
Continuing Education

Acts 19:1-7

A sermon preached at Baccalaureate on May 8, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery, Dean of Duke University Chapel

We can learn something new every day. Some of you are learning right now that some of the people you thought would never graduate actually made it to this day. Surprise, surprise. Parents, some of you are learning how good it feels to think about not having to pay your child's tuition bill anymore! We need the crazy towel guy right now. There's always something more to learn.

This became crystal clear to me during last academic year. A senior Duke student was one of the scripture readers for the Sunday morning service in this building. His job was to read the gospel lesson. On that morning, he was assigned to read a portion of the Gospel of Luke. The music played and a hymn was sung as he and others made their way down the aisle into the middle of this building, which is where we read the gospel lesson each Sunday. The music stopped and it was time for him to announce the reading. He cleared his throat and instead of saying, "a reading from the gospel of Luke." He said, "a reading from the gospel of Duke." Who would have thunk it? A new book of the Bible discovered right here in Duke Chapel. You learn something new everyday.

I know many of you know this building is closing for restoration for about a year, starting Monday, and this is a historical moment in the life of the university. I know you know this building is the icon of the university (though one can argue that Cameron Indoor Stadium is the #1 religious building on campus). And you probably know that James B. Duke wanted this building to be a "great towering church." But did you know that there are 77 stained glass windows or 239 steps up to the top of the chapel tower? Did you know that it took five years to build the Chapel or that there are 120 pews in this building or that the Flentrop organ, the one back there, has more than 5000 pipes? Did you know that there are some hidden green devils in some of the stained glass windows or that there are two wooden mice in special locations in this building? Or, that a giraffe is 17 feet tall and it would take 12 giraffes stacked on top of each other to reach the top of the tower? I know. This is very useful information as you graduate!

You learn something new everyday because learning never stops. New information, new ideas, new knowledge, even when one thinks one has finally arrived on the mountaintop of intellectual discovery under a Duke blue sky. The disciples in Ephesus, in the scripture you heard, confess, "We've not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." These disciples, these students, had not even heard of the Spirit. Yet they were still considered disciples.

They were believers, people of faith, students of Jesus, but they didn't know everything nor hear everything that there is to hear about God. Their learning was unfinished; they had partial understanding because there was so much more to be learned. They came to know God without knowing everything about God and knowing everything God does because they were not called to be gods. They were disciples, students graced with gradual revelation, enrolled in the classroom of life as lifelong learners. They were not called to have all the answers and know everything there is to know but to keep asking questions as a practice of holy curiosity.

Apollos, a native of Alexandria, was "an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures," and had been instructed in the spiritual way of God and his words ignited people's hearts. But even he, we are told, is taken aside by two women, Priscilla and Aquila, and "explained the 'Way of God... more accurately'" (Acts 18). No glass ceiling could stop these two women. Sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes was right when she said, "If it wasn't for the women..." If it wasn't for those two women, Apollos wouldn't have fully understood. Apollos was a disciple already and a dynamic preacher, but he still had more to learn. He had not arrived at the threshold of

knowledge but was open to perpetual learning and growth, continuing his education like a professor who understands the more you know the more you come to realize how much you don't know.

In an university setting, you can't learn everything there is to learn about your academic field in four years but you do learn how to learn. You don't always have the answers but you know where to find them. You don't have to know but know who knows. There's something about claiming to know it all that ironically suggests we don't know it all. Remember what the philosopher Socrates said: "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

We have so much more to learn and especially to learn how to unlearn the idea that your learning has climaxed with an university degree. No degree can encompass the vastness of divine mysteries even though the Divinity School hands out master of divinity degrees. Even disciples declare humbly, "We've not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." There's so much more to learn. Learning is not just book learning but life learning. Some of the wisest people I know don't even have a degree. I'm not saying your Duke degree was a waste of time and money but I'm suggesting that life has an inexhaustible curriculum and the lessons are infinite just like God. As you know, you can learn inside and outside a classroom. And I'm sure what you've learned at Duke is due to the curricular offerings but also the co-curriculum.

