

“Hearts and Minds”

Acts of the Apostles 8.26–40

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 17 May 2009

It’s a weekend when it’s hard to escape graduations in Fort Collins – congratulations to all of our graduates! – and it’s also a weekend when we take time to honor those among us who have volunteered their time as teachers here at Plymouth. And it’s good to reflect upon the idea of education and its importance in our faith.

I love the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, because it lifts up the critical role of teaching in spreading an understanding of faith. Here’s something we are not likely to notice: this man is *reading*, which was not a common skill in the first century. We don’t even know for certain whether Jesus was literate. And the Ethiopian is reading out loud, as was the custom of the day: when people read, they read aloud. (Imagine how loud libraries must have been!)

So, Philip is beckoned by a messenger from God to go to this man and ask if he understands the importance of what is being read. The Ethiopian is reading from the prophet Isaiah, in a text that many Christians interpreted as a prophecy of the coming of Jesus and his execution. So, here they are, the Ethiopian and Philip, traveling along together: the eunuch asking questions about this new faith and how it fits in with the Hebrew scriptures.

And Philip is in the role of teacher, who brings this very intelligent man into the family of faith. It’s a family that then was beginning to be a non-clan, non-national, non-ethnic religion, which caused a lot of stress for some Jewish Christians, who saw Jesus not as a Christian (which he was not), but as a Jew (which he was). And that thought gets extended by thinking that if Jesus was born a Jew, worshipped as a Jew, lived as a Jew, and died as a Jew, then his followers should do the same. In other words, their supposition was that people new to the faith would become Jewish Christians, which to us sounds like an oxymoron, but to them it made perfect sense. It was a totally radical idea to say that if Jesus would associate with prostitutes and tax collectors, he’s welcome just about anybody—even Ethiopians and Romans. But that is what Paul and Philip did say, which is why we, as gentiles are not required to become observant Jews before following Jesus as the messiah.



So, how are we supposed to understand how to interpret scripture if we have no one to guide us? Sometimes, it’s easy. We know that when we say “the Lord is my shepherd,” we’re not really talking about sheep, but rather our relationship with God. But, not all scripture is quite so easy to navigate. Who helped you understand your faith? Who were your Sunday School teachers? Are there one or two who stand out? For me, it was Phyllis Jacob and John Philips. I’d invite you to think of your teachers prayerfully, with an attitude of thanksgiving.

The need for interpretation and guidance is the reason that when we ordain ministers in the United Church, we ordain them both “as pastor *and teacher*.” And the history of a well-educated clergy is long in the Congregational tradition.

The year is 1636. The Pilgrims have been in Plymouth for sixteen years, and the Puritans have been in Massachusetts Bay for seven. And the colonists, who together would be known as Congregationalists, decide to found a college to train their clergy. Many of the early English Congregationalists were graduates and faculty at Cambridge University, so when they created a new college, they located it in what had been called Newtown, but was renamed Cambridge, Massachusetts. And that is how Harvard got its start. An early brochure, published in 1643, laid out the purpose of the new College: “To advance

Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches.”

The year is 1701. Some Congregational clergy in Connecticut are less than pleased with some liberalizing tendencies at Harvard College and have dreamed of having their own divinity school. And with a charter from the Connecticut General Assembly, a group of clergymen start Yale College, again to train Congregational clergy.

The year is 1769. The Rev. Eleazar Wheelock, a Congregational minister from Connecticut wants to expand the school for young American Indian men into a college. With a charter from King George III and land provided by the colonial governor of New Hampshire, Wheelock founds Dartmouth College in Hanover.

And it isn't only the education of clergy that Congregationalists have found essential. I could go on and talk about the founding of historically black colleges like Howard, Fisk, Tougaloo, and Talladega or liberal arts colleges like Middlebury, Oberlin, Grinnell, and Pomona – all of them founded by Congregationalists.

