

“Only One Thing”

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First Presbyterian Church

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Mark 6:30-37a

Luke 10:38-42

When we pick up the newspaper or watch the evening news, there is an overwhelming feeling that living in these days gets more and more complicated all the time. Violence seems to escalate easily and spring up in unexpected places. Politics has become usual in the worst sense of the cliché. We get some reprieve here and there, but our work and family lives are turned to full throttle chaos most of the time; demands from various fronts pull us in too many directions to name and we feel lucky when we get ourselves to church on Sunday just to have an hour to sit in one place. Living these days is no easy task. Getting through these days is one thing, but really feeling like we are LIVING is quite another.

On occasion I fall into the trap that I think many of us succumb to, and I begin to think that living in these days, in this time, is harder than it has been at other times. I find that this odd nostalgia comes over me, a longing for the time when life used to be a lot simpler. I don't just mean before email and cell phones, when occasionally one could actually go somewhere without anyone being able to find you, I mean a longing for a time when the cares of the world were not so heavy and they didn't take up so much space in one's mind.

When this nostalgia comes over me, I realized that the time I think back on as that simple time was when I was about eight or nine years old. My mother and brother and I went to church every Sunday. I fell in love with reading mysteries at about that age, thanks to the Hardy Boys and Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators. I had an abundance of energy and was constantly asking my mom for ideas of what to do next. Aside from helping in the family garden, helping with sewing projects, hauling wood for our woodstove, my mom was great at challenging my creativity. She and I made cookies. She had an abundance of craft projects that would keep me occupied.

One other method she used was to send me outside with a giant garbage bag to pick up pine cones out of yard; we had three tall old pine trees right on the edge of our property and the pine cones they shed were numerous. This chore, unlike the others, always came with the promise of payment - a nickel per pinecone - so the task always involved careful counting as well as hoping to reach the goal of filling the bag! It was not until several years ago, when I was thinking about this golden age of pine cones, that I realized my mother was much wiser than I had even thought. It seems clear to me now that sending her energized daughter, who coped poorly with boredom, out to collect pine cones was probably her way of getting a break for herself in the living of those days.

What I am trying to suggest is that much about the living of any days depends on our perspective. Living the days of any time is difficult, and we have to be careful not to think that these times are so much more difficult than other times. Keeping our perspective reminds us that living in these days right now are difficult for their own reasons. While I suppose arguments could be made endlessly about which times are the

worst of times that kind of thinking only leads to feeling more helpless and more overwhelmed. It's easy to begin to feel a loneliness creep in, like there is nowhere to turn to help evaluate how exactly one is to live in these days. Thinking these are the worst of times may only succeed in making them all the more so. Our energy is needed NOT to lament the difficulty of these times over all others, but to consider from where we draw strength and courage for ourselves to live in these days.

When the adult education committee picked the line "For the Living of These Days" from the hymn *God of Grace and God of Glory*, as the theme for this year's adult education program, it seemed like a perfect fit. What better way to express the emphasis the committee works to incorporate into the program on current events, on Christian formation, on Bible study, on aging, and on wellness? What better expression to encourage all of us to consider what is needed spiritually of strength and courage to really live in these days?

As we contemplate what is needed for the living of these days, there is no doubt that our reformed roots lead us to look to education as a resource from which to draw strength and courage. Today we launch our fall adult education program and we celebrate the importance of teaching and learning in our Presbyterian tradition. In a recent book titled, Called to Teach: the Vocation of the Presbyterian Educator, the editors make a strong case for the importance of the vocation of teaching in higher education, especially as a call within the Reformed tradition.¹ Highlighting the Presbyterian emphasis on education, they set a framework from which we can think about the role of religious education, in our case, the role of religious education in the church.

In this framework they indicate four methods as means in which learning happens: instruction, modeling, training, and discerning. *Instruction* is the transfer of information from one person to another; in ideal circumstances this happens in a clear, coherent and logical manner.

Modeling is the living example; today this method is more commonly called mentoring. Modeling is not the expectation that one lives a perfect life, rather it is a way of living and being that shows the growth and work of faith in one's life.

Training is the accountability aspect of learning. This part is the part which provides discipline and pulls on our faith so that the consistency of our beliefs is recognized. In the Old Testament in particular, accountability is the aspect of learning about the faith that provides redemption. In the New Testament, there is much discourse about "equipping" as the training aspect of learning.

Discerning is perhaps the most complex of the four ideas. This is the kind of learning that allows us to think critically about our faith and to apply our faith to our life. The defining component in discernment is that action is critical to what one believes.

When we think about these four concepts as ways of learning, they may feel difficult to sink our spiritual teeth into; but if we look at these four ideas carefully we can see that they actually parallel a very familiar theological idea, *discipleship*. The scripture lessons for today show how embedded the importance of learning is within the role of being a disciple.

For instance, in the passage from Mark's Gospel, we enter the narrative in mid-stream. At the beginning of the chapter, the disciples had been sent out two by two, to journey to nearby villages and proclaim that all should repent. They are given two things: authority over unclean spirits and a staff, everything else they are to leave behind; they

are to take no money, no bread, no bag, and only one tunic. When we enter the story, they have just returned, and are excitedly recounting their journeys and “all that they had done and taught.”

