

Unlearning the Gospel

St. David's Church February 6, 2022

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How do you know what you know?

Today Jesus gives some fishing instructions to Simon Peter. He tells him to “put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” And Peter immediately says, “We’ve fished all night and got nothing, so why would I try again?”

What he means is, *I know what I know what I know. Don't try to change my mind.* But then Peter has a change of heart—though perhaps it was a change of mind: exchanging his Little Mind for the Big Mind of Christ. In any event, something tells him that this powerful figure may have a class of knowledge that transcends his own. That Jesus is trying to tell him something that conflicts deeply with his own mostly unconscious presuppositions about fishing, about the lake he knows so well, about his own go-to methods, and ultimately, as we see, about his vocation, his calling as a fisher of people.

And in that epiphany moment—and we are in the season of Epiphany—in that moment he thinks, “Oh my God, I could be dead wrong. What if I believed, and pushed out into the deep and let down my net again?” And maybe, long before Blaise, he took Pascal's Wager and thought, What have I got to lose by believing? “Yet if you say so,” says Peter, against his own better judgment, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

And then—the fish, the fish, the fish.

The reason many people are abandoning “the faith,” especially many young people, is because we have made it into a Confirmation Bias system. You know about Confirmation Bias—the tendency to seek out, catalogue and remember the details or “facts” that support our viewpoint or position, and to dispose of everything contrary. We've taught people that to have faith is—in Simon Peter's terms—to *know what you know what you know*. The best “believers” are the surest, most confident—have the best arguments to take down the other side. We've created little faith-bots.

And since all social and political philosophies are really religions with their own dogmas and principles, a whole host of things you have to believe on faith because they can't be proven—or there's an equally provable principle on the other side which we are *not* allowed to see, or acknowledge—we've created faith-bots in every area of life. Our best, most popular people, our most watched and Liked and clicked and downloaded leaders are the ones who know how to amass all “our” facts, and destroy all “their” crazy falsehoods.

The great challenge of our day is to create people of faith who know how to put out into the deep. Which reminds me of that acerbic comment from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who said, “The church is like a swimming pool. All the splashing goes on in the shallow end.” America, we could say, right now is like a summing pool. Pray—and swim for the deep end, people.

The great challenge is to see the truth that does not confirm our bias or our ego. To say, like Peter this morning, *I was wrong*. So what does it take to see truth at this level?

At this stage of spiritual growth, it's not so much anymore what you learn or know; it's what you unlearn. It's what you just don't know anymore. The ability to say, finally, *You know—I used to have the answer for that, and now I'm not sure*.

There was a wildly famous book a few decades ago called “All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten.” But the truth we're glimpsing here is only attained by unlearning

everything I learned in kindergarten, everything I learned in high school and college, all the customs and certainties of my family, tribe and nation, and—we have to say it—everything I learned in church.

At Episcopal Community Services we help people fight their way out of poverty. In this country, we have a lot of experts on poverty. They know everything about why people are poor. Just ask them and they will tell you: They're lazy. They're freeloaders. They don't want to work. And of course there are poor people who are lazy, just like there are rich people who are lazy—especially those given wealth—who are lazy, freeloaders, don't want to work, don't need to work. But all I need is some little factoid, and this kind of stereotyping confirms all my biases and burnishes my ego since I can say, "I came from nothing and look what I accomplished! If everybody was just like me!" Our Executive Director like to say he thought in life he'd hit a home run, when really he was just born on third base.

At ECS we say, The people closest to the pain know how to fix it. And when it comes to poverty, at least, I know how to learn the truth. You listen to actual people experiencing poverty. You trust them. You put out into the deep with them.

A few weeks ago I volunteered to do mock interviews with people in our RISE program, a 6-month program for people who need a job, or they have a low-skill, low-wage job and they want out. Most of the people in our RISE program are in their 30's, 40's. I've done these mock interviews many times, but when I entered the Zoom space for my interview with—I'll call her—Judy, I saw an older woman. She told me at the start of the interview, "I'm 60 years old, and I want this job." Which for her was a pre-school teacher. She'd been an aide for years and knew children so well. She told me these beautiful stories of how she calmed anxious or frightened children, how she taught them to read and do math. But she couldn't live on \$10 an hour, and she wanted to go to school and get training and certification to become a teacher. At 60! How many 60 year olds do you know who show up for a whole new job training?

I left the Zoom meeting and I felt very emotional. My heart was broken. There were so many people I wanted Judy to meet, so they could see how lazy she was, how entitled she felt, what a freeloader she was.

How do you know what you know?

What can you unlearn today?