



“The Challenges of Being the Church: 5. Being a Church Where Thinking is Expected”

Texts: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Mark 12:28-34

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We’ve been talking about the challenges facing the church in general – and this church in particular – as we make our way through these summer Sundays. We’ve talked about being part of the downtown with its blessings and its challenges. We’ve talked about the role of compassion in all that the church does. We explored the importance of being a justice-centered church and how the church must seek justice for all people. We talked about the challenge of being an inclusive church, welcoming and involving all people in the joys and hardships that are inherent in being a church. And, today, we take up the challenge of being a thinking church.

In recent times, faith and thinking have been set up as opponents in the business of believing. Thinking is presented as the opposite of faith and reason is the adversary of believing. The question is this: is there room for thinking in the Christian faith?

Take a look at what the general population believes.

“While the economic gap between college graduates and those with a high school education or less has never been greater, the share of adults saying a college education is necessary to be middle class has actually fallen since 2012, from 37% to 30%, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted Dec. 8-13, 2015.”¹

In another Pew Research Center poll, taken just last month, over 58% of the members of one of our political parties believe that college and university education is having a negative impact on the way our country is heading.² These are only two references to important surveys, but when you read even more, the message is disturbing. Thinking and intellectual enterprise are not as valued as they once were. For Presbyterians, who have always valued education and thinking, and went so far as to establish schools, colleges, and universities across this country, this news is more than disconcerting.

So, we're going to talk a little about thinking this morning and why thinking is critical for the church in the days and years ahead.

Begin with a quick look at the scriptures.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, we hear the words of the Shema - Israel's call to worship and its great statement of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In these simple sentences, Israel's belief in one God is established and the faithful response to God is to love with heart, soul, and might.

When Jesus is being questioned by the religious leaders of his day, he is asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" We are told that Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'"

Now, you might think that Jesus added the word "mind" and - technically - it does appear in the Greek and not in the Hebrew. But, the idea is present in both citings of this ancient statement of faith. To say "heart...soul...mind...and strength" is to say that when we are following God and living as God calls God's people to live, we can hold nothing back. We offer God everything we are - our love, our compassion, our understanding, our physical energy, our emotional energy, our spiritual energy - and we offer our minds, our thinking, our rationality, and our ability to reason, analyze, and deduce.

The Biblical witness is that God expects us to think and question and ponder and discover.

When did thinking become suspect? Go back to the 18th century. Scientific discoveries were being made at an amazing rate. Franklin discovered that lightning was, in fact, electricity. William Herschel discovered the planet Uranus and so expanded our understanding of the universe for the first time in modern history. Antoine Lavoisier's work with the law of the conservation of mass became the basis for modern chemistry.

Move ahead to the 19th century. John Dalton's work in chemistry established atomic theory. Matthias Schleiden discovered that all plants are made of cells. Louis Pasteur offered us an understanding of germs and then developed vaccinations and the process of pasteurization. Gregor Mendel's work laid the foundation for all studies of genetics.

And those are but a handful. Scientific discoveries of every kind were being made. The world - and the understanding of the world - was changing nearly daily. Old theories and long held ideas were being discarded in the light of these new findings.

At the same time, in the church, scholars were also making discoveries and proposing ideas that challenged some of the long-held traditions. The search for the Jesus of history began and continues to this day. Closer reading of the original texts and the rise of textual

criticism challenged the way the church viewed the Bible. Some of the scientific discoveries were embraced by some in the church to the chagrin of others in the church.

But then, in the mid-1800s, Charles Darwin really upset the applecart with his theories of evolution and natural selection. While some in the church had been silent during this age of discovery, when Darwin's work seemingly supplanted the biblical stories of creation, some in the church went ballistic.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Christian fundamentalism emerged as a direct reaction and rejection of science and the progress science was making. The Five Fundamentals were established:

- The inerrancy of the Bible
- The literal nature of the biblical accounts, especially regarding Christ's miracles and the Creation account in Genesis
- The virgin birth of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and physical return of Christ
- The substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross

And so, for just about 100 years, these five fundamentals have engrained themselves in the way Christianity is understood and practiced in this country. No denomination has been exempt. The tendrils of fundamentalism, with its literalism and anti-intellectualism, have entwined themselves in every church.

And that, in a very simplified manner, is how we got to where we are today.

So, were do we go?

Let's begin with a very old statement. Around a thousand years ago, there lived a fellow named Anselm. Anselm was brilliant and wrote essays and books that are still being studied to this day. Among the many gifts Anselm gave us was a little three word statement: "fides quarens intellectum" - translated, "faith in search of understanding."

Anselm was not saying that understanding was more important than faith, nor was he saying that those who did not have faith could have understanding. Anselm was simply telling us that asking questions, pursuing discovery, debating positions, and pushing the accepted boundaries was a good and noble and godly thing to do. Anselm reasoned that since God had given us the capacity to think - which is part of the image of God in which we were created - we had an obligation to use our minds always and especially when it comes to our faith and practice.

We need to reclaim that principle again. The Church needs to stop worrying when science challenges a long-held belief. We need to listen to what science has to say, because science is a good and noble and godly pursuit. Science builds on the God-given capacity for thinking and discovery. To ignore science, or to deny science, is to mock God's gift of reason and intellect.

The Church needs to start welcoming questions again. If our faith is so fragile that it cannot stand up to the questions of human beings, we are in serious trouble. People in the church and before the church have always asked questions about God, life, death, and the meaning and purpose of our existence. There is nothing to fear in any such question, or in any other question. Questions are the beginning of discovery and breakthroughs.

The Church needs to reinvest itself in the work of education and learning. The Church needs to be supportive of the best quality education available for all children, young people, and adults. The Church needs to be an advocate for schools and increasing our spending on education.

And the Church must lead the way to the revaluing of thinking in our society. Thinking is what will bring peace, and justice, and righteousness, and fullness of life. Thinking is not something that should be discouraged, nor should it be mocked and ridiculed.

When Jesus was being questioned by the religious leaders of his day, he was asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" We are told that Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'"

I've told you this story before, but it's appropriate for this morning.

When I was in college, I was having a tough time. I wasn't the student I should have been and I went to see my advisor, Dr. Bardarah McCandless. After babbling on about how unfair life was and how hard college was, Bardie grabbed me by the shirt, and pulled me close to her face. With energy and passion, she said, "The Almighty has placed two and a half pounds of grey stuff between your ears unlike any other being on this planet. I suggest you use it."

Bardie never took prisoners. But on that day, in a way I had never heard before, a wise thinker looked at me and said "you're smart - get thinking."

Each of us has been given a gift from God in a wonderful brain. And when you put all of the brains in this room together, it's an astounding potential. Beginning now and in all the days to come, may I suggest, in the words of my dear professor: "The Almighty has placed two and a half pounds of grey stuff between your ears unlike any other being on this planet. I suggest you use it." For now and evermore. Amen.

1) <http://www.intellectualtakeout.org/blog/fewer-americans-think-college-necessary-middle-class-life> © IntellectualTakeout.org

2) <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/20/republicans-skeptical-of-colleges-impact-on-u-s-but-most-see-benefits-for-workforce-preparation/>