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“Faith and Critical Thinking are not Mutually Exclusive!”

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Deuteronomy 6:4-9

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

When I was in the fourth grade, about 1989, I was really excited about reading things about science and space. I will always remember one of the books that I read that year. I can't tell you the title, but I can tell you this. In 1989, in my small town in Kansas I picked up a book about the moon and one of the sentences in the first few paragraphs went something like this, “Someday scientists hope to put a man on the moon.” Even as a fourth grader, this didn't make much sense to me!

In July of 1969 Neil Armstrong had already been the first person to set foot on the moon. As I sat there in my fourth grade classroom, some twenty years after the event had happened; I was perplexed to read that scientists hoped it might someday happen. Needless to say, that book, and probably many others in that library were horribly outdated. In the early 60's when that book had been written scientists did hope that someone would some day set foot on the moon. Times change though, and today information spreads quickly. And this is more and more so the case every day as technology increases and becomes more and more accessible to more and more people.

I've been quite interested in the last couple of weeks hearing about Pluto's demotion from a planet to a dwarf planet. Cutesy acronyms to remember the names of planets will have to be relearned, science project mobiles will have to be reworked, dorm

room decorations and glow-in-the-dark star kits will have to be redone. But, it is my belief, and my sincere hope that twenty years from now no fourth grader will pick up a book that talks about Pluto as one of the planets. With the continued increase of technology students twenty years from now will be learning about the solar system and other marvels of creation with the latest and greatest tools available. This is something to celebrate. Technology and science, history and anthropology, the sciences that teach us about the world around us are incredible gifts. And current and future generations of students will be blessed to learn and grow in a world where they have these disciplines increasingly at their fingertips.

Educating children is one of the greatest priorities in nearly every culture. Throughout history this priority has been lived out as apprentices have studied with masters to learn a craft, as children have studied in schools to learn trades, and in recent generations, especially in western cultures, as young people have increasingly been given the opportunity to receive formal education. In our communities today the expectation exists, nearly across the board, that young people will graduate from high school. And when many of them do they will have already taken more college level courses and been exposed to more opportunities than people a generation or two ago were in their lifetime. Teaching our children is of the utmost importance and we encourage children to learn and to push themselves in a variety of ways.

While our modern emphasis on formalized education has increased in recent years, the need to teach children well is as old as the scriptures themselves. In the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy we find what is one of the central teachings of the Hebrew faith; a teaching called Shema. Deuteronomy 6:4-9, the Shema, reads as follows,

“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. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

In some streams of Judaism these commandments are understood quite literally. When they pray they wear small leather boxes called phylacteries on their heads and on their arms that hold these words in them. They also post small boxes called Mezuzah's on their doorposts that contain these words. In fact, the tradition of the Mezuzah is one that has even carried over into the lives of some Christians today. Both the Conger and the Clinger homes have one on their door post as a way of remembering the role of God in our lives as we go into the world and as we return to our homes.

More widespread than this literal interpretation, however, is a symbolic one. These words from the book of Deuteronomy teach us of the importance of putting God first in our lives, of emphasizing the importance of this with our children, and of living our lives in our homes and in the world with an awareness of God's presence. We are to understand these things and as the Shema teaches us, we are to teach these things to our children.

Today is our Rally Day here at Ridge United Methodist Church, the day that we kick-off our Sunday school classes and that we celebrate the importance of Christian education for our children and for people of all ages. Today at 9:45 we will present each of our 2nd and 3rd graders with a Bible and it is our hope that they will use this gift to learn more about the role that God plays in their lives and in the world around them. It is our hope that they will take these gifts and constantly learn and grow in God's love and God's grace.

Beyond simply hoping, it is also our responsibility as a congregation to make sure that these young people are learning and growing in their faith. And in order to do this effectively, we must all continually learn and grow in our faith as well. It is our responsibility as Christians to be life long learners as we journey through this life. This won't be an easy task, but is one to which we have a religious obligation.

When I was a student at Nebraska Wesleyan University we had a great lecture series that brought in leading scholars and authors in religious studies. One year Bishop John Shelby Spong came to speak and following his lecture he opened up the floor for a time of question and answer. Now Bishop Spong is a rather cutting edge thinker who challenges the church on a number of hot button issues. One of the first questions to be asked then went something like this, "What do you think is the most difficult issue facing the church today?" The implied subtext of the question was which is going to cause a bigger fight, sexuality, abortion, or war?

However, in response to the question, "What do you think is the most difficult issue facing the church today?" Bishop Spong said the following, "Pastors taking all of their seminary education and putting it away in file cabinets only to continue preaching the exact same things they learned in their Sunday school classes decades before." In Bishop Spong's estimation, the most difficult issue facing the church today is that there is a wealth of information about the Bible, Church History, and Theology that pastors aren't teaching their congregations. Why do you think this is? Why aren't Pastors sharing this new information with their congregations?

