

Loving God with All Our Minds: A Reminder for Preachers

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Passion Disconnected from Mindfulness

Recently, while flipping through the pages of some old magazines I was tossing in the recycling bin, I happened upon one of those memorable advertisements from the United Negro College Fund and its reminder that “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” The ad, of course, was encouraging support for its vital educational work, but I saw it as apt commentary on a disturbing sign of our times – the mindlessness and absence of rational thought that characterize so many public utterances, political speeches, and even ecclesiastical language in this land.

Virtually everywhere one looks, there is more heat to discern than light. Across the country, meetings of city councils and school boards and town meetings have become ideological contests in which the aim appears to be to see which side can make the most noise. Civil discourse and mutual respect have yielded the floor to uncivil discord and personal attacks. The mainstream media seem to have ceded the day to such irrationality. I don’t know who thought it would be a good idea to leave room at the end of online news reports for public comments, but I suspect they did not foresee the torrent of vehemence, passion, and mind-numbing vitriol the practice would unleash. Even religious communities and assemblies, founded in love and grace and mindfulness, have no immunity to such irrational behavior. Consider the extreme, irrational language of some church leaders in recent years in statements on everything from Islam to human sexuality. Bertrand Russell was right when he observed that “more cranks take up fashionable untruths than unfashionable truths,”¹ but my guess is that even Russell would have been appalled by the current fashion in our day. Passion disconnected from mindfulness and reason has never served the human family well. In these days we need the challenging reminder of John Calvin’s understated observation that “the tongue without the mind must be highly displeasing to God.”²

The Church of Jesus Christ has no small stake in turning the present tide; indeed, thoughtful, mindful Christianity can still be a force for redemption, for healing the breaches that divide people, for restoring civility and understanding to our speech and our encounters with those who think differently than we do. We find our moorings as Christians in the old Hebrew understanding that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10), which is to say that true wisdom begins with a sense of mystery and awe in the presence of God. The writer of Deuteronomy framed such awe in terms of the affirmation and command which lies at the heart of the Hebrew Torah and at the center of our faith as well: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5).

The three synoptic gospels each remember that when Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, he cited that same *Shema* with a notable expansion: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with

all your mind, and with all your strength.” Then he added, “And your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27). Our minds are integral parts of that central equation of devotion. The life of the mind is crucial to a life lived in the service of God. We are, after all, those who have been encouraged to embrace the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5) – a mind of humility, thoughtfulness, and self-emptying embrace of God’s purposes. The imperative in Jesus’ reiteration of the commandment requires of us honest thought and the alignment of our intellects with our hearts and wills in the service of God.

The love of learning, the proper stewardship of rational capacities, and hearts inclined to explore the depths of Scripture were likewise characteristics of the Reformation and the Reformed tradition from their beginnings. From our roots we have been shaped as a people for whom the life of the mind was an appropriate and faithful venue for stewardship and discipleship. Our forebears planted schools wherever they established churches. They established scores of church-related colleges in this land, not only to teach matters of faith, but also to offer an education in the liberal arts and to prepare graduates for lives of service.

From the church’s vantage point in our time, however, one would have to say such efforts have not stemmed the rising tides of ignorance, fear, and distrust. There are still strong faith communities where biblical literacy and engagement with the larger culture are valued, where the Gospel is proclaimed in a lively engagement with the complexities of modern life, and where congregants are well versed in the grammar of faith. I worry, though, that such congregations are too often outnumbered. We could point as well to other congregations that rally precisely around “fashionable untruths,” around unadulterated anti-intellectual prejudice. And we could point to a resistance to probing the depths even in our own faith communities. It is against such a tide that churches and preachers need to reclaim their voice.

Addressing the fall convocation at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary last September during his first months as seminary president, Michael Jinkins lamented the loss of an intellectually rigorous faith as he recounted his own personal journey of faith.

As a young person, I became a Presbyterian in large measure *because* of the Reformed movement’s conviction that our love of God is somehow incomplete until we love God with our minds, as well as with heart, soul, and strength. I also worry what will become of Christian faith – indeed, I worry what will become of the world we live in – if Christians fail to ask the tough, deep, critical, sometimes intractable questions posed by and about faith. I am concerned about what it will mean for us all if Christians choose to ignore life’s most profound mysteries and insoluble riddles. I am concerned about the integrity of the church if we abandon the curiosity that is courageous enough to swim at the deep end of the pool, or if we jettison a passion for ideas and knowledge and wisdom for their own sake. And I am equally disturbed about what will become of society if persons of faith retreat from the public sphere, where ideas must fight for their lives among competing interests, and where justice is served by vigorous argumentation and informed action as much as by high ideals.³

