

**“FAITHFUL LEARNING,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas at St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, September 29, 2021**

In these past September weeks hundreds of thousands of young people across our nation have started school again after a summer away and a previous year in which classes were often conducted often remotely.

The return has not been without its hiccups. There have been some fresh COVID outbreaks. However, in the case of my own grandson, who is a six-year-old first grader, heavy flooding in Philadelphia from torrential rains closed school down for at a least a couple of days, making it necessary to briefly return to online instruction. Hopefully, however, all of our schools will be able to get back on course and find smoother sailing ahead.

Many kids are thrilled to be back in the classroom with teachers and classmates. However, others probably aren't. It's not just the fresh adjustment to a classroom setting that may feel strange after almost a year away. Invariably, there are some young people who just don't like school. They actually dread it. Or they just don't see what's in it for them. Consequently, I think it's so important for us as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, and friends to be alert to all this and help our kids through love and encouragement to work through any issues so that they can make the most of school and to get the best education possible.

When we're younger, times goes by so slowly. For some a school year can just drag. The school setting can also be intimidating, particularly if we're more shy and awkward and have more trouble building relationships and making friends. But if we keep at it, keep going, keep learning, good things happen and we benefit for our whole life. Our young people need to know, need to be reminded, sometimes again and again, that education matters and that it really is worth all the effort. And we need to help them find the kind of education that is going to help tap their talents so that they are equipped for life ahead. Ultimately, education is the best investment that we can make in life. In these high-tech times it really does matter more than ever. You can hardly drive a delivery truck today if you don't know how to operate a computer because of all the inventory work that takes place right on board.

Of course, it's not just education for a future job that counts. Our moral and spiritual growth matters too. That's why we have Sunday School and Confirmation here at church that are also starting a new season. In this life, the *whole* person needs to be educated. Each of us benefits by being schooled in faith. We aren't fully equipped for life otherwise. Not at all. The moral and spiritual education that we gain by our weekly church-going and Sunday-school attending is like the yeast needed to bake a good loaf of

bread. It helps us keep the right perspective on everything else we're learning and then use our learning well, in keeping with God's purposes

To my knowledge, Jesus never made it to either middle or secondary school, let alone college. Yet that doesn't mean that he scorned education. In fact, the gospels reveal him to be a learned man through studies pursued at home and through the local Jewish synagogues of his day which were centers of learning. At age twelve, Jesus actually got left behind by his parents at the Great Jerusalem Temple because he was so intent on learning everything he could from the resident elders. Retracing their steps to Jerusalem, Jesus' parents found their "lost" son in the Temple precincts enjoying a deep conversation with Israel's most learned men. (*Luke 2:41-52*) These grown men were keenly impressed by young Jesus' understanding of scripture. At a much later date, when Jesus was already undertaking his ministry, he similarly amazed the elders of the local synagogue in his old hometown of Nazareth. They couldn't believe how eloquently a son of carpenter read and expounded on Holy Scripture. "Is this not Joseph's son?" they murmured among themselves in surprise. At that moment, Jesus' education and wisdom shone through and through. (*Luke 4:14-22*)

Subsequently, throughout his ministry, Jesus welcomed the title of *rabboni* or rabbi, which means "teacher." He also called his own followers *disciples* which means "students." Indeed, Jesus in no small part saw his mission on earth as educational, instructing fellow men and women in the right way to live life in order to have a meaningful life here and now and to gain the promise of eternal life in God's coming kingdom.

At the same time, Jesus, joined by his apostles, did warn us that not all education is alike. Sometimes, as they all noted, education leads us astray by puffing us up, giving us swelled heads, and leading us to believe that we are more knowledgeable and important than we actually are. This is graphically illustrated by all four New Testament gospels where some of the most educated people of Jesus' day have a hand in putting him to death on Calvary's cross. Despite all their education, the presiding authorities of Jerusalem and Rome disdained everything that Jesus taught. To this day, they look foolish and worse.

The Apostle Paul, who came to Jesus Christ after a mystical encounter with him on the road to Damascus, later marveled at how some of the best-educated people whom he met in his missionary journeys had the greatest trouble understanding and appreciating the simple truths that Jesus sought to impart. This proved true not only in Jerusalem but also Athens and Rome where the Apostle Paul sought to educate Jews and Gentiles alike in the life-saving path of Jesus Christ. (*Acts 17:16-33*) The experience led the Apostle Paul to deliver something of a sermon on the subject to fellow Christians in the Greek city of Corinth.

In our epistle lesson for this morning, we hear Paul exhort: “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of the age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? ...Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called... Christ [demonstrates] the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (*1 Corinthians 1:20-25*) Paul then adds: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” (*1 Corinthians 1:25*) This was Paul’s way of emphasizing that amid all the other available knowledge in the world it is so important that we learn first and foremost the fundamental value of love for God and love for one another just as Jesus taught and sacrificed his own life to uphold.