Insofar as it pertains to the idea of educating our children let me share briefly this morning a developmental concept that I have found to be quite helpful over the course of

the last few years. These three stages of development are talked about by Marcus Borg in the Living the Questions Study that some of you did with Kathy and I last year. They are Pre-Critical Naiveté, Critical Thinking, and Post-Critical Naiveté. Oversimplified for the sake of time these three stages are as follows. Pre-Critical Naiveté is the stage in life where we take things we are told and taught at face value, a time during which we don't ask any questions. Critical Thinking is that stage of life where we begin to ask questions, to explore, to synthesize information we have learned about something else with something we're currently investigating. And Post-Critical Naivete is the stage when even though we've been able to ask tough questions about a topic, we're able to still appreciate it and see the beauty of it in a new light.

Let me illustrate briefly. When children are young, when they are in the stage of Pre-Critical Naiveté, and they hear thunder and see lighting and rain what are some of the things that we tell them? Thunder is God bowling or God dropping something down God's stairs, Lightning is God taking pictures of us or looking for something with God's flashlight, or rain is God crying. To people in the stage of Pre-Critical Naiveté these explanations make perfect sense and few questions are asked.

However, as people begin to grow and develop they begin to ask more and more questions don't they? As they begin to ask questions like what did God drop, where are God's stairs, how does God have time to bowl, and as they begin to learn things about weather in science classes at school they begin to think critically and ask questions about these explanations that we have given them. This stage of critical thinking is one that comes naturally, it grows out of life experiences and is the logical outgrowth of learning about the world and it happens with little or not effort.

However, the transition from Critical Thinking to Post-Critical Naiveté is one that doesn't come naturally. From the place of Critical Thinking people can go two directions. One option would be to stay in that phase of Critical Thinking and to take a strictly scientific approach and to look at the scientific mechanics of storms and to have little appreciation of them as anything else. The other option for people in that phase of Critical Thinking is to make the transition to Post-Critical Naiveté. A person in the stage of Post-Critical Naiveté could again look at the explanations of storms and have an appreciation for them as gifts from God. Sure, God might not be bowling or taking pictures of crying, but the storms are a part of God's magnificent creation, and in the storms God's wonder and beauty be can be sensed and felt.

When it comes to matters of faith, all too often people do one of two things. Either they ignore critical thinking and try to stay in that phase of Pre-Critical Naiveté, taking all of the things they ever learned about God or the Bible at face value. Or they engage their critical thinking skills and abandon the faith all together. Both of these options are hugely problematic! We, as individual Christians, as Ridge United Methodist Church, and as the church universal need to work on using our critical thinking skills for good and moving into that phase of Post-Critical Naiveté where we can hear and understand the stories of God's interaction with God's creation in meaningful and dynamic ways.

When he talks about these three stages of faith development Borg often includes a traditional Native American introduction to stories. "I don't know if what I am about to tell you actually happened, but I know that it is true." What a profound statement of faith. As we journey together – pastor and congregation – and as we grow in our

understanding of God's work in the world I can't prove to you that the Genesis Creation stories are factual, but I can testify to the fact that they are true because of the beauty of God's creation that is all around us and is constantly changing. I can't prove to you that the Exodus story actually happened and that Moses led Israelites across a sea, but I can testify to the fact that God's love can free people from things that enslave them because I have seen it happen. I can't prove to you that Jesus rose from the dead after three days, but I can testify to the reality and power of God's ability to bring life from death and to bring about new life in the midst of the darkest corners of the world.

The Jewish tradition of Shema is, at its core, about fully integrating faith and life. Our level of faithfulness as Christians should not be measured then by how tightly we hold to the beliefs that we were taught in Sunday school as children. Unfortunately though, this is often the standard upheld by good hearted Christians. We should be considered "faithful" Christians insofar as we wrestle with God, live in relationship with God, are real with God. We can ask questions of God, we can be upset when our loved ones are sick or hurting or dying. We can cry out regarding injustice in the world, we are to do all of things and to know that God is ever present and always loving.

When scientists changed our classification and understanding of Pluto a few weeks ago, I doubt that it shook anyone's core confidence in science, in planets, or in the universe. Neither should changing, increasing, and expanding viewpoints about God, the Bible, History, and Theology shake our core confidence in God our creator. God has created a wonderful world. Let us challenge the students who receive Bible today, to use them as tools to better understand how God is working in their lives and the lives of others around them. Let us nurture and encourage one another as we learn and grow.