Decades ago, the evangelical teacher R.C. Sproul raised an alarm at what he called “the most anti-intellectual period in the history of Western civilization” and argued that while we needed passion in the church – “hearts on fire for the things of God” – yet, he said, “that passion must resist with intensity the anti-intellectual spirit of the world.”⁴ In our own day, when passion seems often disconnected from reason, the church needs more than ever to embrace the life of the mind as a form of faithful service to God. The onus for such a movement is on the clergy. It matters not whether the congregation we serve meets in an urban cathedral, a rural frame building, or an old storefront; we ought never to underestimate our parishioners’ capacity for depth. In his seminary convocation address, Jinkins noted:

The comments of the lay people I meet, people who want to learn more about their faith, are often along the lines of an elderly woman who approached Tom Long one evening after he had preached in one of the many congregations in which he has spoken around the country. As Tom was making his way from the pulpit to the exit, the woman stepped forward to greet him. Earlier in the evening he had invited members of the congregation to share with him any messages they’d like him to take back to the students he teaches in seminary. As this woman stepped forward, Tom greeted her with the question: “Is there a message you’d like me to take back to the seminary, something you’d like me to tell our students?”

“Yes, there is,” she said. “Tell them to take us seriously.”

Now, I know that not every person in our churches—or indeed in our society—craves to understand God, or, indeed, anything else, more deeply. Certainly, we must speak with a compelling voice if we hope to be heard. What we say must be said well and interestingly. And I would be among the first to argue that we have a mandate not to bore. But treasure seldom lies on the surface.⁵

Preachers have a crucial role to play in helping their congregations learn to plumb the depths. There is, of course, a difference between preaching and exegesis, between preaching and a theology class. We have all heard sermons that bogged down in the latter. But doubtless we’ve also heard sermons that never pushed out from the shallows. Thoughtful preaching--preaching that embraces the mind’s rational processes in an engaging way--most often finds its genesis in and moves out from a deep encounter with scripture. In my experience, most people in the pews readily acknowledge their lack of biblical and theological awareness and confess a desire to know more. They want to learn, to explore the faith at a deeper level, and they want that depth to be part of what they hear from the pulpit.

Minds Disconnected from Hearts

As we seek to respond to the lament about the way passion gets disconnected from reason, we would do well to consider that there is also potential for unfaithfulness when rationality is detached from its relationship to heart and soul, when reason comes untethered from ethics. In his commentary on Mark’s Gospel, Alan Culpepper notes that more than simple rationality was at stake in Jesus’ expansion of the first great commandment to include loving God with all one’s mind. “Mind” or “under-

standing” (*dianoia*), he argues, denotes moral consciousness.⁶

Occasionally, a preacher encounters a story so compelling that it becomes forever linked to the way she/he understands a text. I discovered such a story some years ago in an essay Robert Coles wrote for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.⁷ Coles described one of his students, a young woman who came to Harvard University from the Midwest, from a working class family. To fill the gap between financial aid and financial need, she was working her way through Harvard, and, in so doing, was cleaning the rooms of some of her fellow Harvard students as a housekeeper. The student told Coles that in her work as a housekeeper, again and again she had encountered classmates who “apparently had forgotten the meaning of *please* and *thank you* – no matter how high their [S.A.T.] scores – students who did not hesitate to be rude, even crude toward her.”

Coles said the young woman came to see him in tears one day, describing for him a work-related encounter in the dorm with a classmate who had sexually harassed her. It was not the first time, she said. And after all the other harassment and rudeness, she had finally reached the breaking point. Feeling vulnerable and hard-pressed, she had quit her job and was getting ready to drop out of school.

As she told Coles about the precipitating problem with the unprincipled classmate, she commented that the young man who had harassed her was a very good pre-med student. “That guy gets all A’s,” she said. “In fact, I’ve taken two moral reasoning courses with him, and I’m sure he’s gotten A’s in both of them – and yet look at how he behaves with me, and I’m sure with others.” She talked about the irony of it happening at Harvard, of all places. Then, said Coles, she became a bit more reflective. A philosophy major, she began to talk about a course she had taken on the Holocaust and of the ironies of that unspeakable crime – that it could have happened in a nation previously known as one of the most civilized in the world, with a citizenry as well educated as that of any country at the time.

Before she left his office and the university as well, she asked Coles a pointed question: “I’ve been taking all these philosophy courses, and we talk about what’s true, what’s important, what’s *good*. Well, how do you teach people to *be* good? What’s the point of *knowing* good if you don’t keep trying to *become* a good person?”

She raised a very good question. Indeed, we might ask, what’s the use of learning and education at all if it does not make some significant contribution to the public good, if it does not make us better persons and more thoughtful contributors to the communities and world in which we live? Franklin Roosevelt once said, “To train a [person] in mind and not in morals is to train a menace to society,” but that idea draws fire today in an age of moral relativism and multi-culturalism. Whose morals? Which values? According to what authority? They are, of course, legitimate questions, which make simple answers very difficult to come by. So, let me simplify matters a bit by focusing our attention on the role of Christian preachers, teachers, and leaders to help education find its heart and its soul; that is, to help bridge the chasm between intellect and character, between *knowing* good and *doing* it. The single-mindedness that Jesus taught his followers leaves no room for a knowledge/morality gap in its focused way of living. Knowledge, faith, behavior, and character all fit together, as do heart, mind, soul, and strength. They are all part of our calling and responsibility.

