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“Loving God with All Your Mind”

Matthew 22:34-38

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When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment.

Matthew 22:34-38

Education can be a nasty business. Donald Schley was turned down for a position in religious studies at the College of Charleston. Some professors felt Dr. Schley's resume was unprofessional because "It listed numerous references to irrelevant personal activities, including teaching in Sunday school."

Martin Marty responded: "Teaching in a Sunday School is hardly irrelevant in the resume of a university professor. Those who have taught in Sunday school have engaged in the most college-relevant activity imaginable. They will have worked unnoticed and unrewarded, unless they last fifty years and receive a cross that glows in the dark. This is good practice for the kind of recognition they will get on a faculty. They will, if they have taught teenagers, have faced circumstances of derision that will have prepared them for the most battle-hardened college sophomores. They will, if they ever had to chaperon a Sunday school picnic, have seen enough disorderly behavior to prepare them for fraternity Animal House parties. They will have found that no one does homework, no matter how small the assignment, just like in most colleges. They will have found that nonattendance at Sunday School, which always comes

in second or 23rd to activities like shopping or soccer or (Call of Duty), will be matched by the low priority that college students give class attendance. In short, Sunday school veterans bring credentials more relevant than their Ph.D.'s." (Martin Marty, "No Sunday School Picnic," Christian Century, June 15-22, 1994, 623.)

If you had been on the faculty committee reviewing Donald Schley's resume, what would you have thought? How is what a church does the same as what a university does? What does Christianity have to do with learning? The tensions between religion and education are troubling.

The Pharisees think of themselves as the defenders of both religion and education, and so they find Jesus extremely troubling: "Where did he go to school?" "Where did he get his ideas?" "What has he published?"

When they hear how he had bested the Sadducees, the Pharisees send a representative, a graduate teaching assistant, to ask a question they hope will show him up: "Teacher, what's the most important rule to follow?"

Jesus has thought about this question: "Love God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. This is the most important, the first on any list."

It is not the most sophisticated response they have ever heard, but it is to this day over the heads of most. Most of Jesus' followers have at least given lip service to the heart and soul portion of Jesus' answer, but as often as not the mind has been left unopened. Some who claim Jesus' name have declared war on thinking people. They believe that we have to choose between being open to new ideas and being Christian. They are afraid to listen to anyone who sounds the least bit intelligent, and some of us

sound the least bit intelligent.

Before I left home for college, a person in our church who had chosen not to know better took me aside and said, "Brett, you're about to go to college. They will try to teach you things that you've never heard before. Promise me that you won't let them change your mind about anything."

I wondered if he would have given me the same speech as a five-year-old: "Brett, you're about to go to kindergarten. They will try to teach you things you've never heard before, but don't let them change your mind about anything."

At times, we are guilty of such foolishness, of being unwilling to hear new ideas. We should not be threatened by any knowledge. We need to fear ignorance. It is what we do not know that gets in the way.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, the bank robber Jorge Rodriguez was making a name for himself by sneaking across the border, robbing Texas banks, and then running back to Mexico. People were upset. The Texas Rangers sent a posse. One afternoon, one of the Rangers saw Jorge sneaking across the border with a suspicious looking sack under his arm. Jorge went back to his hometown and into his favorite cantina to relax.

The Ranger slipped in, got the drop on him, put a gun to his head and said, "Jorge Rodriguez, I know who you are. I'm a Texas Ranger. I've come to say that if you don't give back all the money you've robbed from Texas banks, I'm going to blow your brains out."

Unfortunately, Jorge did not understand English, and the Ranger did not know Spanish. They were at an absolute verbal impasse.

But a boy who was watching it all said, "I'll translate."

The young boy translated the Ranger's threat.

Jorge began to shake: "Tell the big Texas Ranger that I have not spent a cent of the money. If he will go to the town well, face north and count down five stones he will find a loose one. Pull the stone out and all the money is there. I haven't lost a cent. Tell him."

A wry look came over the young boy's face.

He turned to the Ranger and said, "Jorge Rodriguez is a brave man. He says he is ready to die." (John Claypool, *The Preaching Event*, Word: Waco, 1980, 121-122)

Sometimes we do not know what we do not know. We act as if we know enough and have no further need to learn, but we need as much understanding as we can get when it comes to questions related to race, gender, abortion, sexuality, militarism, materialism, and the environment.

When churches debate how to teach the faith, some argue for a narrow approach to learning that decides the answers before the questions have been asked. There is no virtue in uniform ideas without any thought behind them. Mediocre thinking is never pleasing to God.

