

Work in Progress

Hebrews 12:1-2 Mark 12:28-34

When I was a child, I was given a bookmark with a picture of a kitten barely hanging on to a tree branch with the words **“Be patient, God’s not finished with me yet”** on it. The kitten was cute, but the sentiment stuck with me as a child, and the scripture that corresponds from the first chapter of Philippians, chapter 6: *“I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.”* That comforting to a girl trying to become a faithful person but was curious and keenly aware of every misstep and mistake. We are works in progress.

When PRCC was coming up with our vision statement of who we are as a congregation and what we are about – The first step is celebrating unity in Christ, diversity in faith in our worship by LEARNING. The first piece of who we are is that we are learners together. Together as a congregation, we are committed to learning. In committees and on teams, you all learn how to run this church, how to get the finances to cover all the bills and needs for ministry, how to reach out to visitors and guests in ways that are not intimidating but welcoming, how to expand our mission efforts to provide school supplies, meals, and even clean water to those in need. We are learning through Bible Studies and through our worship together.

The worship series we just completed on the diversity of faiths helped us learn so much about world religions and we realized how much more we have to learn. And that’s okay because we’re in the right place! Our Faith development team has blessed the concept that each fall, starting with Rally Day, we’ll launch a Learn N’ Go series. In this, we will provide opportunities for all ages in our congregation to learn and then go and see. We can link sermon series up with museum exhibits, trips to places near and far, and see for ourselves. **PRCC is a church committed to continuing to learn.**

Our Gospel lesson in Mark today picks up in the middle. So I want to bring you up to speed. Jesus has already entered Jerusalem with the parade. He has already been causing some disputes and disagreements about who is in charge. In the Gospel of Mark, the scribes have made appearances from the very beginning criticizing Jesus, first for healing on the Sabbath, then for who he chose to eat dinner with, accused him of being Beelzebub, since he could exorcize demons, questioned his handwashing, and questioned his authority to teach. Immediately prior to the verses I just read, he was asked about whether or not he thought people should pay taxes, and then about resurrection.

The Scribes were those who were taught to read and write and copy the scriptures of Israel’s faith and so they knew the verses better than anyone. I’m not sure if they were questioning Jesus out of an earnest attempt to learn or to trick him. In Luke and Matthew’s accounts of this conversation they say the Scribe is trying to trick Jesus. Not so in Mark’s version. This scribe upon hearing Jesus’ answers to the previous questions

and thinks well of Jesus' responses decides to ask him for the greatest commandment. There are over 600 commandments, and the Scribe and Jesus know this all too well.

Jesus responded with the Schema, the verse in Deuteronomy 6: 4-5, Hear O Israel, you shall love your God. Then he adds the verse from Leviticus 19:18 you shall love your neighbor as yourself. As if you can't love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength without also loving your neighbor. The Scribe agrees and adds that loving God and neighbors seems even more important than all the burnt offerings. This seems to take a weird turn, as a slight critique on the Temple taxes. Later in this chapter, Jesus sees a widow placing a small amount in the offering plate and comments that she's given more than everyone. The passage ends that no one else "dared" to ask Jesus any more questions, as if this settled it.

This encounter is a good one for us to consider as we consider how we learn. The Scribe wasn't done learning, even after years of formal education. We are not done learning about God or our scriptures even after attending Sunday School, singing in the choir, and listening to stellar sermons. This faith journey is a life-long adventure.

One of the greatest honors of being a pastor is getting to sit with families and hear stories about their loved ones as we prepare to celebrate their lives. Yesterday we honored Ruth Naudzius, mother to Lonn and Laura, teacher of many at Lincoln Middle. This evening we will light candles and remember loved ones lost in the last year, but we also recognize that a year isn't an expiration date on love.

Our love and our memories and our grief lasts far longer, and on this All saints Sunday, we remember those who have been important teachers to us throughout our lives:

Jack and June Hedrick who were long-time pillars of this church. Carole Nelson, quiet soul who sang in the choir and rang bells on high, and always had a smile and a word of kindness, Jim Reeder, who would come to support his beloved Greg and the choir, beaming from the front row with shining blue eyes, Nancy Zuegel who had ideas about gardens for our grounds. Mel Pirok, history teacher at Niles West who made history come alive, and whose granddaughters brought him to church here with Judy to find community. Irene Ginger who originally came up with the interfaith series and brought in excellent presenters about world religions because she thought PRCC needed to continue to value LEARNING. Pat Nelson, Carolyn Merrifield...

The list goes on and on – people whose lives taught us, shaped us, helped us to know God and to know who we are as children of God. Today we remember, and we give thanks, and we celebrate that their impact continues on. We grieve, yes, and we celebrate, yes. We celebrate that through communion, we join our loved ones at the banquet. We celebrate that our Saints, our loved ones have already marched into Heaven and one day we will join them! Thanks be to God – we are learning, we are growing, we are serving, we are playing because of them, because of God, and because of the power of love.

There's a poem written by Marcia McFee, I posted on Facebook so some of you may have already read it. It goes like this:

*Today we fall back. Not just with our clocks
that usher in the darker days of winter...
But also we fall back upon our memories
of loved ones gone from this realm.
We fall back upon the emptiness
that we still sometimes feel at their absence.
We fall back upon our gratefulness
that such a cloud of witnesses paved the way for us.
We fall back upon our faith,
That just as the Holy walked with them, so too the Holy walks with us.
And today let us also fall back into the arms of loved ones still with us,
And remember to tell them just how much they mean to us.
Today let us fall back into the ever-present arms of the Holy One, remembering to say,
"thank you, thank you, thank you."*

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Amen.