

June 23, 2019 • Scholarship Sunday

## “Minds That Serve God, Ourselves, and Others”

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young



*Philippians 4:8-9*

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

When I realized that today would be our annual Scholarship Sunday, my mind went immediately to these two verses from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable . . . think about these things." It seems to me that one purpose of education is to help us determine what is true, honorable, just, and commendable—because it doesn't just come to us automatically. These are things we have to learn over time—and we probably won't have finished the job at the end of our days. So you students do well to get on with it now, because time is moving on!

But how do we determine what is true, good, and honorable? Where do we turn for help in figuring out the values and mindsets that are worth building our lives around? It's not a simple question to answer; but it's hard to think of anything more important. And our Methodist heritage offers us a set of guidelines to help us along. When I talk about the Methodist Quadrilateral, how many of you know what I'm talking about? If you do, you know that it refers to four sources for learning the truths and values that are worth living by as Christians. The first source is the scriptures themselves—the record of how people in Biblical times understood what God was saying to them, and especially what we learn through Christ. That's the foundation for everything else. But then we also have 20 centuries of Christian tradition, the record of how Christian disciples through time have understood and made sense of what God willed for their lives. But in addition each of us has our own experience of life that speaks to us; and finally we have the gift of reason, the mental capacity to take in all this other input and decide what we will claim for ourselves. God has given us minds to make sense of the life we are given and to decide what is the truth and good worth living for. So scripture, tradition, experience and reason are the four pillars of the Quadrilateral. But today I want to put the focus on the mind, the intellectual capacity we are given, by which we process all the input that comes to us and decide what will be good and true and worthy for us.

Growing the life of the mind has always been a priority in our Methodist tradition. Our founder John Wesley was a university graduate who always believed that being clear in our minds about what we believe and value was essential. Now granted emotion has also had an essential place in our tradition. Wesley spoke about his heart being strangely warmed and about the inner glow of a vital personal relationship with God. But that was always balanced by a clear mental awareness of how one was meant to live as one was going on to perfection. Wesley himself founded a number of schools; and Methodism is notable in this country for the number of colleges and universities it has launched. You see, Wesley understood there was a difference between a Christian mindset and the mindset of the secular society one lived in. And how true that is today! Much of the secular world just assumes that living for oneself is what it's all about. Material goods will make you happy. Get enough power and influence to satisfy your own desires. Treat anyone who doesn't agree with you as an enemy. And don't trouble yourself about anyone's well-being except your own. So often a secular mindset doesn't even recognize a need to grow in one's beliefs and outlook on life; you just assume that whatever has drifted into your mind is good enough. But as Christians we are called to more than that. As Paul puts it in Romans, "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 been reading recently about the life of Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and the remarkable work he did through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission following the end of apartheid there. Many of you know of the atrocities inflicted on the native South African people during apartheid and what a huge gulf of hatred and divisiveness was created by that. So when apartheid ended and black leadership came to power, there were hostile cries for revenge on the part of the non-white population and fearful antagonistic cries from the whites who saw themselves in harm's way. And many on both sides were of a mind to just fight it out and let the chips fall where they may. But Bishop Tutu had a different vision: what South Africa needs is not more hatred and victimizing, but reconciliation; not ignoring all the evil that had transpired, but owning up to it in a way that would help to bridge the divisiveness. So under Bishop Tutu the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up so that the victims of apartheid atrocities could tell their stories publicly in the presence of the perpetrators; and the perpetrators in turn were given the opportunity to respond—to express remorse if they were so minded, or even ask for forgiveness. In some cases the victims were able to forgive. But at least the process created the possibility of some reconciliation, and South Africa was the better for it.

What we need in this country today are minds, like Bishop Tutu's, that won't just go along with our present polarizing climate but are able to see beyond it to a better way of living together. Those who will work for "the renewing of their minds" in the light of Christ are those who can lead us to a future worth having.

As you students move ahead in your academic careers, then, I urge you to go for bigger goals than just getting good-paying jobs. That's fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. You're out to build a life for yourself, and that means figuring out what's true and good and life-giving—the values and outlooks that will make your life all it can be. Let me be bold enough to suggest a few marks of a mind that's growing in that direction:

- It's a mind that can see the bigger picture in the situations you face. It doesn't get stuck in trivial concerns or caught up in group-think. It always hopes for something better and looks to larger possibilities.
- It's a mind with a clear sense of the truths and values it holds to—even while recognizing there's more of the truth and the good yet to be realized. That means it's willing to change its thinking when new insight comes.
- It's a mind with a growing sense of purpose regarding what it has to contribute to the world. It senses life is a gift, and works to answer the question, what has God put me on this earth for?
- It's a mind that takes into account the well-being of others along with self. It recognizes that “no man is an island,” and the well-being of the whole human family has everything to do with my well-being. As scripture puts it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
- Finally, it's a mind that trusts that a loving God is there for us, and so we do not need to live in fear. We all know bad things can happen to any of us, but rather than living anxiously, we can choose to trust in a God who cares for us beyond what we can ever imagine, and believe that trust will see us through.

Now I trust you recognize the relevance of these remarks not only for students but for all of us, wherever we are in our life journey. John Wesley said we are all called to go on to perfection, and that means continually being transformed by the renewal of our minds so that we lay hold of the truth and the good and the commendable and build our lives around that. It's no small challenge and we still have work to do. And in this Pentecost season we trust that God's Spirit is at work helping us get on with the task. Amen.