

Our Needs are Holy to God: The Need to Know
Deuteronomy 6:4-9; John 8:31-32; Romans 12: 1-2

One of the seven basic needs of children, Dr. Seuss said, is *the need to know*. This is our focus today.

“Knowledge is power”, the saying goes, and it is true. Knowledge increases our personal power. Knowledge empowers.

Knowledge is pleasure, “inexhaustible pleasure”, the poet Rilke wrote. We’ve all had those moments of pleasure when we’ve learned something new.

And this, curiosity is a life-long, life-giving quality of mind. Curiosity wants to know something new, know something more. It is an itch God has placed in our minds. Curiosity may kill the proverbial cat, but it brings life to us. Curious yet? Let’s proceed.

There are hundreds of studies that stress the importance of learning in early childhood. It is a vital building block for life-long success. The young brain needs the stimulation to learn that home and school provide.

Dr. Ophelia Garman-Brown, the physician and ordained minister who preached at my installation service was chosen to lead a Charlotte Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force. It came into being after a study was released that said that Charlotte was last among the fifty largest cities in social mobility, the movement of the poorest citizens out of poverty. The task force met for over two years, studying, interviewing doctors, educators, social and political leaders, business people, ministers, social scientists, and more. In their final report they listed three major issues that determine the lack of social mobility. The first was: "Early Care and Education"¹. Their report is a most important one. We know that too many of our children reach elementary school already far behind their peers.

A child needs an environment whether at home or school that encourages learning. Curiosity needs to be celebrated, not stifled. Questions and questioning are good things—even if they can wear us out at times!

II

But learning all by itself is not enough. It needs to be directed toward the learning of the most important things. There are the building blocks of learning, reading and math, learning colors, shapes, words, numbers. So we read to our children, and play games with them that increase their knowledge.

But there is *moral education* too. Figuring out right from wrong, learning how to treat others. Do any of you remember the book by Robert Fulghum entitled, *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten?* Here were the basic lessons, four of them: “Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them.” Psychologists for many years have been studying moral development. There is a whole field of study called “moral psychology”.

The Hebrew scripture is full of instruction on moral education. There is the famous verse, Proverbs 22:6: “Train us a child in the way he/she should go, and when they are old they will not depart from it.” Well, we know that doesn’t always work! But the principal is sound. We pass on to our young our moral and spiritual traditions and truths. Some today call this “traditioning.” Then we set them free to continue on the development of their moral and spiritual sense. We give them, as the saying goes, “roots and wings”.

But our children have their own innate spirituality too, and we can celebrate it. Robert Coles, the Harvard psychiatrist and social psychologist has spent his life studying the lives of children. In his book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, he writes that children are “*soulful in ways they themselves reveal.*”² As we attend the lives of children, we attend to their spiritual lives, we look and listen to them as they reveal their soulfulness to us.

Sue gave me a new way to look at the verse, “Raise up a child in the way he/she should go...” We pay attention to their own uniqueness

as persons and guide them toward the fullest expression of who they are, that they may find their own unique way of being in the world.

When Ella Fitzgerald was around 6 she was asked to perform in a talent show. She had been taking dance lessons, so she would dance. When she walked out on stage, she paused, looked at the audience and said, “I’m not going to dance, I’m going to sing!”, and so she did, and never stopped singing.

III

We have been given a profound tradition of moral and spiritual truth, and we are called as parents, teachers and church to pass it on, which is what tradition means, passing it on, *traditioning*.

The great Hebrew affirmation of faith points the way. It is called the *Shema*, after the first word in the passage. *Shema*, or Hear!

Hear, O Israel

The Lord is our God

The Lord is One!

They sing it at every sabbath service. Israel is first of all a people who stand before the Lord and *listen*.

Then here are the next words in the passage:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words which I shall command you shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk with them when you sit down in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up.

So we here teach our children the ways of God and the way of Jesus. And we teach and learn from one another too, all through our lives, as we share the truth we have found and as we learn from one another's soul-fulness.

IV

Learning is the way we survive and thrive. What we don't know *can* hurt us! Sometimes we engage in "willful ignorance", refusing to know something we don't want to know. When Galileo was charged

with heresy for teaching that the earth moved around the sun, not vice versa, he invited his colleagues at the University of Padua to look through his telescope to see for themselves. They refused to look through it.

And *denial*. Denial is more than a river in Egypt! It is a psychological mechanism by which we refuse to know what we need to know. Such denial can do us great damage. In America today we have been dealing with wide-spread denial about COVID-19.

What you don't know *can* hurt you. There's an old story about the Mexican bandit Pancho Villa. One day he was stopped by a Texas Ranger. Pancho Villa did not know English, and the Ranger did not know Spanish. What to do? A man from Villa's band volunteered to be the translator.

The Ranger said, "I know who you are and that you have buried your stolen treasure somewhere and hidden it. If you don't tell me where it is I will shoot you"

The translator dutifully relayed the message in Spanish to Pancho Villa. Pancho Villa then gave this message to his translator to give to the Ranger: “Go to the next town to the west. There’s a well in the middle of the town. Behind the third brick down on the south side of the well you will find it.”

The Ranger asked, “What did he say?” The translator said to him: “Pancho Villa is a brave man. He says that he is ready to die!”

Yes, what we don’t know can hurt us. And what we *do* know can save us and set us free. As Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free!” The truth about yourself, about God, about the world in which we live. It is not always comfortable. But as Flannery O’Connor said, “truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it....”

We are confronting and being confronted with a lot of uncomfortable truth these days about systemic racism and centuries of racial inequity. Some of it may be hard to stomach, but it has the

capacity to set us free and to help us become agents of change in our communities.

There are those moments in life when new truth dawns, and it sets us on the path to freedom and healing.

V

In Romans 12, Paul outlines what it means to be a Christian and to be the church of Jesus. He begins:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. This is your spiritual worship!

Spirit and body go together! We dedicate our bodies to the love of God and neighbor, and all out of the mercies of God we have received.

Then Paul says these important words:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I've always loved the translation of this verse by J.B. Phillips:

Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold but let God remold your minds from within.

So how do we not let the world squeeze us into its mold? And how do we let God remold our minds from within?

We keep gathering together as a church. We tell and retell the biblical stories, most of all "the old, old story of Jesus and his love." We sing our faith, we worship and pray and hear the word of God through scripture. It is all a way of loving God with our *minds*, our malleable, beautiful, indispensable minds. Instead of being saturated with our culture, we let ourselves be saturated by God.

1. See leadingonopportunity.org

2. Robert Coles, *the Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), p. XVIII.