The Apostle James, Jesus’ own half-brother, didn’t see eye-to-eye with the Apostle Paul on many things. But he nevertheless agreed with Paul on what was truly smart. In his own New Testament letter to fellow Christians he writes: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom...” (*James 3:13*) Then, as we heard last week in worship, James further explains: “If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it... Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere.” (*James 3: 13-17*) Here James was declaring that the wisest people are also the most humble and least vain and self-serving.

In keeping with the insights of both Paul and James, history has again and again shown that so-called educated, self-declared know-it-alls get themselves into the biggest trouble. Consider the fate of Germany in the mid-twentieth century. Before the rise of Hitler it was one of the best educated nations in the world. Germany’s scientists were peerless scholars, creative thinkers, and inventors. But then the German people, forsaking the kind of love and humility that Jesus and his apostles preached, proceeded to perpetrate under Hitler some of the most heinous crimes of the century. The Germans murdered millions of people and brought destruction upon themselves and neighboring countries. The arrogance that sometimes goes with education can also lead men and women astray in less criminal ways.

In America we have certainly seen the “best and the brightest” stumble and fall. During the Vietnam War, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was regarded as the smartest guy in the room. At an earlier time, he had helped turn the Ford Motor Car Company around as both “whiz kid” and president. But all McNamara’s careful planning, complete with the most elaborate charts, graphs, and power point presentations, didn’t

keep him from terrible errors of judgment that embroiled our nation in an unwinnable Southeast Asia war. He later conceded his own folly in a documentary called “The Fog of War.” Sadly, we all saw many of the McNamara’s mistakes repeated as we ventured into what became a twenty-year war in Afghanistan with a terrible loss of life and cost to our nation’s treasury.

There’s a moral to be found in these mistakes repeatedly made by too many of our leaders who have no shortage of degrees from famous colleges like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Intelligence is important. Education is invaluable. Yet only truly wise are those educated and knowledgeable men and women who walk through life with a sense of humility tempered by faith.

There is a false notion afoot that faith and education aren’t compatible. It is true that education often challenges us to examine, even question, our faith in new ways. In some of our institutions of learning students are going to encounter teachers who are skeptical, if not downright cynical, towards all formal religion. This has been topic of more than one good film, pitting a faith-minded student against the wiles of non-believing or disbelieving atheist professor. Yet as a former college chaplain at both Syracuse and Tufts Universities I can attest that there are many teachers and professors, distinguished by their learning, who have a deep and abiding faith in God and Jesus Christ. And seventeen years of higher education, often at secular universities, didn’t snuff the faith out of me. In fact, the more I learned the more I realized how essential it was to be grounded in a personal relationship with God and to lead a life informed by everything that Jesus has taught us through his life, death, and resurrection.

As our kids settle back in classrooms, from kindergarten to college, I want to encourage us to encourage them in every way, *including spiritually*—just as I mentioned at the outset. Their classroom education is important. Without that education, how much harder it is to tap our God-given gifts and talents both for our own benefit and for service to others. In what we say to young people as parents and grandparents, we need to emphasize the value of education for them. We can help them with the firm, clear message that that the pursuit of learning is going to be more meaningful for their lives, offering more dividends, than pleasures of entertainment ever can. Yet our young people also need to know that they will never have a truly solid, well-rounded education unless it is intelligently informed by faith. And in these lingering COVID times faith in Jesus Christ is more important than ever.

Just consider what our youth—including those who love school most--are facing now as they try to get back into the swing of school. This really is a time of big adjustment for them all. While it must certainly be good to be with friends again after all our months of relative isolation, the classroom experience can be pretty stressful and anxiety-producing

across the board. Why? Simply because everyone's out of practice with social interaction and has to find their way all over again. Moreover, our COVID pandemic is not done. All the precautions still necessary as our young people enter their school buildings continue to flag hazard and danger. It's enough to get anyone down. But stress and anxiety are spiritual problems that faith can help. When we know, as Jesus teaches, that God is here for us and is always working redemptively through whatever bad or amiss, it becomes easier to face things without getting down or depressed about them. Yes, trusting in God can help—hugely.

In these stressful days, our kids can benefit not only from our sympathy and empathy, but also our faithful wisdom and reassurance. They can all use some hopeful testimony from those of us more experienced with life that through God's grace and love we're all going to get through this. Yes, despite all that's going on right now, there will be better days ahead. Indeed, down the road opportunities await them as young people that earlier generations could hardly ever have imagined.

To sum it all up then our message for the young people in our lives should be simple and straight. Don't freak out because of what may be happening right now. Trust in God, as proclaimed by Jesus, who can help you and all of us get through every tough time. Build for the future by your own faithful learning, making the most of being back in school and the classroom with friends.

May God bless and guide all of our young people in the school year ahead. May we as faithful families and friends support and encourage them in all they return to classroom to learn. **Amen.**