



THE SECOND PILLAR: A CENTER FOR LEARNING

October 27, 2019, Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost, Reformation Sunday

Deuteronomy 6:4-13; 2 Timothy 1:1-7

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

[Pastor Clayton sings the “Books of the Old Testament” song.]

Those are the books of the Old Testament—all 39 of them. I learned that song in my 3rd grade Sunday School class taught by Mrs. White and Mrs. Hagood. Years later, as a young adult in seminary, our professor announced that on our final exam we would be required to list, in order, the books of the Old Testament. My classmates all groaned. I quietly hummed to myself.

Today is the second sermon in a series focused on the four pillars of The Brick Presbyterian Church. The Second Pillar centers on Education: We are “A Center for Learning.” This congregation serves as a Center for Learning for all ages six out of seven days every week—and quite often on Saturdays, too. We offer many opportunities to learn: the education hour for adults on Sunday mornings and 4 weekly Bible Studies. Our children are learning in the Sunday School classrooms and in the choir room. Our youth are growing in faith in the Pioneer and Youth Fellowships and the Confirmation process. Seminarians are both learning and teaching. A Circle, Book Group, Working Women’s Fellowship, the Women’s Association and the Men’s Council to name a few more.

We are a Center for Learning Monday through Fridays. The Brick Church School is a premier—even the preeminent—independent nursery school on the Upper East Side. The day school is not a separate non-profit; it was founded and has remained to this day a part of the church in governance and mission. Even as the school has grown more diverse over the years (our members go to the school but so do families of other faiths), the unity and close, vital relationship between church and



school adds mutual strength and value. Adam and I are blessed to lead chapel for the children every Wednesday. And our mission of education does not take the summer off. Education for all ages continues on summer Sundays; and Monday through Friday every single classroom is filled with students in the Summer Steps program. This church welcomes students from all over the city for a 5-week program boosting learning skills, preparing them for their start in independent schools in the fall.

Our two Scripture readings give voice to the centrality of the faith community as a center for learning. Here, the faith is handed on from one generation to the next. Here, formation in the faith takes place through ritual and worship, in formal and informal settings of education. What happens here should reinforce your practice of the faith at home. Last year, a visiting grandmother told me that she always says grace at the table before meals when visiting her grandchildren. To remind them, she said, that the gift of food, like the gift of life, comes from God. Deuteronomy 6 makes clear that knowing the commandments of God shapes the life of the community, but also gives shape to each person's daily activities: Sitting down, standing up, going out, coming in...we recite, remember God's words, keeping them in our hearts. Physical, visible symbols of faith are important, too. Jewish people place a mezuzah at the entrance to the house and to other rooms, as well. Inside the slender vessel are these foundational words—"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul..." What visible symbols of our faith are in your home?

1 & 2 Timothy are letters written by a seasoned Pastor to a younger leader or group of leaders near the end of the first century. Beset by false teachers, the older Pastor encourages Timothy to recall the true faith...the faith that was given to him by his mother Eunice and his Grandmother, Lois. Writing on this text, Tom Long says: "Timothy did not become a Christian at a weekend conference in Malibu."ⁱ "Timothy's faith is no fleeting fancy; it has been preserved and passed on through the generations." This passage also exposes the failures of today's church to pass on the faith effectively enough to our children. Tom writes: "The chain from Lois to Eunice to Timothy has, in many places and ways, broken down."



As your transitional minister, I ask you to consider these questions: How does your curriculum get reviewed to ensure it stays fresh and makes the best use of emerging scholarship and learning methods? How do you have beloved educational traditions yet never succumb to the dreaded ‘last seven words of the church’: “But we’ve always done it this way”? How do we welcome differing perspectives being offered in lectures; approaching topics with ‘appreciative inquiry’ instead of becoming offended? How can the church and school combine efforts, offering parent education to strengthen families? Excellent podcasts and online learning courses are almost everywhere but in the church. We need quality education for people on the go. Last year Barbara Wheeler said Brick needs rigorous study of theology because you are capable of it and the church needs an educated laity.

Indeed, our emphasis on education is a heritage received from the Reformation of the church in the 16th century. Today is Reformation Sunday, so it is especially fitting to lift up this aspect of our history and our current mission.

When one Reformed theologian wrote about nine essential characteristics of Presbyterians, among them was this: “The life of the mind as the service of God.” Learning is a Christian duty. Indeed, “Wherever the Reformed community went, it established schools alongside churches”—not only to teach the Bible or to teach reading so people could study the Bible, but also to teach the whole range of liberal arts, which liberate the human spirit. The Reformers “placed value upon the skills of language, reading, writing and speaking. They also prized clarity, logic, and precision...the ability to analyze a problem and to formulate an answer. The sermon in our tradition was meant to be an intellectual exercise and a mental discipline that had a significant cultural impact.”ⁱⁱ

By the start of the Civil War, Presbyterians had built 49 colleges, far more than any other Protestant denomination. Presbyterians place a high value on a “thinking faith” so the church has the capacity to reform itself faithfully in every generation.



