

SUN SEPT 10
9AM & 11AM

What Are You Learning These Days?



FALL 2023 SERMON SERIES

ENERGY

INTELLIGENCE

IMAGINATION

LOVE

Sunday, September 10, 2023

INTELLIGENCE - "What Are You Learning These Days?"

Charlie Berthoud | Psalm 25:1-5

¹To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you

be put to shame;

let them be ashamed

who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O Lord;

teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

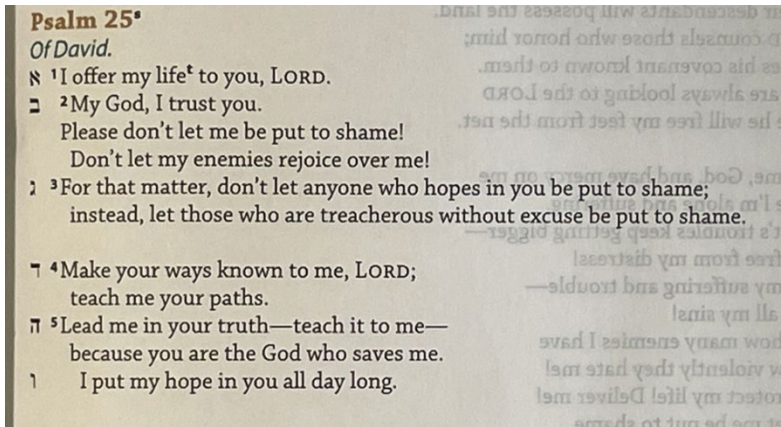
for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

Today we have given Bibles to 1st and 4th graders, encouraging them to read and learn God's word. So it's a good day for **all** of us to read our Bibles.

Please open up the Bible nearest you. Here in the sanctuary, that's the blue book in the pews. At home, I hope you have a Bible handy. If you use a Bible app on your phone, open that up.

In the spirit of learning, we're going to do a short study of Psalm 25.



The psalm opens with a prayerful yielding, a desire to serve to be useful:

The NRSV says “To you O Lord I lift up my soul”

The CEB says “I offer my life to you, Lord”

The prayer continues and in verse 4 we hear a request for guidance, for wisdom:

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me... (NRSV)

“Show me how you work, God; School me in your ways. Take me by the hand;
Lead me down the path of truth.” (*The Message*)

One of the interesting things about Psalm 25 is that it’s an acrostic psalm. That is, each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

In the Common English Bible Study Bible, the Hebrew letters are written in the margins: *alef, bet, gimel, dalet, he*.

This acrostic pattern suggests an orderliness or an intentionality to discovering God’s path and God’s will.

There are 150 psalms in the Bible, including a few other acrostic psalms. Of the 150 psalms, some are songs of praise and thanks, some are cries of lament and sadness. Some are individual, some are collective.

Psalm 25 has a little of all of these elements.

In the psalms, sometimes God is directly addressed, in the second person. Sometimes God is spoken about, in the third person.

In Psalm 25, the beginning and the end are addressed to God. With verses 8 to 15 there is a third person affirmation about God—except for verse 11, at the center, which is plea for forgiveness, as if the psalmist has lost their way and wandered from God's paths.

The psalm affirms God's mercy and forgiveness, and it is essentially asking the question: as a forgiven person, how should I live. The psalm concludes with a prayer for the psalmist and for all the people:

"O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.... Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles." -Psalms 25:20-22 (NRSV)

This psalm-prayer for guidance and wisdom is appropriate for us today, as our focus is on INTELLIGENCE. We are in the second week of our four-week series on ENERGY, INTELLIGENCE, IMAGINATION, and LOVE—four gifts from God that we can nurture and cultivate for more faithful Christian living.

The inspiration for the series comes from a question that is asked of people being ordained as Elders, Deacons, or Pastors:

"Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" -Presbyterian Church *Book of Order*, W-4.0404h

Last week we focused on ENERGY, and I encouraged you to be intentional about charging stations—places and ways that we can tap into the energy, the power, the love of God.

With INTELLIGENCE, we're asking God to make us wise. As we learn that we are forgiven people, loved people, we seek the path of life.

