

2026-08-16 Session 5 of Practices that Grow our Faith – Learn

How do we learn? And then once we've learned something, how do we retain it and make it become part of our lives?

When I was a student at WSU working towards a double major in Music Ed and Special Ed, there was one semester when I was taking both a heavy-duty Music History class and a class on different learning styles. The Music History professor was well-known as a tough teacher, but my problem wasn't the topic or the material, it was HOW the class was being taught. When we came into the classroom, the large chalkboards on two walls (yes, there were chalkboards on the walls) were covered with notes that we were supposed to copy down and be responsible for knowing. But at the same time this professor was lecturing on something entirely unrelated to the notes on the boards; we were also supposed to be taking notes on the lecture.

In my special ed class, we were learning methods of testing (and we were testing one another) to find out what our strongest learning styles were. I tested off the chart as a kinesthetic learner. That means that I learn best when I move. So I was always the kid who was tapping my fingers or swinging my leg or doing something else distracting to others that involved moving. I'm not nearly as strong a visual or aural learner. This has been problematic for me my whole life. Kinesthetic learners can make it hard for those around them to concentrate!

Since neither visual nor aural are my strongest learning styles I was sunk in this Music History class. And this class was not optional for me. As a Music major I had to pass it. So my special ed teacher suggested that I bring a tape recorder into the classroom and record the professor's lecture, and not even try to listen to it. Just focus on writing down the notes from the boards. Then, later, she said I should listen to the recording in a setting where I could move while I listened. Also, she said, study the notes from the board while you move. So it took me til college, but I finally learned to walk around my house or my yard, familiar places, as I read and study books and notes and whatever else I'm trying to absorb. Within a few weeks I was doing much better in the History class and, in the end, both classes turned out just fine. Still, to this day, when I need to really concentrate on something, it helps me to move while I'm trying to learn it. How do YOU learn best? What's your learning style?

For those in the Deuteronomic tradition, learning involved lots of repetition. The stories of God's faithfulness were repeated over and over until they were learned by heart – and then repeated again generation upon generation. Finally, after many hundreds of years, the most important stories and laws were written down. But the writing didn't happen for a long, long time, so the learning was done by hearing and repeating, hearing and repeating.

And even today in the Jewish tradition, this passage that we just read together from Deuteronomy 6 has come to be known as the Shema, which means "hear!" or "listen!". This prayer is repeated (recited) twice a day, fulfilling the command to speak God's words "when you lie down and when you get up". So repetition is still a very important part of the Jewish practice of learning and being faithful.

Memorization is also a really important way of learning in the Jewish tradition. I've read that most boys in Jesus' day, by the time they were about 12 years old or so had the entire Torah memorized. That's Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, the first 5 books of the Hebrew text. They would begin around the age of 5 with intensive training – a sort of singing or chanting exercise and, as a group, they would repeat and recite large portions of text until they had it memorized. So for about 7 years, those formative years, the young Jewish boys were quite disciplined as they practiced learning the scripture.

Jesus clearly and often demonstrated the significance of learning and memorizing scripture. He had so much of it memorized (and appropriately in its context – it wasn't proof-texted) that he was quick to call it up often when he was questioned, especially by those who were trying to trap him in his own words. Of course, we think of the story in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22 where we read about the adversarial exchange between Jesus and the lawyer when the lawyer asks Jesus "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Now remember, there were 613 laws. And in a heartbeat Jesus recites the Shema to him – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." And then he added the second part which he pulled quickly from his memory, from Leviticus 19:18 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus put those two commands together as the most important sum total of all the Law and the Prophets. I wonder if we're so accustomed to hearing those two commands together that we sometimes forget that they were not originally written back to back or side by side but Jesus had those texts memorized so thoroughly that they were on the tip of his tongue and at his command so that he could instantly, in that circumstance, bring them together.

A third important way to learn is by asking questions. In Jesus' tradition it was the children's job during special holidays to ask the same questions at each point in the rituals. For example, during the Passover meal, the youngest child asks four questions. Why do we eat matzah at the Passover? Matzah is unleavened, flat bread instead of regular bread or rolls. Why do we dip our food at the Passover in salt water and charoset (a fruit-nut paste)? Why do we eat bitter herbs and greens like horseradish instead of regular vegetables at the Passover meal? And why do we lean back on pillows or cushions at the Passover meal, the way kings used to sit at their meals – instead of sitting up straight in chairs the way we usually sit to eat?

Now, these are very specific questions that the youngest child has been coached to ask. And the answers to these questions are given as the grown-ups repeat the story of when their ancestors were enslaved in Egypt and God rescued them when the angel of death passed over them and they were able to escape from the Pharaoh. That's one way of asking questions. And if you don't know the answers to those questions I would encourage you to look them up!

It's important to ask all kinds of questions! You can ask pre-planned questions or unplanned questions. You can ask silly questions or serious questions. You can ask questions that seem easy to answer or you can ask really hard questions that may not have answers. My granddaughter Rosie asks all kinds of questions... "Why do we always just walk home from school Grandma? Why don't we sometime walk the opposite direction and see where it goes?" "Why am I gonna math homework every day in the third grade?" "Why is Neil (her little brother) so annoying?" "Why do people get sick?" "Why are people so mean to each other sometimes?" "What will happen if all the forests burn down?" "What if I just CAN'T go to sleep because I'm

so nervous about school?” Rosie is full of questions as she learns about the world and her place in it. And even though her questions can make us feel tired sometimes, it’s important to remember that she’s learning.

So... whatever your learning style is, however you learn best, embrace it, explore it, remember that it’s God-given, and let’s build and welcome a culture of curiosity here at church so that we can learn together. Let’s continue to read the Bible together as we do in Sunday school and in worship. And let’s read and talk about other books together like we also do sometimes in Sunday school or at our Wednesday evening book study. Let’s repeat the stories of our faith to each other and our children so that we remember God’s faithfulness to us. Let’s memorize scripture, or at least be so familiar with it that we can call it to mind and incorporate it into our lives. And let’s always encourage one another and our children to ask lots of questions that help us learn. Often the questions are as important or maybe even more-so than the answers. I believe that the Holy Spirit honors genuine questions from those who are seeking to learn.

Here’s a prayer of blessing for all of us:

Loving God, thank you for giving each of us unique and amazing ways of learning.

Be present with us as we practice learning more about life and about you.

May everything that we learn strengthen our faith in you and our ability to follow Jesus every day. Amen.

Benediction

Go out into this beautiful world that God has made.

Go and play!

Go and learn!

Go and love!

May the prayers of your faith community keep you safe, healthy, and hopeful. Amen.