

Word of God: speak to us. Speak through us. Amen.

Today we take up the second spiritual practice in the Way of Love - LEARN
Learning encompasses study, and we'll talk about that.

But even more important is curiosity, adventurous exploration, focus.

For Christians, our focus of learning is not ideas or beliefs, as important as those are.
Our focus of learning is a person. Jesus. God. A God who wants to be known by us.

The purpose of the Way of Love – spiritual practices for a Jesus-focused life –
is to help us become more intentional about our relationship with God,
not so we can become "better people" but so we can experience more of God.
That's why Jesus came in flesh – so we could experience God, know God,
because in Jesus, he looked a little like us. We can relate.

Relating where we start. We are invited into a lived relationship with God.

You can have relationships that exist in name only or on paper... you may have a
cousin you've never met. You have a relationship but not a lived relationship.

Pursuing a relationship is one way of understanding Learn. Here's another:

Uncovering a mystery. I watch a ton of mystery/detective shows.

These women and men are dogged in trying to discover what happened.

Or take investigative journalists, seeking truth someone prefers remain hidden.

The procedures, whether getting to know someone in relationship or unearthing
Truth, are fairly similar. We can learn from them as we learn.

There are at least approaches to learning detectives, journalists and lovers use:

Spend time with them; talk with their friends about them; research them.

There is no substitute for spending time with Jesus. We do that here in worship.

It happens more intensely in prayer – and to have the kind of prayer life
in which we can listen as well as talk might require some work; it's meditative.

I was a Christian my whole life before I discovered you could actually have a
relationship with Jesus – a man who died over 2000 years ago, but lives among us.

I thought that was just an expression, "personal relationship with Jesus Christ."

Until I began to learn a life of prayer that involves centering, silence, listening.

God knows I'm not so good at silence, so God gave me visuals and words.

Places in my imagination where I encountered Jesus and had conversations with him, where he could speak to me of God's love for me, God's desire that I know his love; where I could pour out my heart in confession and prayer. We'll talk more about prayer next week – it is one of the chief ways we learn. It's where the relationship really grows, just as a marriage is built on quiet conversation at the beginning or end of the day. We can think of learning as a dry and dusty endeavor, but God is inviting us into a deeper, life-transforming relationship. This Way of Love is a journey into the heart of God.

And I don't think we can learn about Jesus without talking to his friends. That includes reading the writings of those who have known Jesus and talking to people who know him now. Some people are brought up to never talk about their spiritual lives – but it's really hard to grow in faith without spiritual conversation. That is one of the fruits I hope will emerge from the Diocesan course I'm teaching this fall, the Sacred Art of Story-Sharing. (Link posted in Chat) Telling about our experiences in faith – answered prayers, times we feel God near, builds up the faith of everyone who hears it, or invites a desire for God. This is an important element of learning in the Christian life.

And then we get to the background – detectives and journalists and lovers all delve into the background of the subject they're pursuing. God has revealed a lot about God's self in his Word. What we call the Bible is two collections of literature –

The Hebrew Bible contains stories and histories, drama and poetry, law codes and prophecies. I don't find all of it equally life-giving, but it's part of our heritage. And knowing and reading the New Testament is essential for life-long learning. Different ways to read the bible...

- ◆ Daily chunks, short, medium long – Forward Day by Day, Water Daily, lectionary.
- ◆ Weekly – bible study – it comes alive when we hear other perspectives on it.
- ◆ Study bible/bible in a year – don't start at the beginning!
- ◆ Lectio divina – meditative reading of small pieces of scripture, letting them unfold.

We want the Word to be written on our hearts and on our lips; to know the Word of God so well that phrases come to mind when we need them.

Now, I've been talking about the kind of learning you do when you first fall in love. But the learning can't stop when the relationship gets going –

that's a recipe for splitsville, when we stop being curious about the other, or when we assume we know all there is to know.

At the heart of this practice is cultivating a spirit of life-long learning –

A spirit of adventurous exploration, and delighted discovery.

Take the gospel passage we have today – three somewhat inscrutable parables...

All about discovering what is precious and ensuring a continued relationship.

Who would, upon finding a treasure, bury it again and then buy the field that contains it? Someone who realizes they've stumbled upon the most important thing. The thing that makes sense of everything else. That's how it is when the reality of God's love for us gets through our heads and to our hearts.

We're willing to make sacrifices to put that love first.

Sacrifices of time, sacrifices of money – for those of us awash in privilege,

it may mean ensuring that such privilege is shared with those who got skipped, even if it lowers our incomes or opportunities. That's buying the pearl.

As we come to know God, we're willing to trust God to do the sorting, the judging;

Better able to love those we consider unlovable, putting our trust in God.

I'm needing to do that hourly these days, not only daily.

I've been drawing hard in the past week on the depth of that relationship that

I've gained through learning and prayer. I'm shaken to my core by events in our country, by threats to our democracy, but I am praying every moment to be grounded on the firm foundation of Jesus.

He is the pearl of great price worth more than anything else that consumes us.

Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

We are being trained for the Kingdom of heaven, my friends. It doesn't come naturally; so much of what Jesus taught is the opposite of human nature.

The more intentionally we enter into that training, the more fully we'll be able to discern the best of the new and the old to bring out of our treasure and share with the world.

Here's a practical suggestion: share with someone on social media this week one insight you've gained or learned. That's a place to start – learning and growing.

I promised to develop a ritual for each of the practices, something we can enact each day. This is what I have for Learn: pray for your eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands – and mind to be opened to awareness of God around you.

I want to end with a prayer in our baptismal service, which we prayed over

Amor two weeks ago:

Give us an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.

Amen.

Matthew 13:44-53

‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.