One obvious way to cultivate our intelligence is through Bible study. We routinely remind each other of the importance of regular Bible reading here.

If you haven't read the Bible in a while or if you're looking for a place to start, I have some ideas.

Get yourself a good study Bible. We have several in the church library which you can

sample.

And if it's your thing, check out YouVersion Bible app, where you can read the Bible, get a daily verse, and get prompts to help you pray.

The Bible Project is another great resource, with short videos to introduce every book of the Bible, and a whole lot more.

As for reading the Bible itself, if you're wondering where to start, I don't suggest going from start to finish, as it's a big a complex book. Really, it's a collection of 66 books.

And I don't suggest closing your eyes and opening the Bible to a random page. You might find a great teaching, but you also might end up frustrated or confused.

If you want to do some Bible reading, here are five good starting points:

- Psalm 23 "The Lord is my shepherd..."
- Matthew 5-7 The sermon on the mount
- Jonah Not just a tale of a whale
- Romans 12 Be transformed by the renewing of your mind
- Luke 15 The lost and found chapter (or reading the whole gospel)

I am a big fan of Bible study, of learning the culture and context, of reflecting on similar passages, of understanding the nuance of Greek or Hebrew words.

That said, sometimes we get a bit too scholarly and analytical with our Bible study—especially in a college town with lots of scholarly and analytical people!

So we do our Bible study, but we need to realize that the real intelligence in it is not understanding the Greek syntax or the history of the Roman Empire, but in listening for God to speak to us. The Bible is God's word to guide us, comfort us, challenge us, help us, lead us.

Former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins has a poem called "Introduction to Poetry" which seems to be reflecting on his teaching experience of students being too analytical with poetry. I picture him reading this poem to other exasperated poetry professors, and I hear this poem in terms of how we read and study the Bible. Billy Collins writes:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

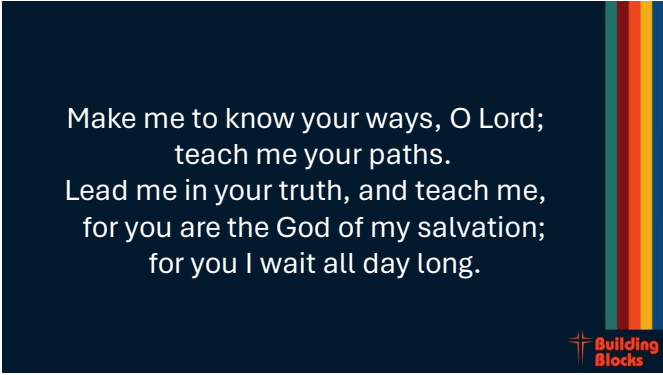
But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Sometimes we over-study and over-think the Bible and try to torture “the real meaning” out of it when we really just need to listen and ask God to speak to us.

Maybe that means just picking a verse or two and meditating on the words.

So let's look again at a verse in Psalm 25 and just hold it up to the light, or waterski across it, and listen for God.



Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

This might be a good prayer for you this week.

Maybe you want to spend some time reflecting on Psalm 25, asking God to teach you so you can find your way in life.

This is essentially what we do here at Covenant, trying to cultivate our godly

intelligence. We gather for worship and study, to “Learn God’s Love”, expecting great things from God.

Then we go forth with our intelligence, to attempt great things for God, to “Live God’s Love.”

As we walk into church, we could rightly ask ourselves “what am I going to learn today?”

As we leave, hopefully with some new insight or inspiration, we could rightly ask ourselves “how am I going to live today?”

To me, this is what Christian intelligence is about. We learn that we are beloved children of God, called by Jesus through the power of the Spirit, to see ourselves and the world in new ways, and then we’re sent out, to do what we can to make this world a better place.

Remember Jesus was known as a Rabbi, a teacher. As his disciples, his students, we try to learn about our world, about ourselves, about the Bible, about our neighbors every day.

A disciple is a learner. We are all students of life. Here at Covenant, we strive to learn God’s love and then live God’s love.

