

The Joy of Learning

November 25, 2018 ~ U.M. Student Sunday

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

Psalm 119: 97, 102-105 (NRSV)

⁹⁷ Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.

¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Ephesians 4:25-26, 29-32 (NRSV)

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,^[a] as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.^[b]



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An international repertory theater group performed in a small village church in Scotland. The church was packed. The program began with several short and very humorous plays. No one laughed at the first one, or at the second. By the end of the third play, the leader said, “They must really hate us. They’re not even smiling. We’ll cut the program short.”

At a reception following the performance the troupe was puzzled when everyone said how much they had enjoyed the performance. Then one troupe member understood when he overheard a kilt-clad gentleman say to his friends, “Oh, they were so funny . . . it was all I could do not to laugh in the church!”ⁱ

It is sad to say that many people disassociate joy and gladness from church, from learning, and especially from learning about the doctrines of the faith we profess, based on Scripture. Many think of religion kind of like health food – it may not taste good, but it’s good for you so you endure it. “Joy and gladness” reminds the trendy ones more of an evening with friends at the most hip brewery, but definitely not of a morning in church!

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But those scriptures declare that in God's presence is fullness of joy; at God's right hand are pleasures forever more (Psalm 16:11). If we, as God's people, are to reflect the image of our Creator, then we *must* become joyous/joy-filled people! This is a perfect time to start!

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, espoused new kinds of faith practices in fulfilling scriptural mandates by promoting education for all persons. In Wesley's day, in the midst of the industrial era, education was not understood to be a basic human right. But because Wesley and his companions on the journey of discipleship, believed firmly that God desires and has equipped us to enhance the condition of our society, he was convicted that one of the best ways to improve the condition of humankind was to offer quality education to all persons. John himself had enjoyed the privilege of education, beginning with his mother's tutelage of basic language skills. Susanna Wesley taught all of her children (even the girls!) to read using the Bible as their primer! John Wesley knew that access to the truths of the Bible through literacy would lead many to salvation in their knowledge of Christ. And that knowledge would spur the faithful to positive social reform, and empower believers to resist evil. Finding joy in learning is a "win-win" situation!

John Wesley, taught those of us known as "Methodists" of the immense value in starting and maintaining schools, preparatory schools, colleges and universities, and, providing opportunities for those of every socio-economic level to gain a quality education. In 1866 the Methodist Church established a special fund for the advanced education of Sunday School children and the educational preparation of persons for the ministry and missionary service. The 1940 General Conference birthed Methodist Student Day with a church-wide offering to support scholarships. And that tradition carries on in the United Methodist Student Sunday which we share each year on the last Sunday of the season of Pentecost. These funds continue to be made available to U.M. students attending institutions of higher education.

As the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus, just prior to today's scripture text, he spoke of a three step process of maturing in the faith that we also heard about in our baptismal liturgy this morning. He describes putting off the old self which is corrupted by sinful desires, being renewed in our minds, and putting on the new self / becoming a new creation in the likeness of Christ. That leads into today's text in which Paul describes in greater detail what being renewed in mind means. Paul sets up a set of contrasts for Christ followers: *we will no longer do THIS / and instead we will learn to intentionally change our behavior and act according to Christ's teachings*. Then, he goes on to say, we will know the full blessing of joy, as learning about and acting on these teachings will instill in us a greater love for the Giver of every good gift.

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In 1988 I had the privilege of attending my first (of several) National Camp Leaders Meetings for U.M.'s in leadership in camp and retreat ministries. This gathering was held at a YMCA camp outside of Madison, Wisconsin. There we worshiped, heard inspirational speakers who specialized in outdoor Christian education for children and youth. And, we could pick a number of workshops to attend in order to learn specific skills for life transforming ministry. As one who has long been known as "directionally challenged," I decided that I needed to sign up for the workshop on Orienteering. That is the practice of using a compass, list of coordinates, and sometimes a map to follow an unfamiliar journey to reach a destination. Orienteering has now become a number of competitive sports. But for the purpose of the workshop and the skills I would be able to teach young campers, it was practicing the skills of using a compass to navigate through a wilderness to find a treasure at the end of a trail. It was the proper use of that compass that became imperative. Misunderstanding the constant northward direction of the needle, or misinterpreting the desired direction from constant point B to C, could plunge one into a state of confusion and being hopelessly lost! (Hence, wilderness survival skills must also be learned, along with a crash course in search and rescue for the leaders!)

For Christians, our spiritual compass is the Bible! As the psalmist sang, "thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." The living Word of God, and all that we learn through studying that word, is the compass that points to Christ, living faithfully, and joyfully, as one who continues to learn, grow, mature, and thrive in the light of Christ's love. Oh, that reminds me of another of John Wesley's tenants. We should all be life-long learners in order to draw closer to Christ, and to love God more deeply day by day. He often reminded folks that we should not read the Bible once and assume that we know all there is to learn from its rich text! Our continued immersion in the scriptures, interpretation based on the teachings of the saints and our ever-evolving experiences in life, will add to the wisdom that comes from combining the written Word with God's gift of reasoning (using that brain!).

Friends, we have the opportunity to provide for many the Joy of Learning that we have experienced, and continue to cherish. And we have the joyful responsibility to equip as many as possible to know that joy as well, as we act on the scriptural tenants we have learned and pass that along to future generations.

ⁱ Adapted from *Reader's Digest* [1/93], pp. 31-32.