Harrisburg. And, of course there’s my daughter Cydney’s home church, First UCC in Schuylkill Haven.

I have often wondered what the word “First” really means in a church name. Usually it’s the first one of that denomination in that in that area, but, somehow there’s a sense of importance attached to being ‘first.’ And, likewise, to be “Second” Church somehow just doesn’t quite have the same feel to it, does it? That’s because embedded within our consciousness is the thought that being first most often is best. We can pump ourselves up with glory and satisfaction when we know we are first.

There’s a church in Dayton, Ohio that calls themselves the “Omega Baptist Church.”

Why ‘omega?’ Because ‘omega’ is the last letter of the Greek alphabet, so their name is another way of saying that they aren’t first in line, but rather they are the last in line. It’s like they are the “Last Baptist Church” (Sermon Resources for October 18, www.esermons.com, retrieved October 13, 2009). But there’s the risk of glorification here, too, because being the last Baptist church might imply that the best was saved for last and none greater will ever follow.

So, you can never get away from the fact that that glorification is an issue to contend with in the practice of the Christian faith. Jesus seems to detect this human tendency to glorify one’s self in the statement that James and John make to Jesus: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you...” They want Jesus to grant them the high and prestigious honor of sitting at the head table... being in the seats of glory next to Jesus. Pretty nervy, wouldn’t you say? James and John are stuck in human ways of thinking. They are looking out for number 1. They understood that rank has its privileges, and so does prestige and power. They wanted to be first.

When Jesus says, “You don’t know what you are asking,” I think he is really saying to them, “You must unlearn what you think you know... again. Following me has a price to pay. It means following the ways of God, which are not the ways of human beings.” You see, Jesus has taught this lesson already several times previously. Remember when the disciples asked Jesus who was the greatest in God’s realm, and Jesus showed them a child (Mark 9:33-37). Unlearn the thought that the greatest is someone with a lot of accomplishments. And, remember from last Sunday the rich man who went away sad because Jesus told him to give away his wealth and to follow him (Mark 10: 17-31)?

Unlearn the idea that wealth has anything to do with following God. And, again, for today, Jesus seems to be saying, “Unlearn your human thinking that enduring the path I follow gets you the high seats. Re-learn God’s ways, for God is the one who makes those decisions.”

Like many of Jesus’ stories, the lesson is the same for us. What can we find in these two Bible passages that we might have to unlearn—again—and what is it that we might have to re-learn in its place? Let me share with you three sets of answers to these questions.

First, I think this Jesus story suggests that where we apply hierarchy can be unlearned. This is so much easier said than done! Hierarchy is a cultural characteristic which is embedded systemically everywhere. It is the basis of many business and systems of government. It exists in our churches, schools, work settings, even family life. Bosses are above the employees. Supervisors are above the workers. Principals are above the teachers. Presidents and Governors are above the cabinet members and the military and legislators. In the Catholic Church, the Pope is above the archbishops, who are above the bishops, who are above the priests, who are above the common individual. And hierarchy serves a good purpose—it helps keep order and organized.

But, no matter the good purposes are, or how deeply entrenched hierarchy is, perhaps unlearning the applicability of hierarchy is important when it comes to considering God’s ways. I wonder if we tend to assume that because hierarchy is so common in our way of life, that it ought to apply to God’s ways. But, from what we can tell in scripture and from studying God’s ways, hierarchy doesn’t apply nearly as much as we apply it in our

way of life, for all are created by God, all are loved by God, all are equal in God's sight. In God's ways, child is as important as the adult, the rich as the poor, the powerful as the weak, the master is as important as the servant.

So, if we unlearn the applicability of hierarchy, what might we need to re-learn? Jesus tells us—again: servanthood. If we want to make any points with God, we are to be servants of each other. Care for one another. The child is tended to by the adult. The powerful reach out to the weak. The wealthy individual uses his or her wealth to benefit others. The high-ranking official serves the common individual.

