

"A Thief's Lessons" (27Nov16)
Isaiah2:1-5; Matthew24:36-44; Psalm122

It's a pretty common sense that we come here to learn something.

Partly that's since we spend lots of our lives in school, learning about various subjects and learning how to do things. So in thinking about the value of church, we may picture it as what knowledge it can impart, of what we learn while we're at church. Two common answers are to learn about God and to learn our values.

That's a tough measure for church, though. For starters, how can we learn *about* God? God doesn't fit the usual patterns of how we learn. God doesn't submit to cause and effect testing or show up under a microscope. Our best source for learning about God is the Bible, which often is perceived as ancient history or old stories with inconsistencies and inaccuracies. None of that seems to point to much clarity for learning about God.

See, normally we think that truth can be proven once and for all, but the whole category of faith remains unseen and that God must always be mystery. I heard Bishop Mary say the other day that the opposite of faith isn't doubt; it's certainty. That's a helpful lesson, even if doesn't directly teach us about God. In the end, we can never prove anything about God, but can only trust. Maybe in church we are hoping to learn how to be faithful, by practicing our trust. That's still pretty indistinct and open-ended, though. We'd like more resolution.

So maybe we turn to the values we hope to impart, of church teaching how we ought to live, for learning "life lessons." These are rampant in our worship services: we practice extending peace. We are continually nurtured to be reconciling. I've mentioned recently praying forgiveness and stretching our gratitude. This is a place to learn joy—since that doesn't just

happen to us circumstantially. We learn sharing, not simply in a preschool siblings way, but the grown-up version as we gather around communal tables and as we bring what we have to offer, in monetary donations or in skills. That ordinary sharing is extraordinarily essential to our life here. And it expands with compassion, that we learn to support each other in times of need and also how to reach out to others, in this city and around the world.

That's the practical side. Less tangibly is the value learned in a really diverse set of relationships. We've been talking about that more with the new shape of youth ministry. It used to be that church served as a place of fun or a social outlet for youth, but now lives are so filled with those kinds of opportunity that we don't look to church for the dances some of you remember or the pizza parties I knew. Instead, though, that makes us better able to notice the boundary-crossing relationships that youth—with all of us—develop and share here. This is no enclave of homogeneity, no social club, no narrow version of peers who are just like you. Your presence here for each other is remarkable in that you relate equally to each other, not marked by class or income, not in a standard hierarchy as teacher and student, not where age is presumed to be indicative of wisdom. You don't look alike. You don't like the same things. You don't necessarily vote the same way. You don't even believe the same things about God. You have lots of differences. Yet across all bounds you embrace understanding the fullness of each other's experience. This community is amazingly unique in that.

We might summarize this by saying what we learn at church is a new worldview, reorienting us and contrasting with so much of how we've been socialized. Notice how often we're ranked and divided into winners and losers and the ways you're told you don't

measure up and aren't good enough or pretty enough or strong enough or young enough or healthy enough. When you're so bombarded by that marketing—including for Christmas presents that allege to be the perfect gifts you or your loved ones want or "need"—it is hard to unlearn that bad news of society's message. According to some, we spend 35 hours per week watching TV and 11 hours a day paying attention to our electronic gizmos and average less than two hours per week outside. A pretty standard number is that you are the target of 3000 advertisements each day!

That's enormous and scary, but that's still only part of it. It's not just to extract money from your pocket but a cultural message to put fear in your heart. The news constantly is trying to make you feel afraid, appealing to your reptilian brain and your tribal instincts. It's a message that everyone not like you is bad or dangerous. Besides the news' attack, it's also structured into the core functioning of our government, no matter who's in Washington D.C. as, for example, 44% of our federal budget—nearly 50¢ of every tax dollar—goes to prepare for war and fund violence and militarism.

Contrast all of that with the amazing prophetic word from Isaiah, that we will no longer learn war. Or, as phrased by the old spiritual, "Gonna lay down my sword and shield. I ain't gonna study war no more!" Beating swords into plowshares for us means our dollars would go to feeding the hungry, to supporting society, into valuing life instead of trying to destroy it. That is what God is trying to teach us, Isaiah says, to stop learning war, to learn peace. God's grand vision is of all tribes and all nations coming together, nothing less than teaching all humanity and all creation, united for peace and streaming to celebrate together. Those who would claim religion is bad would

have to overlook this faithful sense of supporting the needy and welcoming the outcast and moderating the mighty (or, in Mary's words, casting them down from their thrones). In this way, our world needs religion now maybe more than ever.

It's a great vision. But we have to ask: how do you unlearn the corrupting consumerist culture and menacing militant message? Notice how little time we spend trying to learn to be nice to each other, to learn the lesson that you are okay, you are loved, you are cherished just as you are. If you need church to re-socialize you for this, it might seem like an uphill struggle when there's only one hour per week when you're getting one message and just from my one mouth.

But if we're worried, we need to expand our expectations. Returning to some of the mystery of God and faith, we stick to the confession that the Holy Spirit works through common means. To say it another way, God is sneaky. God's messaging is coming to you even with my words, and with your words to each other, and in song, and amid a splash of water, and in bread and wine.

Again, to rephrase this: church isn't just about learning another set of rules and requirements, not just in studying a better way of living. Sometimes people refer to our Bible readings on Sunday mornings as "lessons" or even call the Bible their instruction manual. I don't. We aren't just listening for lessons on how to live. Even less are we hearing ancient history. We listen for a present and active reality breaking in among us.

We're listening because that sneaky God, that stealthy Spirit, that thieving Jesus is using these words to take over your life, to claim your heart, to renovate your mind, to recreate your very existence in the blink of an eye. Maybe even more remarkable than Isaiah's amazing

vision of peace is the word from Jesus today: He's coming like a thief in the night. He's coming to what you own, or what owns you, and taking it, taking over your possessions and passions. He's taking away your faulty worldview and taking your sins. He's absconding with your presumptuous pride or your sense of inadequacy, either way leaving you as you should rightly be, with nothing but the image of God. He's robbing you of your selfishness and pulling the rug out from under your fearful isolations. He's taking your abilities and quite literally taking your gifts.

So if you think Advent is just a countdown getting you ready for Christmas and the cute little story of a baby Jesus and no crying he makes, well, this thief Jesus is coming more like the Grinch who stole Christmas, taking your gifts, taking away the glitz and schmaltz and crap, coming to rob you away from a culture that too often has you trapped and bound. He takes your false fears and stifled self-image that you may celebrate rightly and fully. You better watch out, 'cuz Jesus is coming. And that's good news.

Turn to the light and learn this lesson:
Jesus comes to take away your sin
and to make of you a new creation.
In + his name, God comes to set you free.
Rejoice: you have been brought into God's way of peace.
Amen.

In peace, in peace we pray to you
For peace between nations, for peace between peoples
For all of your students who live out your lessons
For rest and renewal in this Advent season
We continue thanksgiving for our many blessings

Gathered as your witnesses in your holy place of peace that we may learn to walk in your paths, we pray that you would continue to steal in among our lives and convert our warring madness to works of cultivating peace, prosperity, and growth.

Be attentive to all who wait expectantly for your mercy in times of crisis, illness, fear, and grief (*especially Lynne*

Schultz, Dorothea Torstenson, Lucetta & Howard Kanetzke, Hollis Rudiger, Rita Olson's mother Ruth, and Pastor Sonja with her parents).

Finally, on your great day, bring us streaming with all your saints of all times and places to the everlasting light of your redemption.

Until then, we practice entrusting to you all for whom we pray, with confidence that you fulfill your promises through Christ our Savior and Lord **Amen.**