

“CEU’S REQUIRED”
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John 3:1-17

It’s graduation time. For the past few weeks or so, and particularly, this coming week, thousands upon thousands of graduates have walked or will walk across stages and receive their diplomas. It’s an exciting time for them, for their families, and their friends.

What’s not so exciting sometimes are the graduation speeches! Now, to give the speakers the benefit of the doubt, giving a graduation speech is almost a losing proposition. You’re facing an audience of people who just want to get the diploma, pass around hugs and kisses, collect the gifts, and get to the parties! And people are expecting you to give some life-changing message, profound words of wisdom to propel them into the next phase of their lives.

But occasionally there are some stellar graduation speeches, and not infrequently, they get posted to the internet. One of my favorites was one given by the writer Anna Quindlen a number of years ago, and it was subsequently turned into a little book entitled *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*.

She said a lot in that speech about keeping perspective in life. Sadly, she learned very early in her college career how life can change in an instant. Her mother, who was in her 40's at the time, was diagnosed with cancer and died not much later, and it totally changed the way Anna looked at life. So her entire graduation speech was about keeping perspective, knowing what’s important.

And the lines that I liked especially were near the very end of the speech and went like this: “School never ends. The classroom is everywhere.” (Anna Quindlen, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, p. 45-46)

I think the main character in today’s Gospel lesson understood that. He understood that school never ends, that he needed to keep on learning. And, my goodness, he was already quite a learned man when he came to see Jesus in the middle of the night. He was one of the most learned men in the community, a religious scholar, yet for all the facts he had stored in his head, he knew there must be something more - and so he went to see Jesus.

He knew that he didn’t have all the answers. He didn’t decide to rest on his

laurels, that because he had a degree, as it were, in Biblical studies, he could quit learning and growing. He knew that school never ends, and so he went to see Jesus.

Sadly, too few people continually seek to grow in their faith. When I say that, I mean intentionally grow in their faith - through study, prayer, small groups, retreats and such. The level of Biblical literacy goes down year after year after year.

If you don't believe me, let me tell you about something that happened on the Tonight show one night. Jay Leno went out on the streets to interview people like he does occasionally, asking about a wide variety of subjects, and this night, he was asking people about Biblical stories.

He asked one man, "Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?"

"Freedom of speech?!" the guy asked.

To another, "Complete this sentence . . . Let him who is without sin . . ."

And the person replied, "Have a good time?"

Finally, Leno turned to someone else in the group, who, by the way, had been laughing at his friends at their inability to answer correctly - Jay says to him, "Who, according to the Bible, was swallowed by a whale?" With a great big smile on his face, and ultimate confidence in his answer, he said, "Oh, I know that one - Pinocchio!" (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul That Only God Can Fill*, Finding God in the Bible, p. 75)

That would be funny, if it weren't so tragically sad. Too many of us don't know the Word, and we don't know it because we don't spend enough time in it. Maybe it's because after we went through confirmation, or finished Sunday School in high school, we called it quits - and stopped intentionally seeking to grow in our faith.

Friends, school never ends. Growing in faith should never end. But we have to work at it. Did you notice the title of my sermon today? I have been amused this week as several people who were looking over the bulletin as it was being put together, thought I had made a typo in the sermon title. They didn't get it, and maybe you don't understand it either. CEU's required. CEU's are continuing education units. I would imagine that many people here know what that means and it's a part of their job. It's a part of my job, for sure.

Every four years, pastors are required to have 8 continuing education units.

Required. We have to document what we do to intentionally grow in our faith development, and job skills every single year. And it's not done to us just to give us more work, but it's done with the knowledge that learning and growing makes you a better pastor. In the same vein, learning and growing makes all of us better Christians, better disciples of Jesus Christ.

So, have you earned any CEU's lately when it comes to growing in faith? In what ways are you going to school to learn more? Are you taking time for daily devotions? Daily times of prayer? Are you taking part in a Sunday School class, youth group, Beginnings group, Emmaus group? Have you participated in one of our short-term studies? Have you gone on one of our retreats? Are you in a womens' circle, or do you take part in one of the many gatherings with men that we have in our church?

How are you doing when it comes to growing in faith? I hope you, like Nicodemus, have come to realize that school never ends, and that you take advantage of ways in which you can grow in your knowledge of the Lord, and more importantly, grow closer to Him.

Bishop Robert Schnase, one of our most gifted Bishops in the United Methodist Church right now, made an interesting discovery a number of years ago. He was out hiking one day when he spotted what he thought was an unusually beautiful and rare bird. Well, the next few times he was hiking, he kept seeing that same bird.

He really wanted to know what kind of bird it was, so he bought a field guide to birds, and a pair of binoculars, and figured it out. And then, he said, he became a birder. He had discovered a whole new world of interest. He would go out on long walks with his binocular and book, and marvel at all of the different birds, and their wonderful colors, and traits. It left him with an entirely new appreciation for God's creative hand, and in his words, he said, "My eyes have been opened to a whole new world." (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, "Growing in Grace," p. 76.

So too, our eyes are opened to a whole new world, when we, as Schnase then continued, "open Scripture, belong to a community of Christ, and start to explore life with God. We detect God's presence and activity that we never before noticed. A new world opens. We learn a new vocabulary. With soul work, an unseen world that we never knew existed becomes visible. Regular Bible study with others brings topics before us that we otherwise overlook, and we learn to identify them with greater clarity. We learn to see God." (Ibid.)

Old Nicodemus discovered that on his midnight visit to Jesus. He found out what had been missing in his life. He went back to school, and his eyes were

opened, and he went forth a different man, more Christ-like, with a deeper love for the Lord.

My friends, school never ends. Not just for graduates, but for all of us. School never ends. We have so many marvelous opportunities to grow in our faith here at our church, so I pray that you will take part in one or more of them. I already mentioned a lot of them earlier. But let me tell you about a couple more.

This summer, we will have our always wonderful Vacation Bible School for children. Please do all you can to bring your children, and if you can, help out as well.

Secondly, this summer, we're trying something completely new. We're having a study outside of the church - in four different locations throughout our parish. It's the same study - John Ortberg's book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You Have to Get Out of the Boat*, and, as I said, it will be held in four different locations, so one will surely be close to you. It's only four weeks long, one night a week for about two hours. What a wonderful opportunity, in the warmth and beauty of summer, to join some of your fellow parishioners and hopefully some of their friends and neighbors, to go back to school and learn more about God. There's an insert in today's bulletin about it, so I hope you'll pray about signing up for one of the locations.

None of us, friends, is ever too old to learn something new, and there is always something God waits to teach us. Like Nicodemus, may we step out in faith and intentionally seek to grow in our faith, to the end that, we will grow more in love with Christ, be ever more aware of his amazing grace, and be the faithful disciples He calls us to be. May it be so. Amen.