So as you leave these cozy confines of blue devil territory, I hope you recognize that there are more lessons to be learned that no chemistry experiment can teach or research article truly convey or exam test. We have so much more to learn and some things you can only learn by living--to learn how to respect difference of any kind without demonizing it, to learn that we are more alike than different, to learn more about the interconnected web of mutuality between humanity. We need to learn so much more about justice and those experiencing injustice in any part of the world, even around the street corner from our United States homes because what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said is right: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

We have so much more to learn. We need to learn how to love better to root out all the hate in the world, to discover the *agape* love of God so that our love is unconditional, even including love of our enemies. Essays have been written and studies done on EDD, empathy deficit disorder. Although we may be more connected technologically, they say people are caring less for others. Maybe we should learn how to empathize with those schools that may beat us in basketball and not say, "That's alright, that's okay! You will work for us one day!" They will, but that's not nice. Learning isn't just about others but you can even learn more about yourself as you excavate the terrain of your soul in recognition that you are more than a brain on legs; you are human, a child of God. And as you continue to learn, what you will discover is that you will be surprised many times at the lessons learned, confirming what Forest Gump said, "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get." He's right.

A degree won't prepare you for the unexpected twists and turns of life. A degree is not an end to knowledge but a means toward lifelong learning and the pursuit of knowledge. Duke is just a beginning, a commencement, immersing you into an experiential school whose bell never rings to signal the end of classes; there is no recess in life. As one person notes, "never let your schooling interfere with your education" because your education continues beyond Duke.

Even if you don't know everything there is to know, there are others whom you will encounter to help you grow and develop, if you have a willingness to keep learning and are teachable. The Ephesian disciples were just that—teachable.

They recognized that they didn't have to have all of the answers, every 'i' dotted or 't' crossed. "We've not even heard ..." There's a humble acknowledgement that religious life is one of faith seeking understanding with an emphasis on the 'seeking.' The journey. The process of gradually learning, continuing education, growing in knowledge such that we discover things we never knew about ourselves, others, the world, and

God. At the age of 19 or 90, we can always grow and develop because we only see in a glass dimly now (1 Cor 13).

There's so much more to learn and it is an expression of grace that we have the capacity to still learn and the opportunity to be taught by others when we don't fully comprehend. Continuing education is a gift as we keep inquiring and listening and being curious and open to new ideas and fresh experiences. There is an implicit lesson here—don't be so sure you are always right (!). But this takes intellectual and spiritual humility. To think you are always right is an indication that something is wrong because lifelong learners know that at times they will be wrong.

These disciples were not afraid to learn from the apostle Paul. They recognized the importance of community and of having mentors. They were not solely teachers but teachable. Robin had Batman. Jerry had Tom. Garfunkel had Simon. Plato had Socrates. Justin Bieber had Usher. (I guess it hasn't worked out so well for Justin but that's besides the point). The point is to keep learning and seek understanding, even as we allow ourselves to be moulded and guided by others, committed to doing life and learning together.

Yet this doesn't mean that you will learn everything that can be learned during your lifetime. The Ephesians experienced something new through Paul as he laid hands on them—"they spoke in tongues and prophesied" which means they didn't understand *and* they understood. The blessing, the gift, of the Holy Spirit in this story was both unintelligibility and comprehensibility. Some things in life you just can't explain because you can't exhaust an inexhaustible God. It is a freeing gift not to know everything and we will always be at a place of understanding and not fully understanding. That's because we're human.

We know that we don't know but can have an open heart and mind, a teachable spirit, to learn something new everyday. And we have so much more to learn. But do you possess a humble, holy curiosity?

There's a story about a young man who went to Socrates asking for knowledge. He walked up to the philosopher and said, *"O great Socrates, I come to you for knowledge."*

Socrates led the young man through the streets, to the sea, and ultimately chest deep into the water. Then he asked the young man, *"What do you want?"*

"Knowledge, O wise Socrates," said the young man with a smile.

Socrates put his strong hands on the man's shoulders and pushed him under the water. 30 seconds later Socrates let him up. *"What do you want?"* he asked again.

"Knowledge," the young man sputtered, *"O great and wise Socrates."*

Socrates pushed him under again. 30 seconds passed, 35. 40. Socrates let him up and the man was gasping. *"What do you want, young man?"*

Between heavy breaths the young man screamed, *"Knowledge, O wise and wonderful..."*

Socrates pushed him under again. 40 seconds passed. 50. 1 minute. He felt the young man struggling and he pulled him up and asked again, *"What do you want?"*

"Air!" the young man screamed. *"I need air!"* Socrates looked at the young man, smiled, and said, *"When you want knowledge as you have just wanted air, then you will have knowledge."*

Class of 2015, are you hungry and thirsty to learn more? That's the only entry requirement for life's school of continuing education. May you be ready, like the disciples, for lessons you've never heard.