

“Learning in the Pandemic”
September 13, 2020

Proverbs 9:1-12
John 8:12, 31-32

Once again this past week we were confronted with the need to separate truth from falsehood.

With over 1,200 Covid-19 deaths in Iowa alone and with death toll in the United States closing in on 200,000, we learned from his own words that the President knew the coronavirus was a major threat to our nation’s health—“deadly,” he called it—but chose to publicly deny this. As cases increased, as deaths increased, he continued to minimize the problem, to lie about its seriousness, and to ridicule efforts to stop the spread of the disease, such as wearing a mask.

We have become inured to lies and falsehoods over the past 3½-4 years.

Knowing that we are not hearing the truth has become the distorted reality in which we have lived through each day. Fact-checkers are kept busy around the clock. Back in June, the *Washington Post* stated that the President had made 20,000 false or misleading claims since the beginning of his presidency.

Now we know just how destructive and yes, even deadly, those false claims are.

Our ongoing pursuit of the truth, then, is vital to our well-being as individuals and as nation.

As the academic year begins, then, we are confronted with the urgency of a primary goal of education: getting at the truth.

When Congregationalists founded Harvard, they took as their motto: *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*—Truth for Christ and His Church, which they later shortened to simply *Veritas*.

Down in New Haven, the Congregationalist in Connecticut chose the motto *Lux et Veritas*—Light and Truth, hoping, I guess to brighten things up a little bit compared to Cambridge, where the light seemed to have dimmed.

As Congregationalist moved west, they established more colleges—from schools such as Grinnell and Carleton in the Midwest to Pomona in California—so that from sea to shining sea the lamp of learning and truth might shed its light on this nation.

Teaching and learning are religious concerns. We seek to grow in wisdom and knowledge out of the sense that all truth is God’s truth, that in our pursuit of truth we are pursuing the divine.

The ancient book of Proverbs gives us that image of divine Wisdom calling the simple, the unwise—that is calling *us*—to a great banquet. She invites us “Lay aside immaturity, and live and walk in the way of insight.” In other words, “Grow up,” which is yet another goal of education. And we are told that the “fear of the Lord”—that is, reverence toward God—is the beginning of the wisdom that we seek, that “knowledge of the Holy One” is indeed the insight that we need.

This thought was echoed centuries later by the great French Reformer, John Calvin, whose work led to the Reformation in England and, therefore, ultimately to the development of Congregational churches such as ours. He famously wrote at the beginning of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that all true wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of our selves. He keeps coming back to this central affirmation several times in the *Institutes*.

He recognizes that it is not easy to discern which brings forth the other, but self-knowledge seems to lead us to seek and, to some extent, even to know God. At the same time, we can't really have a clear understanding of ourselves unless we also have some knowledge of God.

Our knowledge of God is limited at best.

Our knowledge of ourselves is incomplete as well.

In humility we recognize this reality even as we seek to grow in knowledge.

I was thinking about this much of last week. And then I got some help when, just last Thursday, David Brooks, reflecting on the President's unwillingness to be honest with our nation about the dangers of Covid-19, said that St. Augustine's theory of knowledge begins with love.

Love, he says, is a focus of attention.

Love is a motivation to learn more about a person.

Love is a reverence for the image of God in each person.

Our search for knowledge, our pursuit of the truth begins, not in the classroom or lab, not in the practice room or library, it begins with love. Love, of course, can lead us to unexpected places, such as classrooms or Zoom lectures.

Brooks concluded that "the heart is the key to understanding. To accurately size up a human situation you have to project a certain quality of attention that is personal, gentle, respectful, intimate and affectionate — more moving with and feeling into than simply observing with detachment."

Love is the beginning of knowledge.

The heart is the key to wisdom.

And from such a beginning, with such a key, we continue to seek and to study and to learn—not about ourselves alone and not even about God alone, but about all things in this vast and wondrous creation.

The most unusual academic year in our lifetime has begun with all of its strangeness. With masks and skyrocketing Covid-19 cases, students have returned to Iowa City. Many faculty and department offices are empty as professors and other instructors teach and meet with students online.

Because of the increasing number of Covid-19 cases, our public schools received permission to begin the year online for two weeks—and that permission has just been extended for another two weeks. Parents continue to juggle work life and school life and home life—often all in the same household.

Ask any parent or child, any professor or university student: Learning in the pandemic has changed. In person or online, it looks different, it feels different, it is different.

And while we are just at the beginning of this new experiment in learning, perhaps it is not too soon to suggest that we can learn in adversity. When the challenges are great, it might be that the opportunities are great as well.

The difficulties and challenges of these days test all of us, but they test those who learn and those who teach in special ways. In these days Wisdom extends to both students and teachers the promise: “Give instruction to the wise and they will become wiser still.” That is to say, the possibility of great achievement is with us even now.

And even now, in the most difficult and trying circumstances that most of us have known—pandemic, economic turmoil, racial reckoning, great natural disasters that hint of the destructive nature of climate change, and a lack of coordinated leadership on both the state and national level overseen by a president who openly admits to lying for political gain—even now we can seek the truth and the light that it provides. Especially now we must do so.

And I say “we” because this kind of learning is not confined to those on campus or in the classroom whether it is physical or online. Wisdom calls to all of us, inviting us to learn in these days who God is and who we are, to know ourselves and our neighbors as those created in the image of God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

All human beings are loved by God, cherished by their Creator. Knowing who we are, we see that lies and falsehoods violate the image of God in all people. Hunger violates the image of God in all people. Poverty violates the image of God in all people. Racism violates the image of God in all people. We honor and respect one another, our neighbors, even our enemies because we see the image of God in each person.

In the Talmud we read those wonderful words of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: “A procession of angels passes before a human being wherever he or she goes, proclaiming, “Make way for the image of God.” Think of the changes in our politics, our economics, our teaching and learning, our providing care, our creative work, our businesses, our family life if we held such a vision close to our hearts.

As the pandemic continues, may we seek the reverence of God that is the beginning of wisdom.

May we recognize the image of God in ourselves and in all people, which is the fruit of that wisdom.

And may we continue to shine the light of wisdom on all things so that we can separate truth from falsehood, walk out of the shadows in the light of life, and come to know the truth that will make us free.