

LOVING GOD WITH YOUR MIND

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself;’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Mark 12: 28-34

“I know only enough of God to want to worship [God], by any means ready to hand.” These words are from an essay by Annie Dillard, (“Holy the Firm” in *The Annie Dillard Reader*, p. 445) which I first heard from Stan Hall, one of my professors at Austin Seminary. Stan was fond of quoting Annie Dillard and these were the words he used to begin a course on worship and liturgics. So his emphasis was on the last part of the quote, the “worship God by any means ready to hand” bit. And right now, of course, we are discovering a new meaning to those words. But it is the first part of the quote, “I know only enough of God,” that raises more questions in my mind.

How much do you have to know in order to love and worship God? How much knowledge is enough?

Two of the giants in our Reformed tradition have dealt with one extreme in coming to terms with this question. Both John Calvin and Karl Barth are adamant that God is ultimately incomprehensible and un-knowable. Calvin especially often warns against what he calls “idle speculation” about the nature of God, and also against the danger of presuming to grasp the totality of God by means of the intellect and knowledge.

And that creates something of a dilemma for those of us who claim the Reformed tradition. Historically, we have placed high value on learning and education and intellectual pursuits. John Leith goes so far as to say that the Academy of Geneva, which was established in 1559 by John Calvin, was the crowning achievement of Calvin's work there. He goes on to say that wherever the Reformed community went, from Geneva to the Netherlands, to England and Scotland, and to this country, we established schools, colleges, seminaries and universities alongside the churches, not only to give students the tools to study the Bible, but also to teach the whole range of what we now call the liberal arts. And not just for service and leadership in the church, but for the flourishing of the human spirit. (*Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 80)

This question of what or how much you need to know is at the center of the encounter between Jesus and one of the scribes in our reading from Mark's gospel. The religious and intellectual elite had been hammering him with difficult questions and trying to pin him down on the intricacies of the law and its interpretations, and you can almost hear the frustration and exasperation in his responses to them until, finally, one of the scribes comes along and says, "OK, so what's the bottom line? Just what do you need to know in order to worship God?" And Jesus responds by quoting that great commandment from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." And he adds the corollary to that fundamental commandment, from the Book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And with these words, Mark says that he brought all their questions to an end.

But I wonder about that.

It seems to me that rather than cut off the questioning, what Jesus does is open up the way for a new line of questioning. In effect he says, "You start by loving God. Then you go from there to loving your neighbor. And when you've done that, when you've gotten your heart in the right place, you still haven't arrived yet, but you are heading in the right direction, you are on the road to the kingdom of God." And in both Mark's gospel and in Matthew, Jesus adds something to the quote from the Book of Deuteronomy. He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength," and then he adds, "and with all your *mind*."

As Calvin and Barth suggest there are certain dangers in presuming to *know* God with our minds and intellect. But what does it mean to *love* God with all your mind? I want to suggest at least a few ways that we love God with our minds.

The first way is the simplest, and yet may also be the most profound and moving. It is simply to notice and appreciate the hand of God, or the presence of the holy, in the world around us. To go out on a clear night and look up at the stars and just marvel at the mystery and wonder of it all. Or to have your spirits lifted by paying attention to the change of seasons; or watching a gaggle of kids become so absorbed in some game they have invented on the spot that they are totally oblivious to the passing of time. Loving God with your mind can be as simple as taking the time to observe life in all its complexity and variety. As one writer puts it: "We believe in the God of creation, [and] we stand in awe before the majesty and mystery of the cosmos. . . . Learning begins in wonder." This is something we can learn from children and from artists, if we pay attention to them.

Another way to love God with your mind is by being attentive to what is going on in the human world. Part of our task as people of faith is to *discern* the will of God in order to *do* the

will of God. And if we believe that God is not just a distant, remote deity, but is active in and through the world, then as teachers of the faith and as learners who are growing in faith we are called to be cognizant of the ways of the world.

