

“Learning As We Go”

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Text: John 16:12-15

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It was 25 years ago this month that Holly and I moved from Enid, Oklahoma, to Sheridan, Wyoming, so that I could begin serving as an associate pastor. Three years of seminary, and then a year's experience in the development office of Phillips University gave me a good foundation to start my pastoral experience. However, I wasn't prepared to handle every situation. Oh, I had done weekly preaching when I was in seminary, serving a Sunday-only church of 25 people. So I had some pulpit experience. But I'd officiated at only one wedding, assisted in two funerals. I had never led a Bible study, or conducted a stewardship campaign, or organized a youth lock-in or mission trip. We lived in the church parsonage in Sheridan, and I'd never done that before. So most of my four years with that congregation was spent learning as I went – learning what was expected of a pastor living in the parsonage – learning when and when not to speak out at board meetings, learning how to walk with church folk down the hospital corridors and through the cemetery gates.

Isn't much of life a “learn as you go” proposition? Some of us graduate from high school thinking we've got it all figured out and then quickly discover that there are some things we haven't learned yet.

Or how about marriage? Let me see a show of hands of those who knew what you were signing on for when you got married.

And what about the area that calls for the most on-the-job training? In my mind that would be parenting. Children don't come with instruction manuals, warranties, or money-back guarantees. As Bill Cosby says, “In spite of 6,000 manuals on child raising in the bookstore, raising children is still a dark continent and no one really knows anything. You just need a lot of love and luck, and of course, courage.” Cosby also believes that “no matter how calmly you try to referee, parenting will eventually produce bizarre behavior, and I'm not talking about the kids.” Those of us who have more than one child – did we learn anything after the first one that helped us with the next?

I remember taking Ben, our older child, to the pediatrician for his six-week check up. Man were we loaded down. We had the diaper bag and the carrier and some pacifiers and squeaky toys and an extra blanket and a bunch of other stuff. It looked like we were going on a three-day camping trip. I know as we stumbled through the door to the waiting room, people could tell we were new parents. By the time we went through that experience with Gretchen, we'd learned that you didn't need to carry half the baby's room with you when you went to a doctor's appointment.

Sydney Harris once observed that “the beauty of spacing children many years apart lies in the fact that parents have time to learn the mistakes that were made with the older ones – which permits them to make exactly the opposite mistakes with the younger ones.”

Permit me one final observation about parenting from Bill Cosby. He said, “Parenthood is pretending the present you love the most is soap-on-a-rope.”

Most of life is “learn as we go.” We pick up bits and pieces along the way – we learn to adapt and adjust. We never really have the whole picture right in front of us. We don't have a neatly woven tapestry to enjoy – rather, we're continuing to weave our lives – we're working with the fabric as we go. God has given us tremendous freedom with which to conduct our lives. And that means we can live our lives with a sense of anticipation – for the only thing that is constant is change. Healthy people are those who, in the face of change and valleys and hills and ruts and falls, learn how to make the most of them. I even heard someone state that the mark of a true leader is the ability to adapt.

We learn as we go – Jesus knew that. In the last several weeks, our gospel selections have focused on the farewell material from John. You remember Jesus spends a great deal of time in the Gospel of John saying goodbye – preparing His disciples for His departure and promising them that God would send the Holy Spirit to be with them in Jesus' absence. So in today's text, He tells His disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth.” Jesus was sending the disciples out, knowing that what they needed to know they would learn through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

When Thomas later went to India to become the first Christian missionary there and literally build the church with the labor of his own hands and back, he would know what Jesus meant. When Andrew went to Scythia, north of the Black Sea, to preach the gospel and become the patron saint of Russia, he would know what Jesus meant. When James the elder became the first of the disciples to be martyred for the faith by Herod Agrippa I, he would remember what Jesus said. As Paul became the great apostle to the Gentiles and Peter founded the church in Rome, they would know what it meant to be sent out in faith and hope and trust that God would be with them. Their faith journeys were, in a very real sense, experiences of learning as they went. So were Luther's, and Calvin's, and Bonhoeffer's, and Martin Luther King's.

And so are ours, for who of us can be absolutely certain where God will lead us? Who of us has the insight to know how God is guiding us and where God is calling us? Who of us knows precisely where God is leading our lives to go? But of this we can all be sure – God is with us – that is the promise of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Today is Trinity Sunday – observed every year on the first Sunday after Pentecost. It's been called the Octave of Whitsun – the 8th Day of Pentecost. Whitsunday was the English title for Pentecost, so called because of its association with white robes of baptism. Trinity Sunday – the day to lift up God in three persons – Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

Trinity Sunday is a good time to remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit is the hallmark of Christianity, and that the church affirms the Holy Spirit is from God and from Christ, and is witness to that which God has revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Trinity Sunday initiates the season after Pentecost – the longest season of the church year – often called Kingdomtide – also called Ordinary Time.

We may be in Ordinary Time as far as the liturgical calendar goes, but this is anything but ordinary time in the life of our congregation.

We've just begun searching for an Associate Pastor. Now we don't know what potential candidates are out there. We don't know what we have to offer programmatically and financially will be a great match with someone. There are some unknowns in this process – but there are also some exciting possibilities for us. And you know what – we're going to learn and discover as we go, because the Holy Spirit will be leading our process. God will reveal to us what we need to know as we move step by step through the process. The Holy Spirit will teach us and lead us to find the right person.

We also just recently authorized the Trustees to entertain inquiries and offers regarding the purchase of this facility. Will we receive any offers? I am hopeful we will – but we don't know until the time comes. If we do receive an offer and make the decision to sell, what would that mean for us? Would we stay here awhile or need to locate temporarily somewhere else? I don't know, but I'm not uneasy with the uncertainty, because God's Holy Spirit will be guiding us and revealing to us what we need to consider. I believe we will learn as we go – whether to accept an offer – whether to office and worship somewhere else for awhile – whether to put up a temporary structure on our new land. Whatever path we choose, we aren't alone. We can't see the whole picture now. It would be nice to look ahead ten years and see where we're at, but we obviously don't have that advantage. What advantage we do have is that of a God who guides and directs our lives and our mission as the church. What will we do with the land we've purchased? Will we build on it – will we sell off some of it?

Once again, I don't have the answers, but we are being ultimately led by the One who does have the answers. Now all of this does not mean that we just sit back and wait for divine revelation. It means we use the wisdom and judgment God has given us to proceed with confidence, seeking the Spirit's leading as we go. It means we trust – trust that the Holy Spirit will give us the gifts necessary to adapt to the changes we encounter, the challenges we face, and the exciting possibilities that present themselves.

Charles Stanley says: "God is looking for imperfect men and women who have learned to walk in moment-by-moment dependence on the Holy Spirit." Although we may not know what is around the bend, although we may not know why the journey gets difficult and lonely sometimes, although we may not know where the road leads and what dangers lurk before us, we must still move on. And we can do that because from our baptisms we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit – to guide, to direct, to encourage, and to give us hope. If we need a working definition of faith – how about this: Faith is a learn-as-you-go journey with the Holy Spirit. It's as simple and as profound and as powerful as that.

Let us pray: O God, with your Holy Spirit as our guide, we are teachable. Guide us individually and as a congregation in the uncertain and exciting days ahead. We can't see around the next curve, but we can see You and that's enough for us. Amen.

Thanks to Glen Ludwig for the idea for this sermon.