Every Friday, we send out a CONNECTIONS email with some information and inspiration. If you want to be added to the list, check our website, or contact the church office.

This week I wrote about three of our partners: Pres House, Stephens Elementary, and Dubuque Seminary. All three of them are educational institutions.

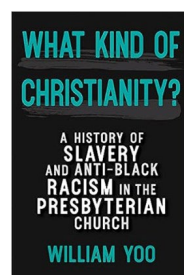
Our church is all about learning.

Intelligence also means having a sense of humility and being able to recognize that we don’t know everything.

For a very long time, most Presbyterians in this country were perfectly OK with slavery, thinking that since “it’s in the Bible” it must be OK.

Ordained Presbyterian minister and Columbia Theological Seminary professor William Yoo has written a fascinating and challenging study of Presbyterians and

slavery called *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church*. In the book, he persuasively shows how strong Presbyterians



support of slavery was, and he invites us into thoughtful reckoning of our heritage and our world today.

He will be here on Sunday, October 1, to help us all grow in intelligence, and hopefully in love too.

Part of intelligence is the awareness that we might be wrong, that we need to change our minds. The word “repentance” really means a change of mind, a change of direction.

Thank goodness a majority of Presbyterians eventually changed their minds about slavery.

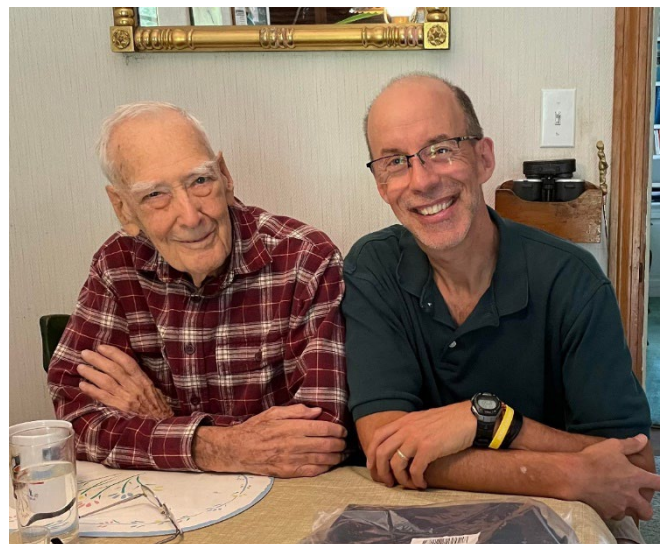
Thank goodness Presbyterians were open to changing their minds about women being elders, deacons, and pastors.

Thank goodness Presbyterians were open to changing their minds about inclusion of LGBTQ people.

- An intelligent person is open to the possibility that they might be wrong.
- An intelligent Christian takes the prayer of confession seriously, seeking to repent—to turn around and change one’s mind, in alignment with God.
- And an intelligent person is open to learning something new every day.

As we think about intelligence and the importance of learning, I want to tell you about Arthur W. Frank, a wonderful person who died earlier this year at the age of 103.

Mr. and Mrs. Frank were our neighbors in my childhood home in Connecticut. Both of them were always kind, caring, and joyful. They always seemed to be smiling. She died several years ago. He continued living in their home on Wyndwood Road until his final days.



I visited him last year when I was in Connecticut for a high school reunion. His 102-year-old body was a little bit frail, but his smile was warm, and his mind was sharp. We

sat together and he asked all about my family and the reunion, and we reminisced and laughed about the good old days together.

Then he asked me a question which I really appreciated.

He said “Charlie, what are you learning these days?” He followed it up with questions about God and the church and the role of pastor. He seemed genuinely interested in learning about what I was learning. We had a wonderful conversation. I remember thinking how delightful it was that a 102-year-old person was open to learning new things.

Jesus came into the world proclaiming the reality of the Kingdom of God, with the hope that we would learn, follow, and live as new people.

For us Christians, this means:

- we have to read and study the Bible
- we need to reflect and discuss with each other on the issues of the day
- and we have to be open to learning new things

so that we can really grow in faith, hope, and love as followers of Jesus.

What are you learning these days?