If we are to be the salt of the earth, we have to know where there is a need for seasoning; and if we are to be the light of the world, we have to know where there is darkness. And if we accept that all truth comes from God then we have to be open to truth from all dimensions of life: the sciences, the arts, literature, and sometimes even the wisdom from other faiths and religions. It means we have to be well informed so that we can be active in the realms of politics and economics and justice. It means we have to prepare ourselves and our children to be responsible participants in the community and to be agents of change for the common good. And that might involve things like knowing where our food comes from and the human cost of cheap clothing. It might involve using our minds to better understand the atmospheric effects of carbon dioxide from fossil fuels, and the impact it is having on our planet and on our neighbors in poorer countries. We can't profess to love our neighbor if our actions or our lifestyle are causing the land they depend on for their livelihood to suffer from drought or rising sea levels.

Another way we love God with our minds is when we remember that the acquisition of knowledge of any kind is not just an end in itself. The scribes and Pharisees who encountered Jesus were well informed about the intricacies of the law they were questioning him on. But what he tells them is that our knowledge serves two ends: first, to nurture our love of God, and second to equip us to serve our neighbors. One of the overarching themes of the biblical story is the liberation of captive people, challenging those systems and forces in the world that serve to rob the vulnerable in our societies of their dignity. The Bible is clear that God is not indifferent to the situation of the poor and the victims of prejudice and injustice. And so when we use our minds and apply our knowledge to transform the world and to lift up those who are marginalized, we begin to discover what it really means when Jesus said that all the laws and commandments hinge on those two great commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.

And finally, on a very personal note, when I think of loving God with my mind, the first names that occur to me are not John Calvin or Karl Barth, as much as I love reading and wrestling with the large theological questions they raise. I think, instead, of Mrs. Kregel.

Some of my earliest and most vivid memories are of my Sunday School classroom at Victory Baptist Church, in Wichita Falls, Texas. Mrs. Kregel was my first Sunday School teacher, and even before I was able to read for myself, she introduced me and a gaggle of other squirmy kids to the stories of the Bible.

Each Sunday morning she would begin by reading a story directly from the Bible, the King James Version—Daniel in the lion's den, baby Moses in the bulrushes, Peter and James and John in a sailboat, and the little boy Samuel who helped the nearly blind priest Eli, and kept the lamp burning in the Temple, and who heard the voice of God in the middle of the night. I still remember the language that sounded majestic and holy and, well, Biblical. But since that 17th-century English went right over our young minds, Mrs. Kregel would re-tell the story using flannel-graph, cut-out paper figures that were moved around on a flannel board.

And then, being a good teacher, Mrs. Kregel would give each one of us a turn moving the characters around on the flannel board and telling the story in our own words. She allowed us to enter into the story of Samuel, to be amazed with Peter as he hauled in a net of fish, to experience the fear of Daniel in the lion's den before we trusted that God would save us from all harm.

What Mrs. Kregel was doing, even without realizing it, was teaching us one way of loving God with our mind—using our mind and our imagination to make these ancient stories real and present, to make them an extension of our own stories; to enter into these stories and discover something about our own fears, our own little victories, our own sense of trust. Without realizing it, and in ways that she could not have imagined, Mrs. Kregel was helping me lay a foundation for future ways of loving God with my mind, so that years later when I was in seminary and trying to decipher these same stories in their original Hebrew or Greek, there was a familiarity to them. Or when I did eventually dive into the complex thoughts of Calvin and Barth, or my own theology professors, Cindy Rigby and Stacy Johnson, I had an anchor where I could tether these high-flying concepts and situate them in the biblical narrative of who we are, what we are about in the world.

“I know only enough . . .” says Annie Dillard. How much is enough? It seems to me that we cannot answer that with a certain quantity of knowledge. It seems that these two readings from Deuteronomy and Mark's gospel suggest that the only way to gauge how much is enough is whether we are loving and worshiping God with everything we have: our whole spirit, our whole heart, our whole being—and our whole mind.

Loving God goes beyond just having good thoughts or strong feelings toward God. Loving God with all your mind is a holy endeavor, a life-long vocation that never ceases to transform us, to equip us for ministry, to nurture us as individuals and as a community, to enable us to discern God's will in the world, and to empower us to work for the transformation of the whole of creation.

Thanks be to God who has given us the vision and shown us the way.

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