

“Will you devote yourself to the church’s teaching?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
March 19, 2023

John 9:1-17, 24-41

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I know that our Confirmation students may be too young to remember this scene, but we old folks (and yes, somehow I am now in that category) will never forget Robin Williams as Mr. Keating in the movie *Dead Poets Society*, playing an English teacher. The scene begins with a student reading aloud from their textbook on analyzing poetry. The boys look bored out of their minds. After they’ve finished reading the preeminent scholar, with his graphs of what makes a poem great, Mr. Keating tells them to rip out the page. Rip out the whole introduction! Soon, a flurry of hands and paper fills the classroom. “Keep ripping, gentlemen,” Mr. Keating says. “This is a battle, a war, and the casualties could be your hearts and souls. Armies of academics going forward, measuring poetry. No! We will not have that here. Now, in my class you will learn to think for yourselves again.”

As the boys huddle around their teacher, Mr. Keating shares a secret: “We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion... To quote from Whitman: ‘Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring, of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish... What good amid these, O me, O life? *Answer*. That you are here—that life exists and identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.’”

Mr. Keating looks at his students and asks, “What will your verse be?”

Today, our Confirmation curriculum has us asking the question, “Will you devote yourself to the church’s teaching?” Now, there’s a lot of good here, in this book. But there’s one thing it never really gets into in this chapter: you. Your conscience. Your place in this ongoing story of God and humanity. Your verse.

I’m not going to rip out a page. This thing’s expensive! But there are many out there who would have you sit nicely in your pews and quietly absorb the teachings of the past as if they were absolute truth. But you are not an empty vessel to be filled. You are already full of the Holy Spirit. You have ideas, dreams, of your own—and they very well may come from God. Your voice is no less than any voice of the past or present. Our role as teachers isn’t to fill you up with information; it’s to bring you alive so that you can encounter that Holy Spirit for yourself and discover truth for yourself, individually and communally.

Faith is a passionate love affair with God, in which you use all of yourself: your mind, your heart, your body, your soul.

“Will you devote yourself to the church’s teachings?” Now, there’s the problem. There are two kinds of devotion. The religious leaders in our story *are* devoted. They obey what they have been

taught. And so when Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath, they are confounded. The teaching of the “church” at the time said that disabilities and illness were the result of sin.¹ It said you shouldn’t help this man on the Sabbath unless it was a life-or-death emergency. It said that eyes could not be opened. It said that rule breakers could not be from God. It said that sinners couldn’t teach. “Are you going to teach us?” they ask with indignation the man who was once blind.

Over and over again, they speak with the tones of certainty. Of Jesus they say, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath,” and “We *know* that this man is a sinner.” And anyone who breaks from these certain teachings will be rejected. For they “had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.” When the man who was once blind stands by Jesus, the leaders “revile” him and drive him out. He stands on the outside, with anyone who’s ever been kicked out of their church, because they believed or thought differently, because they found out they were gay or transgender, because they got divorced or refused to accept abuse, because they have disabilities or mental health challenges.

In steps a Jewish rabbi by the name of Jesus. Jesus and the man he will heal are also devoted, but in a very different way. This is the same Jesus who, in the Sermon on the Mount, will say repeatedly, “You have heard it said, but I say to you...” as he contrasts a commonly held teaching with his own assertion of truth. So when the disciples ask him who sinned, the man who is blind or his parents, Jesus denies the assumption. He says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” This particular teaching of the church is wrong. Another teaching, however, may be right—a teaching later expressed in Paul’s Letter to the Romans when he writes, “God makes all things work together for good” (8:28). This doesn’t mean that God causes all things, especially things that hurt; it means that God is present in all things, working to turn them around toward hope. So, whereas the religious leaders saw in the man’s blindness only something to condemn, Jesus sees the hopeful work of God; he sees a miracle—not just in the healing but in who this man is even before the healing.

Jesus loves him. He hurts to think of the pain this man has borne, the social isolation and poverty, the wondering whether God even cares. So Jesus heals him. He knows that the church’s teaching forbids it: it’s the Sabbath. But Jesus prioritizes another teaching of the church, a greater teaching, a teaching he will elsewhere call the greatest commandment: to love God and to love your neighbor. Just like our Mr. Rogers, whom we remember today, Jesus prioritizes loving and helping the man who is blind.

Jesus implies that the church’s teachings are subject to this rubric: Does it help you love God and neighbor? If the answer is yes, it is worthy of your devotion. If the answer is no, it is not worthy.

Jesus also implies that our devotion should be touched with humility. In contrast to the leaders who think they know everything, our formerly blind man says with humility, “I do not know

¹ This teaching draws on Scripture, such as the Holiness Code in Leviticus, chapters 17-26, and Exodus 20:5, in which God visits the sins of parents on their descendants. It was also a popular theory in the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman world. If God, or the gods, were all powerful and in control, then anything bad that happens to you must surely be the will (and punishment) of God. This teaching, however, is explicitly challenged elsewhere in Scripture, particularly in the Book of Job (which insists that suffering is not the result of sin, but that bad things happen to good people) and Ezekiel 18:20, which says that “a child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent.”

whether he [referring to Jesus] is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

Jesus says that people, like the religious leaders, who think they see everything, are actually the blind ones, whereas the people who meet the world with humility and curiosity, who recognize that they don't see everything and thus need God's help, these are the people who truly see.

Whereas the leaders drive the man out, Jesus seeks him out. For, Jesus said a few chapters earlier: “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37).

One devotion excludes. The other invites. One pretends to know everything. The other understands that our knowledge is limited. One focuses on dogmatic obedience. The other focuses on the practicality of love. One is top-down. The other invites us to learn from each other in a mutual teaching.

We, as Presbyterians, value the church's teaching. We have a Book of Confessions. It is a collection of teachings from the early centuries of the church to the 20th century. They are the witness of others who have walked with God, studied Scripture, prayed, served, and loved. And they are worthy of our devotion because “we are fallible human beings, prone to error, and inclined to forget who and whose we are.”² We need the help of our ancestors who have honestly, and together, wrestled with these questions of faith.

But these teachings are not God. They are not perfect. They are shaped by the gifts *and* the limitations of their historical time. To devote ourselves to these teachings is not to follow them blindly. We follow Jesus, and no one else. Rather, to devote ourselves is to study them, to find in them a partner for this journey with Christ.

We are a creedal church, not a fundamentalist church. Fundamentalists believe that there are certain beliefs you have to hold, and if you don't, you're out—just like our man who was blind. Presbyterians have consistently resisted any movement to reduce us to any fundamental other than the essential belief that Jesus is Lord and Savior. In fact, Auburn—yes, our little community—was a leader in this resistance to fundamentalism.

Instead, we have creeds. The Latin *credo* is often translated as “I believe,” but it means more than that. It means, “I give my heart, I love, I devote.”

To devote yourself to the church's teachings is to hold them on your heart loosely. We devote ourselves to the process of people wrestling with faith together, listening to each other, praying to God, studying Scripture, and above all, loving God, loving each other.

Jesus alone is the Lord of your conscience. He may whisper something to you that has never been whispered before, or never understood before.

Still the debate between these two kinds of devotion rages in our society. The one would silence you. Do not let it. The other would ask you: What will your verse be? **Amen.**

² Perky Daniel, “Why do we confess our faith?” *Presbyterians Today* (May 1996)