Why is the trend of colleges and universities founded by our Congregational forbears so deeply etched in American history? In a sense, it goes back to the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and the desire for intellectual apprehension of our faith. St. Anselm of Canterbury, who lived in the 11th century, famously defined theology as “faith seeking understanding.” It also goes back to the development of Congregationalism as a product of the Age of Enlightenment. And our tradition is steeped in the idea that our intellect is one of the key means we can use in understanding God and God's action in the world. Sometimes, we may take it a bit too far and perhaps rely too much on head at the expense of heart.

Yet, in an era when the words “faith” and “intellect” are seldom used in the same sentence, it's an important time to underscore the connection between the two. The last hymn this morning is one of my favorites: “Praise the Source of Faith and Learning,” and it was written by Tom Troeger, who was my preaching professor at Iliff. The way he weaves themes together is brilliant, so I hope you'll really pay attention to the words.

I also want to mention something that happened here at Plymouth three weeks ago in an adult education class on *Finding Darwin's God: Evolution and Faith*. Two of our members – Wayne Carpenter, a therapist and ordained Presbyterian minister, and Mary Robinson, who has a Ph.D. in biochemistry – were teaching the class, and their class was disrupted by a woman who objected vehemently to the idea that science and Christian faith are compatible. And while it was obviously uncomfortable for all concerned, it points out a larger theme that we see being played out across the American stage, namely a strain of anti-intellectualism that is ascending in certain parts of the Christian family.

It happens most clearly when we see Christians try to make the Bible into a geology and biology textbook and proposing something they call “Creation Science.” But, it happens in subtler ways, as well. I was surprised to learn that one of the other churches on Prospect Road has a large pastoral staff on which nobody has a Master of Divinity degree. While seminary education does not a minister make, three years of postgraduate academic training is what we consider minimum preparation for ordained ministry.

On Sunday, May 31 we will celebrate Seminarian Sunday, and you'll hear from three of our four in-care students about their experiences. More than half of our association's in-care students are members here at Plymouth, and I hope you take pride in the fact that we are an incubator that is helping to ensure the future of the church's ordained leadership.

If you were an outsider looking in a Plymouth, the number of seminarians may be one of the things you'd notice. But you'd also notice the breadth and depth of our educational offerings.

We have a youth education program that is based on Howard Gardiner's multiple-intelligence theory – the idea that each of us has different abilities to learn using a variety of modes: bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, verbal/linguistic, spatial, logical/mathematical, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and musical. Our workshop rotation model of Christian education uses those different ways of learning to help our children apprehend the stories of our faith using different modes, so that our elementary students get to experience learning from several perspectives. The net effect is that the stories sink in, providing a foundation for faith that develops over time. We also have conversation-based classes for our junior and senior high students, and their teachers are here every week to help them grapple with the questions of their faith.

One of the things that this model requires is a high degree of volunteer participation. There are “trail guides,” who bring each class through a multi-week cycle of classes, and a large cadre of volunteers who teach the class to three different age groups, and adults who work each week with our teens. I'd like to recognize all of those who have been involved in our youth education programs, so would you stand and let us show our appreciation?

When I was on the staff of the Connecticut Conference of the UCC, I had the opportunity to see over 250 local churches and the ways they created community and provided education for their members, including about a dozen churches with more than 1,000 members. While some of them had solid educational offerings for adults, I never saw one that could hold a candle to our Adult Ed. program at Plymouth. Every Sunday during the program year, we offer two classes (often book studies) as well as a forum during our 10 o'clock hour (which like a therapist's hour is actually 50 minutes). Most churches don't have so many people who want to engage their faith as we do, and most churches can't provide the resources to make such programs possible. So, I'd like to honor all of you who have helped with adult education as hosts, committee members, or teachers. Will you stand so that we can offer our thanks?



I am grateful to each of you, because your commitment means that learning and growing in the faith is strong here at Plymouth. I am grateful to serve with a congregation that places such a strong emphasis on education. And I am proud of the strength of our programs.

We are building upon a long tradition of valuing education as an integral component of our faith. May we never take for granted that tradition or the hard work of the people who make our learning at Plymouth possible.

Amen.