During the American Revolution a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a defensive barrier. The job was huge, and the soldiers were spent. A corporal was shouting instructions but made no attempt to help the men. When the man in civilian clothes asked the corporal why he was not helping, he replied with great dignity, "Because sir, I am a corporal!" The stranger apologized, dismounted, and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. The job done, he turned to the corporal and said, "Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief, and I will come and help you again." And, with that George Washington got back on his horse and rode off (Sermon Resources for October 18, www.esermons.com, retrieved October 13, 2009). Servanthood is to be re-learned.

The second idea I think this Jesus story suggests that we unlearn—again—is our practice of being exclusive. Exclusivity is embedded within us, too. We easily understand that the top spots are reserved for the privileged. Certain highfalutin night clubs regularly have exclusive parties where one has to be on the guest list in order to get

in. Court-side seats at NBA games are for those like Jack Nicholson or Spike Lee who have the money and can afford it.

Even the reverse can be true... sometimes those with money get excluded, too. Take for example, Rush Limbaugh's participation in a group trying to buy the St. Louis Rams. A lot of controversy brewed because the conservative radio talk show host would be a limited partner in the ownership of the Rams. Apparently, though, his politics excluded him, even though he might have had the money to make a bid. Turns out, Mr. Limbaugh was dropped from the group because his presence complicated things too much. You know what? I say that if Rush Limbaugh has the money and makes the best offer, he should have every right to make the purchase and be a limited partner. I don't like his politics all that much, but that should have nothing to do with whether or not he can be part owner of the Rams (<http://kdka.com/sports/limbaugh.dropped.rams.2.1248727.html>, retrieved October. 17, 2009).

That's unlearning exclusivity. And, in its place to be relearned is inclusivity. We've heard the message before—in God's ways there is inclusivity. And what place on earth is better to practice inclusivity than in the church? Inclusivity happens in our hospitality. We've seen it before, we've heard it before—"No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." All inclusive! You can serve God here, no matter what gifts you bring. You can worship here! No matter if you're young or old, gay or straight, rich or poor, of different race or nationality.

I think the church can be like a man named William Powell who in the 1920's was an exceptional athlete and was drawn to the game of golf, but couldn't play it anywhere

on account of his skin color. After serving in WWII, he came home to a segregated America and was still excluded at most golf courses. His family owned a large amount of land in Canton, Ohio, and Mr. Powell proceeded to build his own golf course without modern excavation equipment. He said he designed it for all regardless of skin color. His daughter is one of three African American women on the LPGA circuit. Clearview Golf Course is now a museum, and Mr. Powell is in his nineties (<http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/26184891/vp/33342294#33342294>). We can Re-learn inclusivity.

My last idea to unlearn—again—is the idea that we often want God to answer all our prayers the way we want them answered. Our prayers are, “Lord, do this for me...” Or, “Lord, if you do this, I will go to church every week.” We want a Jesus who will give us what we want, a God who can shower a little power on us, a Savior who will forgive us and make us better than we are. James and John were like us, in this regard. “God do for us whatever we ask of you,” they said.

Be sure to know, however, that the ‘God, give me what I want’ prayers have their place, and are appropriate at certain times, especially when we feel a sense of desperation, I think. And, ironically, in our helplessness, in our hopelessness, when we come to God in utter dependence on God, God is quick to respond in ways we need, not necessarily in ways that we want.

If we unlearn this practice and don’t do it so much, what can we relearn in its place? Perhaps the answer is in Jesus when he said, “Father, not my will but your will be done.” This is essentially being obedient in following God’s ways as much as we can.

Relearning obedience to God's ways means realigning our perspectives. It means being role-models for our kids so they see us practicing being a servant, practicing being inclusive, practicing obedience. Kids are notorious for imitating their parents and the significant adults in their lives. Let's practice what we've relearned so that all of our world can grow in the ways of God.

The lyrics of our hymn express this sentiment. Let's stand and sing:

O for a world where everyone respects each other's ways! Where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise.