

"What You Don't Know *Can* Hurt You"

Proverbs 1:20-33; I Timothy 1:12-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 11, 2018—Transfiguration Sunday—Rev. Ronald Botts

In July of 1876 the body of General George Custer was found in Montana near a stream called the Little Bighorn. Surrounding him were the other fallen men in his command.

Custer came to that particular hill unaware of what lay ahead. His small cavalry band would soon face, perhaps, the greatest assembly of warriors that had ever come together on the Plains. What he didn't know was the extent of the opposition that had gathered. As it was, the end came swiftly for his troops. He and his men had no chance whatsoever.

In a sense Custer's greater enemy on that day was not those he did battle with, but it was lack of knowledge. Custer was an able commander, but he had no idea of the overwhelming odds stacked against him. If he had been aware, and made other choices, he and his regiment probably would have survived. He simply didn't know, and this was his downfall.

Ignorance of vital things is a common human predicament. Not knowing is often our problem, too. Pity the poor homeowner who bought a house a few years back, only to see its value tumble dramatically as it was found to have been built on top of a brown field site. Consider the person who's still got a closet full of survival supplies left over from the Millennium scare almost a decade ago. Think about more than 200 audio cassettes I found in cleaning my basement out, now brittle with age and no good unless I can resurrect my 20 year old boombox.

John Dewey once pointed out what he felt were the four common enemies of humanity. He named poverty and disease and injustice, but only after he had first listed ignorance. Perhaps the Apostle Paul would have agreed with that assessment.

In writing to his younger colleague, Timothy, it's clear that Paul has not forgotten how zealously he once persecuted Christians as heretics. "Even though I was a persecutor and a man of violence," he reflects, "I have received forgiveness through God's mercy. I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief."

Paul was actually an educated man for those times. He could read and write, knew the Hebrew scriptures, and had a broad understanding about life and people. Yet, he was honest in saying that, of something truly important, he once had no knowledge at all.

Paul likened himself to a child who had not yet even learned his letters. That was how unaware he was of God at work in and through Jesus. He couldn't see it and he couldn't understand it. Prior to his experience on the Damascus road he acted on what he knew, seeking out and crushing those who followed Christ. He truly did terrible things to others. What he didn't know did hurt him, and ended up hurting many others, too.

Both George Custer and the Apostle Paul suffered from decisions they made with limited knowledge, just like we also do at times. Whenever we lack crucial knowledge, we move

ahead blindly. We face whatever may be waiting around the next corner without adequate preparation. Our ignorance often costs us dearly.

In our other reading this morning from Proverbs the writer deals with knowledge as well, but from a different angle. Here the scripture underscores the importance of learning. The passage starts out by saying, "Wisdom cries out in the streets, 'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"

Apparently history is full of people who seemingly know nothing and, ironically, are proud of it. Why does this passage remind me of some politicians? The ancient Chinese poet, Su Shih, writing a thousand years ago, has a few verses on this very subject:

Most men, bringing up sons, wish for them intellect;
But I, by my intellect, have had a lifetime of failure.
I would only desire that my child be simple and dull,
[so] That with no ill-fortune and troubles
he may reach high office.

Being a "know nothing" has a certain payoff. It allows you to feel superior in any situation regardless of what you may lack. Besides, it's the easy course because there isn't any work connected with it. You're good just the way you are. You never have to reconsider anything because your mind is already made up—no matter what.

Some folks approach faith in the same way. They don't work much at what they believe or say they believe. They're more the "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." kind of people. Often they let someone else, like a charismatic preacher, do their thinking for them. It's like putting religion on cruise control.

Here's the problem, though. When you don't really engage with your faith you don't end up with much substance to build your life on. This means there won't be the resources to turn to when you really need them. What you don't know can hurt you.

Knowledge shouldn't be a threat to our faith and learning isn't a weakness. A faith that can't stand up to examination is a faith that is shallow and untested. How can you commit yourself to Christ's way unless you understand what you are committing yourself to? Regarding yourself a disciple is meaningless without knowing what you stand for and prepared to do.

Someone I once knew said she regarded herself as only a person of simple faith. I observed this woman over time. I saw how she lived her life and what she did. I saw the unpopular causes she bravely supported. I saw the sacrifices she made to respond to others in their need. I knew the strength and peace she had when she was dying. A person of simple faith? Perhaps, but simple in her case meant humble and self-giving. Simple faith did not mean simplistic faith. Quite the contrary.

If there is anything I've learned in life it's that nothing worthwhile comes without effort. In the most important areas of living there are few shortcuts. Our payback, however, is directly proportional to our investment. If you put little in, you get little out. If you put more in, you'll get

more out. In the end when the final audit of our life is made, our account will be seen for what it is. Our assets will be judged on merit, not our posturing.

God gave us understanding to make use of it and it's a shame when we sometimes don't take full advantage of this gift. Learning is life long. It doesn't have to be a drudge. Each day can be exhilarating because we have new opportunities for growth. Each day is a laboratory for discovery. We will never exhaust our capacity to learn. And nowhere does this apply better than how it relates to what is at the very core of our lives.

Learning to live by faith, led by the Spirit, should to be high priority for all of us; unfortunately, that isn't always the case. Other things seem to grab our attention. It's easy to close our minds and hearts to what God would teach us. It's tempting to think we already know enough to get by.

A summary of our faith might be "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," but if that is the total of our understanding, then we've only just begun. Such a basic affirmation as this one from childhood may be a cornerstone of faith, but it doesn't give us much direction as to how to really live our lives in precarious times.

"Jesus loves me" is a wonderful truth, but if I would love Jesus in return then I need be open to what Christ reveals to me about his life and then what he would show me about mine. I undercut everything if I stop before I've even begun. There is no badge of honor in being a "know nothing" in most things, but especially in matters of the soul.

No one is so learned that he or she doesn't have more yet to discover. None are so far behind that they can't catch up.

When we stop learning, stop discovering, then we close ourselves off to much of what the Holy Spirit is doing around us all the time. We miss out on the greater understanding that God intends for us. There is no bliss in this kind of ignorance.

An unexamined faith can lead us astray just when we need direction the most. We can think we are doing Christ's work, but be very mistaken about his intentions. When we act without true understanding we often do what we want to do, but convince ourselves we are following our faith. We can champion the wrong causes and put our efforts in secondary matters. Out of ignorance we can end up working against Christ even when our intention is to witness for him.

What we don't know **can** hurt us. That's true in most of life and it's certainly true in regard to matters of faith. Jesus taught his followers directly long ago. His words have instructed Christians down through the ages. And he desires to teach us as well but, you see, we have to want to learn. That is the key. We have to commit ourselves to take time to listen and study and reflect so that we can be knowledgeable. You can't do what you don't know.

What kind of disciple says, "I know enough. Don't bother me. I'm happy just where I am?" What kind of disciple says that? Well, not a very good one.

I would hope that this wouldn't be said about any of us. Now that would be a true shame. What we don't know can hurt us and those around us.