In the medieval period, for many of the faithful, religion had become a matter of pious superstition. Magic replaced authentic faith. Ignorance and corruption plagued the church. In the Renaissance, the work of humanists began an effective counter movement to restore authentic biblical faith, nourishing the roots of the Reformation. Humanists like Erasmus wanted to translate the Bible into the languages of the people so they could read the Bible for themselves. In his introduction to the translation of the New Testament, Erasmus wrote: “I wish every...woman would read the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul. ...I hope the farmer may sing snatches of Scripture at his plough, that the weaver may hum bits of Scripture to the tune of the shuttle, that the traveler may lighten the weariness of his journey with stories from Scripture.” This emphasis on teaching and education became so identified with the Reformed movement that one visitor to an early Reformed church thought the worship space looked like the interior of a school: “Benches are everywhere with a pulpit for the preacher in the middle.” A former seminary President writes: “The Reformed project, was, from its beginning, an educational project as much as an evangelical project.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our emphasis on education is deeply theological: If God expects every person to affirm or deny the Gospel...and if the Bible offers everything necessary for saving knowledge, then everyone has to read the Bible. We have a duty to teach it.^{iv}

Our forebear in the faith, John Calvin, made knowledge as well as personal commitment a condition for admission to the communion table. According to Deane Turner’s wonderful history, our first pastor, Dr. John Rodgers, began the custom of a weekly class for the instruction of children in the Shorter Catechism and a popular public lecture on the catechism on Thursday evenings. Gardiner Spring came next and by 1825 was offering quarterly meetings with a large adult Bible Class, a class for catechism instruction, and a singing school. In those days, if you wanted to join the church, the pastors and Session tested the applicant on knowledge of the Bible and the Catechism!^v

Brick Church’s predecessor congregations sponsored a “Charity School” in the City as early as 1789 as a form of outreach to poor children. In the early 1800s, New York had no system of public education. People of means sent their children

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



to private day schools or boarding schools or hired private tutors. Some could afford the few “pay schools” but “Charity Schools” were the only hope for many. The Sunday School movement took off in the early 1820s providing both secular and religious teaching for boys and girls. This congregation was part of intentional educational efforts from 1789 on – not only for children of economic need, but offering education for its own children and adults as well.

The Brick Church School began when the church moved in 1938 to this location. As Deane Turner writes, “At the insistence of Dr. Paul Wolfe, on October 7, 1940, Mrs. Lane Boutwell met 6 children at the door of the Parish House and took them in the elevator to their classroom, beginning the day school that continues to this day. Tuition was \$11 a month. By the time there were 50 children enrolled from 3-5 years of age, tuition had increased to \$100 a year.” Today, The Brick Church School has 195 students from ages 2-5 and tuition is, well, more than \$100 a year. Dr. Wolfe is the pastor that instituted including a Children’s Sermon in worship.

The Second Pillar of The Brick Presbyterian Church is education. We are “A Center for Learning.” The Bible remains at the center of our educational programs and worship services. Much has changed since the Reformation era: we have grown in understandings about teaching and learning. Memorization and learning facts has decreased, making space for creativity, wonder, and a sense of profound mystery. We no longer require a certain level or measure of knowledge before you are welcomed to the table, as Calvin did in his time. Though to be fair to him, he sought to dispel notions of “magic” in the Sacrament of bread and cup.

I think Calvin might approve of the greater space we give today for the mystery inherent in communion. We continue to share his value in understanding the meanings of the Lord’s Supper and teaching those meanings to our children, who are now welcomed to the table with us. But it is also true that however much we may learn, the sacrament will always be more than we can fully comprehend.

One of my professors once told this story: A little boy grew up in the church sitting with his parents week after week, learning the faith. When he was young, as the



communion bread and cup was passed, his father would lean over to him and whisper: “You do not understand this now, but this bread means that God loves you. And this cup means that God gives everything for you, now and forever.”

Years later, when the little boy had grown to be a man, he would bring his father to church with him. His father now suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. And on Sundays, as the communion elements were passed. The son would take the bread and give it to his father, whispering, “You do not understand this now, but this bread means God loves you. And this cup means that God gives everything for you, now and forever.”

It is amazing what you can learn by being in worship week after week. What you pick up going to Sunday School and Bible Study week after week. You never know when it will provide exactly what you need for that day. In that season.

Your time, your talent, your financial resources support this second pillar. Your gifts ensure it will remain as strong for the future as it has been from the beginning and is now.

Amen.

ⁱ Thomas G. Long, **Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible: 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 189.

ⁱⁱ John H. Leith, **Introduction to the Reformed Tradition** (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 77-78.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Jenkins, **The Church Transforming: What’s Next for the Reformed Project?** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 6-7.

^{iv} Louis B. Weeks, **To Be A Presbyterian** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 56.

^v E. Deane Turner: *A History of The Brick Presbyterian Church*, Vol 1, 51, 65-68.