

WHY THINK?

Psalm 26
Mark 12: 28-34

Faith Community
June 3, 2001

Introduction

In the comic strip, Bloom Country, a penguin named Opus decides to improve his life. He's going to give up television and become more learned. Walking up the steps of the Public Library he proclaims, "Attention, dark world of electronic gratification...I would like to announce my intellectualization! No more TV! No boob tube-a-roo! 'Twas turning my noodle to video goo! Yes, there's something much better for smart chaps like me...From what I have heard, it's known as 'to read'! Books! I'll read books! Be they large or quite dinky! Straight from the shelves all musty and stinky! Faulkner! O'Neill! Twain and Saul Bellow! I think I'll curl up with a few of those fellows! Yes, I'll soon be well read! Such a fab thing to be! I've allowed plenty of time, at least an hour...or three!"

Opus enters the library and stands among tall stacks of books that stretch to the sky. They seem to be closing in on him. In the last frame of the cartoon we see Opus slouched in front of the TV, the chips and snacks all around him. A voice cries out from the television, "Gilligan!"

Maybe you feel like poor Opus - enthusiastic about learning and thinking but then the enormous magnitude of all there is to know and understand becomes overwhelming. Besides, there's news that comes to you in tiny bites, fast-food style. And there's always Gilligan's Island!

I

I am asking you this morning to take up or continue an important challenge – to be thinking Christians. A couple of generations ago a sermon titled "Why Think?" would be absurd. Of course people thought. My grandfather read the both volumes of John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. He was not an intellectual by profession; he was an Ohio farmer. But he believed profoundly in the Christian faith, so he read the work of one of the most profound Christians to ever write.

But then that was before the temptations of television, video games, and cable TV.

Some people today might consider "a thinking Christian" a contradiction in terms. Some feel that you need to quit thinking if you are going to be a good Christian.

But look at what God demands of us..."You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, *and with all your Mind*, and with all your strength." Love God with all your mind. You and I can't love with all of our mind if we don't think seriously and in depth about our God - who God is, what God does, how God interacts with us.

Chaim Potok wrote in his novel, In the Beginning, "A shallow mind is a sin against God." Why is superficial thinking an affront to God? I think it is because we have been made in the

image of God. Surely that means, in part, that we have a rational ability to look at the world and understand it, to reason and make judgments.

One characteristic that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom is our ability to think – to analyze a situation and comprehend it. You and I are called by God to explore with our mind (as well as our heart and soul and strength) to know God more faithfully. Loving God with all our minds can give us greater depth of faith. As our Faith Community mission statement says, “We will study God’s word, attempting to grow in Christian maturity to become more thoughtful and compassionate Christians”

II

It seems like much of contemporary thinking about religion says, “A shallow mind is required by God.” The word that comes across is don’t think for yourself, “Accept everything on faith” – which means accept what we say, how we interpret the Bible, what we believe, and don’t question it. This is the worse kind of heresy.

A young person I know was in a Bible study class where at the 1st class the teacher said, “We have to approach this study in the way the biblical people would have – we have to accept it as it is and not question it. Don’t question what the book says.”

There are two problems with that statement. First, that’s not how biblical people understood the word of God. That is clear from Moses to Jonah to Peter...just look at the Bible! Second, I think that comment was a lame excuse so the teacher wouldn’t have to deal with difficult questions.

We are taught in the bible that we must have faith. To have faith means that we realize that we will never have absolute certainty. We can’t prove things of faith. But having faith doesn’t mean we don’t think them through, it just means we have to trust, we aren’t going to have proof that we’re right.

One church ran an ad in the newspaper that had a picture of Jesus; under the picture it said, “He died to take away your sins, not your mind.” Some of the most brilliant thinkers of history have been devout people of faith: Augustine, Pascal, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Soren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dag Hammarsjold.

III

Neil Postman, in his book, Amusing Ourselves to Death, shows how television has changed our culture. He says we think less deeply, we have shorter attention spans, we expect to be entertained, and we get bored with any kind of in-depth discussions. By in-depth he doesn’t mean the “In-Depth” reports on the evening news that last a whole minute and 1/2, between commercials!

His argument is that it is a great deal more difficult to have thorough, concentrated discussions in the age of television. Since children have been brought up with Sesame Street they have expected education to entertain them, and not to go on too long at one time.

But real, comprehensive understanding takes time to explore. There aren’t any short cuts, and it won’t come out on video. It takes time, an inquisitive mind, and patience.

God asks us to approach our faith in that way. That's part of what loving God with all your mind means.

IV

We live in a community that stresses, "Think to succeed." We believe education is important – especially if it will pay off in the end. Math and science are stressed in school. Is it because these are intrinsically valuable and interesting fields of study? Is it because in these areas we can see the order, beauty, and wonder of what God has done? No, this is where the future jobs are!

I'm afraid this narrow learning is a dead end street that takes us out to our own field, and leaves us all alone. Certainly you want to be trained for a skill and be prepared to earn a living. But also learn about the arts – drama, photography, painting, music, film and poetry. Savor great literature – that library of profound thinking that has been building for centuries now. Explore philosophy and psychology.

And especially search for answers in your spiritual life. Our students have not had any public education in this area, and yet it is the most important learning we can do. Here is not only the foundation for your living, but direction for how to act, what is true and good, and where lasting hope is to be found.

Conclusion

Think about your faith. Yes, you will face questions and doubts. You will have to wrestle with serious life issues. But remember that even Christ struggled with his faith. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, "Father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me," with sweat dripping from his face like drops of blood,..."not my will, but your will be done."

And from the cross he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A serious, deep faith isn't easy.

A young woman – a recent graduate from University of Michigan – made an appointment to meet with me. She wanted to talk about her faith. She had been brought to faith by a group of friends who were fundamentalists. Now, as she began to grow deeper in her faith, she had lots of questions – about God, what happens after we die, what God did through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, about homosexuality and abortion.

"I love my friends," she said, "but their answers to these questions seem too simplistic. I think these issues are a lot more complicated than they make them out to be. I can't just shut my eyes to these difficulties; that seems too shallow to be serious faith. I don't think God is afraid for me to think about my faith."

She's absolutely right. The God who created everything certainly isn't afraid for us to think seriously, and critically, about our faith. What God asks of us isn't simple. It certainly isn't simplistic. Christ asks us to fulfill his command to love God with all our minds.

Amen.