

“Learning the Faith”
Proverbs 1:1-7
James 3:13-18
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The signs are everywhere: yellow school buses clogging Deerpath Road, children hauling backpacks twice their size, mothers *sans* offspring lingering over lattes at Starbucks. It can mean only one thing: school has started.

With the start of school each year, the church gears into action. The signs are everywhere here, as well: construction workers here 24-7 trying to get an entrance open; our preschool’s in full-swing; and, of course, the parking lot is no longer easy pickings Sunday morning.

It’s appropriate that our church marches in time with the school year, not only to be in sync with our families, but because this *is* a school to which we’ve come. And the church is a very special sort of school, indeed. This school isn’t simply a place to nail down our ABCs, or learn a trade, or even toss around grand ideas. This school is the place we come when we thirst for truth with a capital T ... to find the meaning of life ... to understand what matters and what, in the end, does not ... in other words, we come here not just to seek *knowledge*, but to discover *wisdom*. Our Scripture this morning says it this way: “For learning about wisdom and instruction ... the fear of the Lord is the beginning” (Proverbs 1:7).

So just as principals and college presidents are addressing their student body and teachers, conveying the values of the school and their passion for learning – I decided to give my own start-of-the-school year address this morning.

Ah, but how does such a speech go? To make sure I got the genre right, I called on a pro. I phoned Stephen Schutt, President of Lake Forest College, who had recently presented his own matriculation speech from this very pulpit. He kindly sent me his address – which was outstanding. It was so outstanding, in fact, that I have taken the liberty of interpreting his remarks for the start of our own school year. Since you can’t see where the quotation marks begin and end, I commend to you a printed or e-copy of the sermon so that President Schutt receives full credit for his writing, and no blame for mine. With apologies to President Schutt, here goes. (*The welcome that follows is a direct quotation of President Schutt’s words from his matriculation address of August 23, 2006, adapted for our religious setting.*)

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I would like to offer a warm welcome to all new and returning students of Jesus Christ at First Presbyterian Church Lake Forest. It is wonderful to see you, and we’re very glad you’ve joined us.

As you look around, you’ll notice a number of impressive-looking people in the congregation– trustees, faculty, fellow students and friends. They are here

because, along with Christmas and Easter, this is the most important ceremony in the church calendar.

They are here to join you in your fall re-entry to this community, this community I treasure. I commend your choice of institutions.

This is a very special day, a day when I'm supposed to urge you students to be responsible, to study hard, to admire the faculty and to stay out of trouble.

I assume you will do all of these things. Instead of harping on them, though, I want to mention a few other things that I hope you will learn here.

(The style of the rest of this address is President Schutt's. The content is mine, except where President Schutt is cited.)

First, learn to listen. In President Schutt's fine words:

"There is an awful lot of noise in the world today, and much of it holds no value. To hear what's important, you will need to calm yourself and simultaneously open and close your ears. Open them to words of meaning that may lie hidden in too much talk, to music that may be covered by too much sound, to truth that may be obscured by too much falsehood. Close your ears to everything else."

Second, I would add, learn to speak. The search for truth is not a passive one in which we merely soak up knowledge like a sponge. To think clearly you must dare to put your convictions into words. Moreover, your community of fellow students will learn something from you ... even if all you have to offer is your questions. On this fifth anniversary of September 11, we are reminded that our world needs all of us to be leaders – to have the courage to stand up for what we believe is true and decent and right.

Third, learn to be happy. "Rejoice in the Lord always," St. Paul tells us, for the life of faith is anything but a gloomy enterprise. Delight in beauty, cherish glimpses of kindness, enjoy even the challenges of faith. Following Jesus can even be, dare I say it? fun.

Fourth, learn to be miserable. President Schutt says it well:

"Learn to be miserable [because] the world will give you cause. In the film Little Miss Sunshine, a despondent teenager wants to fall asleep for years and not wake up until his problems were gone. His uncle – a Proust scholar – counsels that the French novelist believed his most meaningful years came when he was in despair. Untroubled years, Proust believed, produced no personal growth, no evolution."

I agree. Scripture is filled with evidence that the wilderness seasons are some of our most productive ... and no matter how hard they may be, we are never alone in them. Angels – often the human variety – attend to us, and will not leave us stranded.

Fifth, learn to believe. President Schutt advises:

“Take care to determine your core beliefs, then hold fast to them. Reject cynicism as a childish ruse. ‘Never doubt,’ in anthropologist Margaret Mead’s famous words, ‘that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.’”

But sixth, I would add, also learn to doubt, so that you grow. As visiting professor Marcus Borg will remind us next weekend, faith is much more than merely assent to certain beliefs. It is the willingness to trust that there is a force in the universe that we will never fully apprehend. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke once said, “Love the questions” (*Letters to a Young Poet*). Faith is never fully accomplished. Our first Scripture reading from Proverbs advises that learning is not only for the simple and the young; rather, “let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill. ... [Only] fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Push yourself. If you can do nothing else, come to worship as many Sundays as you possibly can. If you already attend worship weekly, pick up a study group: the women’s group on Wednesdays or Christian Perspectives on Thursdays or the Men’s fellowship on Fridays or the sermon discussion or Bible study on Sunday mornings. And if you already do all that, then consider adding daily devotions and prayers. Learning the faith is a life-long enterprise. As the non-Biblical proverb advises, “If you’re green you grow; if you’re ripe, you rot.”

Seventh and last, learn to love and be loved. President Schutt reminded his charges of the lovely words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn: “Rub your eyes and purify your heart, and prize above all else those who love you and wish you well.” Here you will learn that even when the world despises you – and even when perhaps you deserve it – the Lord will love you still. Sometimes when you’ve been wretched, God’s love will require you to think hard, feel bad, to repent and change. And sometimes, when your heart is broken, God’s love will hold you firmly, gently in the everlasting arms. And always, *always*, God’s love will provide you with a family of faith, with brothers and sisters who care about you, and pray for you, even if they do not even know your name.

This is a school, dear friends, the most important school that you will ever attend. Like any school, you will get out of it what you put into it. The world has plenty of knowledge that is good and useful – we need not be afraid of it. But this is the only place where you learn, as the letter of James says, “wisdom from above”: “For the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” That’s the kind of learning you will find here. That’s the kind of learning our world so desperately needs.

So welcome. Welcome to another year of learning how to live your life. Welcome to the school of Jesus Christ, our Greatest Teacher; the Lord of all. Amen.