The narrow approach forgets that everything true is true to God. No question is outside of the realm of God's wisdom. Freedom of thought and the Christian faith sustain one another.

I once heard a graduating seminary student announce, "I'm happy to say that I spent three years here and still think the same things I did before I came."

If anyone is ever so foolish as to stop learning, they should

recognize it is a sin they should avoid confessing in public.

Wouldn't you love to hear your surgeon say, "I think the old ways are best. We're going to remove your appendix exactly as we would have 100 years ago. Put the anesthesia away"?

Do you still think exactly what you thought ten years ago? Five years ago? One year ago? If we ever stop learning, we have stopped learning too soon. The Christ we are to follow said, "I am the truth." If we stop searching for truth, wherever it may lead, then we have stopped following Christ.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus waited until he was 30 to begin his ministry? Luke says that he spent those years growing in wisdom. The Hebrew custom was that a rabbi had to be at least thirty. They thought no one younger than that was old enough to know what was worth teaching.

Did you know that the title most often given to Jesus in the New Testament is not "Master" or "Lord," as we might expect, but "Teacher"? On several occasions, we read that the crowds were astonished, not by miracles, but by his teaching. When Jesus called disciples, he called them to be learners. The Greek word *mathates*, usually translated disciples, could just as easily be rendered "students."

If we do not include our minds in our love for God, we end up worshipping simple ideas about God rather than experiencing God's presence. When we think, we experience the Christian faith in new ways. When we think, we begin to realize the ways in which we might be wrong. When we think, we learn to factor in a lot of uncertainty.

Elie Wiesel said: “Every (ultimate) question possesses a power that does not lie in the answer.”

That is why we return to the questions again and again.

Rilke offers this advice: We need to learn to “love the questions” and not “search for the answers which could not be given to you now, because you wouldn’t be able to live them. And the point is to live the question now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer.” (William Hawkins, “A Questionable God,” *Christian Century*, August 14-27, 2002, 20).

God calls us to question, because thinking is one of the ways God leads us to life. The best teachers help us understand that God calls us to learn, because learning helps us find our way to meaning.

On the first day of History of Western Civilization, the professor handed out a syllabus. We had a reading assignment for each day of class. He said, “I can give you a quiz over that day’s reading any day, so make sure you read the assignments.”

For a while we skimmed the assignments, but he never gave a quiz. We had a major exam the Monday before Thanksgiving. The day before Thanksgiving—this was back when students went to class the Wednesday before Thanksgiving—he came in with a folded sheet of white legal paper and said, “I think it’s time for a quiz.”

This is going to be ugly. I am confident that no one did the reading. Who could have guessed we would have a quiz on the day before Thanksgiving? We were begging one another for any scrap of information. I heard someone whisper that he thought the reading might be over “a war in

Europe.”

Then the teacher offered a temporary stay of execution: “I want to be fair. Before we take the quiz, does anybody have a question over the reading?”

We were desperately looking around in the hope that someone who was about to become more popular would come up with a question that was not incredibly lame.

In the back of the room a hand went up hesitantly: “Can you tell us what you thought was most significant in the reading?”

We grimaced. How could a question be more transparent?

But to our surprise, the professor responded: “That’s a helpful question.”

He started writing on the chalkboard—this was back when professors wrote on chalkboards—telling us about the reading that he appeared to believe we had read. We were listening as hard as we could, clinging to any fact that might make the difference between an F and a D.

After thirty minutes of an intensely followed lecture, he got out his ominous piece of paper again and said, “Okay, let’s get to the test. Here we go. But does anybody have any questions about what I just explained?”

This could be another reprieve, but at first no hands went up.

Then, finally, “How would you set all this in context?”

More pained expressions— “This wasn’t going to work”—but it did! He went back to the board and fascinated us with more details of the Crimean War. He stopped five minutes before it was time for class to end and said, “We still have time for the quiz. Number 1-20.”

We still wished there wasn't a quiz, but we knew, "1854-1856, England, France, Turkey, Sardinia wins, Russia loses."

He slowly unfolded his piece of paper and said, "Here's your quiz." He turned it toward us. It was blank. There was nothing there. He never planned to give a quiz. He smiled and said, "Have a happy Thanksgiving."

What I most remember, more than I remember the Crimean War, is how stunned I was to realize that our teacher just wanted us to learn. I was shocked to discover that for him it was not about quizzes, tests, or grades. He wanted us to learn.

Some would be shocked to discover that God wants us to learn. God wants us to read books, all kinds of books, to ask questions, all kinds of questions, to think, all kinds of thoughts. God has no boundaries but the truth. God invites us to love with our minds, because the search for truth leads to God.

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