

DEVOTED TO LEARNING

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented to Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, January 10, 2016

Acts 2:41-42

⁴¹ Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church—about three thousand in all.

⁴² They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer.

They “joined with the other believers.” This was a collective pursuit. They recognized the wisdom of the ancient sage: “Two are better than one...”

Christian discipleship is not a solo adventure.

Their shared devotion traveled along four avenues:

- They were a learning church
- They were a together church
- They were a feasting church
- They were a praying church

They were a learning church—moving forward, progressing in the knowledge of Christ and His Kingdom's purpose.

The people of God have always been called to learn from Him—to grow wiser in their inner life, and more compassionate in their social life. For their sage declared:

“Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are open for knowledge.” (Proverbs 18:15)

John called Jesus the living “Word of God.” And a major part of Christ's mission was to teach people about God and His Kingdom. He taught them in the Temple, He taught them in the synagogues, and He taught them in the countryside. He said:

Matthew 7:24-27

²⁴ “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. ²⁵ Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. ²⁶ But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. ²⁷ When the

rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.”

So, the teaching Jesus shared was intended to provide a foundation for living, a solid foundation that could withstand life’s storms and trials. Today, that teaching is found in the pages of the New Testament. With just a copy of the Bible and “intelligent ears,” anyone can learn from the Master!

Building the house atop that foundation, of course, remains the responsibility of the hearer—you and me. Jesus referred to this as “following Him.” We do not follow Him physically today, but as we bring His teachings to life through our attitude and conduct, we show that He is “with us.”

Luke 8:16-18

¹⁶ “No one lights a lamp and then covers it with a bowl or hides it under a bed. A lamp is placed on a stand, where its light can be seen by all who enter the house. ¹⁷ For all that is secret will eventually be brought into the open, and everything that is concealed will be brought to light and made known to all.

¹⁸ “So pay attention to how you hear. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what they think they understand will be taken away from them.”

Pay attention to *how* you hear. Simply hearing—putting your ears in the room—is not enough. We must hear with a desire to understand, and the intent to obey. If we approach the Scriptures with this desire and intention, we will gain wisdom from its pages, and faith and assurance will grow. If we do not... we may actually lose what we think we know. In other words, doubt and uncertainty will increase.

This is not a joke. You may know such people, who once were avid followers of Jesus—singing His praises and telling His story—who now have fallen silent, since their hearts have become darkened by cynicism and unbelief, and want no more to do with the church.

The lesson of “how to hear” is told in the preceding parable. A lamp is not lit to be hidden, but to spread its light, to give light to others. So, what you learn of Christ is not to be hidden or kept to yourself, but to be shared, to be told, to be “brought into the open,” so others may understand it also. Whether or not you have a gift of teaching, you have a growing experience with Christ that deserves to be shared with others. Let your light shine!

This is a matter of timeliness. Whenever people demonstrate openness to the Good News, we are to offer what we know.

While these words from Paul were directed to Timothy, as a young preacher and pastor, the warning that Paul tagged on the end as motivation for his young protégé certainly applies to all of us, as well.

2 Timothy 4:2-4

² Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching.

³ For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will reject the truth and chase after myths.

We are living in that time, my friends. Knowledge is abundant and abundantly available, yet people are not finding the truth. Instead, they are being drawn in a hundred directions away from the truth. Personal experience is masquerading as truth. Fascinating anecdotes and complete fabrications take the place of Holy Scripture. Virtual realities are preferred to real realities. The time of myth-chasing is here. Be careful how you hear.

“Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you.” (1 Timothy 4:16)

The church of Jesus Christ is an ever-learning church, because we recognize what is at stake—our eternal salvation, and the salvation of those close to us. We want to gain it, and we don’t want to lose it. John was emphatic about this:

“Anyone who wanders away from this teaching has no relationship with God. But anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with both the Father and the Son.” (2 John 9)

We all learn in three ways: by instruction, by experience, and by correction. So, also, our learning about Christ and His Kingdom must come from these three sources.

We offer sound instruction here in Trinity. Our Sunday morning preaching and teaching are Bible-based. Our Tuesday evening discussion group is Bible-centered. I urge you to take advantage of these opportunities every week. Feed upon the Word of God and grow.

This year I will also offer a series of foundational classes to cover the 16 Statements of Fundamental Truth of the Assemblies of God. The series will be called “Sound Bites.” The aim will be to give you a functional knowledge of sound doctrine. Details will be given, and pre-registration will be opened, at our Annual Business Meeting on January 31.

However, instruction alone is insufficient. In fact, any one or two of these three ways is insufficient. We all need *all three* in our lives. That's why I said, "functional knowledge." If instruction does not lead to corresponding experience, then we have only begun to learn.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:15): *"For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you."*

Instructors are good for passing along information, but spiritual fathers or mentors are necessary for turning information into understanding through our everyday experiences.

Story of young man and his mentor: I want to be wise like you, and avoid common mistakes. How did you become so wise? Experience. And how did you gain that experience? By making mistakes.

And this leads naturally to the third way of learning: correction.

"To learn, you must love discipline; it is stupid to hate correction." (Proverbs 12:1)

Life itself will often correct you, which is usually painful, and sometimes humiliating. But it is hardest to receive correction from other people, especially those younger or less experienced than you. But that's just your pride reacting! Get past it and *HEAR* what you need to grow. Don't be stupid.

"The reproofs of discipline are the way of life." (Proverbs 6:23)

According to the Scriptures, here are eight things which you should aspire to learn (by instruction, by experience, and by correction):

- The truth
- What is right
- Good judgment
- To fear the Lord
- To do good
- To know God's will
- To obey God
- To know God

Give yourself to these things, devote yourself to these things, diligently. Let's make 2016 our year of learning, our year of growing—both personally and collectively. And be sure to share with others along the way what you are learning. May the Lord refresh us!