Of course, the greater the knowledge one attains, the higher the responsibility for faithful living. It is a point underwritten by Jesus’ reminder to the disciples that

“from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). And so, to all intelligent, articulate, highly-educated people, the challenge is even greater. As we *know*, so should we *do*. As we have been given, so should we give.

And thus, not only should the life of the mind provide an impetus to right behavior; it also should ask of us something more than the pursuit of self-interest. In the Christian consciousness, education is never simply for the enhancement of self, but always for service. During his tenure as president of Davidson College, John Kuykendall spoke often about the historic Christian and, more specifically, Presbyterian linkage of education and service. Scholarship and service go hand in hand, he said; and the aim of the former is always to prepare us for the latter. I find it a deep sign of hope and encouragement that many students at the university where I serve seem to embrace such a belief and eschew the notion that the primary goal of education is self-betterment or the satisfaction of personal ambitions. The church and its leaders should always press us to see that serving God with all our minds helps equip faithful persons better to serve not only God, but also the welfare and virtue of the whole community. Education is for service. A proper stewardship of the mind leads to the upbuilding of the community in justice and equity and integrity.

I had an eccentric old chemistry teacher in high school, one who had mastered the art of teaching by intimidation, who graded each day’s class performance by hundreds and zeros. I’ll call him Mr. Smith. Consistently he began each day by a tour of the room, asking each of us a question, giving each of us a hundred or zero. There was one day, however, when the first question he asked was a stumper. The first student nervously ventured a guess, but missed. Zero. Another shrugged his shoulders. Zero. One girl just started crying. Still, a zero. One by one, we all missed the answer, and all of us felt the sting of the zero in Mr. Smith’s grade book.

Then he rose from his desk, and launched into his little homily for the morning. “There are four types of persons in this world,” he said. “There are those who know, and *know* that they know. There are those who know, and know *not* that they know. There are those who know not, but *know* that they know not. And then there are *you*: those who know not, and *know not* that they know not.”

He may have been right then, as much as he embarrassed us. By and large, however, that’s not our problem today. We know. The challenge for us is to *do* and to *be* as well as we know. And it is always a challenge for educated people.

Think back for a moment to the Harvard sophomore who asked Robert Coles how intelligent, civilized people could allow and participate in such horrors as the Holocaust, as she thought of the classmate who had behaved so poorly toward her. Her question about the Holocaust brought to my mind a different memory of those horrific days on our world stage. More than thirty years ago the philosopher Philip Hallie wrote a book about a remarkable French village, a town whose people, unlike so many others in France, engaged in the dangerous practice of sheltering Jews from the Nazis during the German occupation. The name of the village was Le Chambon, and Hallie went there to try to discover what led those simple villagers to do such an extraordinary thing. What he discovered was that they weren’t particularly heroic or extraordinary people... not even politically enlightened.

In fact, what he found was that the largest part of their education had come from the teachings of the village church and from its faithful pastor, André Trocmé. Each

week Pastor Trocmé proclaimed the Word, and each week the members of the parish studied the Scriptures, and each week they came to understand something of what it meant to be called to discipleship and faithfulness. Over time, week by week, the people there came, by habit, to be people who *knew* what to do and who also developed a willingness to do it. When the time came for them to be courageous, specifically when the Nazis came to town looking for Jews, the people of Le Chambon quietly did what was right--they sheltered their Jewish brothers and sisters from harm.

One elderly woman, who faked a heart attack when the Nazis came to search her house, said later, "Pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus. When our time came, we knew what to do." Another woman, when asked why she would risk her life for the sake of these total strangers, replied, "For what else was I born?"⁸

Mindless passion threatens to undo the world. But the life of the mind disconnected from the human heart and soul is empty and devoid of promise. Preaching and teaching that embody heart and soul together will yield servanthood and strength. It is the mission of the church in every village, household, and city to help tie together scholarship and service, intellect and character, mind and heart, to help connect the life of the mind with its heart and soul and strength. Why take the time for study? Why continue to explore and learn? Why love God with all our minds? Why strive to integrate heart and soul and mind and strength in the service of God and humankind? For what else were we born?

Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950).
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, xx, 33, tr. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 896.
3. Michael Jenkins, "The Life of the Mind in the Service of God: Why a Thinking Faith Still Matters," convocation address at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, September 9, 2010.
4. R.C. Sproul, "Burning Hearts Are Not Nourished by Empty Heads," *Christianity Today*, 26 (September 3, 1982), 100.
5. Jenkins, citing Tom Long, "A Matter of Depth," sermon preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia, October 5, 2003.
6. R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2007), 421.
7. Robert Coles, "The Disparity Between Intellect and Character," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 22, 1995), A68.
8. Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979), 286.