Since they are eager to share their experiences of instruction and training, Jesus attempts to take them to quiet area to hear their accounts; but this retreat also proves futile, as many people continue to follow them to hear Jesus teach. At this point, Jesus provides another layer to the disciples’ learning; he adds to their experience examples of modeling and discernment. Rather than shoo the crowds away, Jesus, we are told, has compassion, and teaches the crowds that have followed. When the disciples come to him, also in compassion, and encourage him to send the crowds away so the people will have time to go into the villages and get something to eat, Jesus discerns a further opportunity and encourages his disciples to respond in a different way. He asks them, the disciples, still fresh from their journey around to the villages, to feed this crowd that has assembled. He asks them to act on their faith, to apply their beliefs, to *discern* in faithfulness how to feed these people.

We stopped our reading there, but you probably know the rest of the story. The disciples are still too practical in their thinking. They don’t understand what is being asked of them, and they falter on their own, but rally around Jesus’ instruction of how to feed this multitude, using resources from the crowd itself and a smidge of divine inspiration.

No one reminds us more than the disciples how hard the learning of discipleship is. They are constantly being taught what it means to be disciples, and often they learn the most and teach us the most through their lack of understanding.

The passage that Bill read to us from Luke’s Gospel illustrates the importance of learning in our faith and it also teaches us the difficulty of prioritizing this emphasis. It is probably one of the most memorable stories in the Bible about Mary and Martha.

This passage is often read as being solely about women’s roles. Many women resonate with Martha’s complaint, and it is hard not to be discouraged at Jesus’ response if you relate more to Martha. The conflict really arises out of the fact that Martha is doing the work of preparation - work the women were expected to do - and Mary was sitting and listening – likely with the men. While there is little room to argue that there is a patriarchal aspect to this narrative, let me suggest that today we read this passage as primarily being about how discipleship is applied by these two disciples. Although it never appears, we could just as easily have the conflict in this passage between James and John, if one them was looking for some help fixing the fishing net or the sail before Jesus went on the journey with them, and the other brother was sitting and listening while Jesus addressed the crowds.

The question today might be something other than deciding which woman we relate to more in these verses; the question today might be “what do these two women teach us about the importance of learning as an aspect of discipleship?” Both Mary and Martha have unique skills; their foundations of their faith are probably quite similar. There is no doubt that they both feel a resonance toward Jesus and his teachings. It is their discernment, or how they should act in their faith, which is lived out differently.

Clearly, Jesus puts an emphasis on learning, as he reinforces with Martha, “there is need of only one thing.” We can read his response too hastily as a dismissal of the

many things Martha is doing, and that prevents us from thinking about the one thing Jesus is telling this disciple to think about: learning. Jesus wants Martha to be sitting and listening and asking questions as well. We hear the dismissal of her offerings quickly; perhaps because our own lives and foundations have been taken over by many things, and thinking that only one thing being needed worries us a great deal that our foundation too is built on many things and not just this one thing. It is hard to put down all our efforts and believe that there is really only one thing that is necessary.

When we look at the many aspects of discipleship, we see that a large part of being of a disciple is *learning* what the role itself means. If we were to push to the end of any of the gospels, we would see that even after Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples are still learning. They are still trying to determine what comes next in this journey they have embarked on.

Our journey of discipleship is not that much different. One of the most critical mistakes people make about their faith is that they believe that faith is all about learning certain things, creeds and bible passages, and theological concepts. Sometimes we think once we know those things and have some mastery over them, our faith is set and we can quit learning and just draw on what we have already learned. If discipleship teaches us anything, it is that this type of thinking about our faith is not accurate.

The learning of discipleship surely does require that we build a foundation of beliefs and understandings. That foundation provides consistency and accountability and gives us a common language around which to talk with other people of faith. The foundation is where we start when we are discerning; but the foundation is not where we end. The joy and challenge of being a disciple is that it is not static; being a disciple is a growing, organic thing. The learning of discipleship demands our attention not only as place of joy and a place of comfort, but as a place of questioning, a place of change.

Living in these days demands one clear thing from us, a commitment to discipleship, which is a commitment to learn. When life is as chaotic as it seems in these days, our tendency is try to do more and more. Doing more makes us feel less helpless and gives us a sense that the things we do are valuable. What we need is not necessarily to do less, but to be sure that our actions should not just be a flurry of projects. We need to be aware of how our actions are grounded deeply in our faith. If we are staying busy for the sake of being busy, our actions are probably not coming out of discernment.

We have to remember, as difficult as it is in these days, that only one thing is needed: a willingness to learn. Not only must we focus on the actions that stem from discernment, we must think about the other aspects of spiritual learning as well. Where are we having fellowship with other learners so we can receive *instruction* from each other? How are we paying attention to how our own lives represent who we are as people of faith; what kind of growth do we *model*? How are we accountable in our faith; what kind of *training* do we engage in?

Like the disciples in many times and places before us, these are some of the most challenging questions for the living of these days. For these are the foundations of faith that under-gird the practical and abstract questions that we have in the living of these days. Our faithful learning is a vital place where we can draw strength and courage. It is the foundation that feeds our other responses and points us in the directions of where to go from that one thing.

We must start somewhere. Like the disciples, we have to dive in, willing to make mistakes and stumble a bit. We are assured that our mistakes as well as our insights in our learning are necessary. Both of these aspects of our faith are what help us to grow and to keep our perspective. And we must keep our perspective; for the living of these days is our challenge as much as the days Harry Emerson Fosdick originally wrote about were the his generation's challenge.. God will grant us strength and courage; we just have to be aware of how to receive them.

ⁱ Ferguson, Duncan S. and William J. Weston, ed. Called to Teach: The Vocation of the Presbyterian Educator. (Geneva Press; Louisville, KY, 2003) p. 14- 18 outline the four-part framework for thinking about education and learning.