

“Learning Experiences As a Community of Faith: Negative and Positive”

II Kings 4:38-41 and Acts 2:43-47
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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On May 21, 1789, Dr. John Witherspoon preached in Philadelphia on the occasion of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. On a Sunday closest to May 21, Presbyterians often celebrate Presbyterian Heritage Sunday.

Anyone's heritage is a mixture of positives and negatives, whether the heritage to which we're referring is that of Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Baptists, or of the United States, any nation, state, community, school, corporation, or family. Anyone's or any group's heritage is a mixture of positives and negatives.

In small, medium, or large ways, we are all influenced by the heritage of experiences, decisions, and relationships of persons with one another. This morning, Travis Allen has spoken of the heritage and legacy of which he is aware because particular imperfect persons have served the Lord of heaven and earth. You and I are a few of the many across 22 years of his life who have related to him as part of his life and faith journey. We're part of the heritage and legacy of his faith journey in the Lord.

Reading from 2nd Kings, we are privileged to hear the story of a faith community much older than any of us, and much older than any Presbyterians. The story is told of a theological school in the time of the prophet Elisha. The date is plus-or-minus 800 years before Jesus. That faith community met on a regular basis to pray and study and learn with their leader. Sharing a meal was part of their routine. The meal would be prepared by a member of the group. That day, cabbage was boiling when the young cook thought the soup needed something extra.

Since there was no HEB, Appletree, Albertson's, Kroger, Wal-Mart, or Farm Patch Market, the student with kitchen duties went to a pasture or a canyon creekbed and gathered some wild squash to boil with the cabbage. He may or may not have been a sharp student of Scripture and prophetic ministry, but he failed Julia Child's and Rachel Ray's classes on school cafeteria cuisine. The young man made a mistake by gathering gourds which he did not know, when cooked, taste awful.

When the mistake is discovered, the students, who are ready to eat, call Elisha, who is the seminary president/the dean, the Bible class teacher, their mentor, and the most experienced all-round person in the prophetic training group. Elisha makes his way to the kitchen. Once he assesses the situation, Elisha goes to the pantry, takes some cornmeal (or perhaps cornstarch) and throws a cupful or two into the pot of stew. The cornmeal or cornstarch added was not magical; but it was effective. The stew was edible. Dinner happened. The evening study group occurred as planned.

You and I may ask, “Why is this story part of our heritage? Why did anyone write this down as part of a book in the Scriptures of Israel and the Church?” This story is part of the heritage of the community of faith. At class reunions long after Elisha had retired and died, we can imagine that someone would say, “Remember the time when...” and, inevitably, a member of the reunion groups would recall the awful gourds and cornstarch story. They likely both laughed good-naturedly and were amazed at the way it worked out. The story was part of their heritage as a learning experience.

Learning experiences can be both negative and positive. A negative learning experience may be that mistakes are made, even when the one making the mistake means well. A negative learning experience occurs to the extent that a bad decision is made: bitter gourds are picked and peeled and placed in the soup. Yet a second negative learning experience never develops. The story never indicates that community members were negative toward the inexperienced cook. They did not “ream him out” to his face, nor did they talk sarcastically or snidely behind his back. They maturely called their mentor; and this becomes part of the positive learning experience!

Dinner did not have to be perfect for it to be adequate. ***Those of us then and now who make mistakes and the community together as a spiritually healthy community are more important than unconstructive, disparaging criticism which infects the community with bitterness.*** What is a little bitterness to the taste buds or to one’s sense of smell compared to bitterness within attitudes and relationships?

I’ve been in faith communities and other groups who criticize one or two or five or ten in the hope that those criticized will get the message and leave, or never ask to help. I’ve been in groups who give responsibility to a willing newcomer, not give that person either freedom or personal instruction in their task or assignment, and then sit back and criticize her / him / them for not “doing their job right.” That behavior by a group cannibalizes its own. Isolate the one who has made the mistake, who seems not to be as knowledgeable or acceptable as others who are more part of the inner circle. Isolate, embarrass, and cannibalize her, or him, or them, so they will leave. *If we have the sensitivity and sense to realize and understand, that’s a negative learning experience.*

Elisha’s disciples do better than that. They realize that their mentor serves as a channel of God’s care and desire for their health, rather than as a channel of God’s fussiness expecting each and every person to be flawless and perfect. The community that day long ago modeled the response of its mentor. Elisha doesn’t embarrass the cook or crack a mean-spirited, hurtful joke to humiliate that community member. Elisha takes the situation like it is and models a positive learning approach.

That day long ago, Elisha affirms the students’ better and healthier instinct: That spiritual health for the community is more important than arrogance and superior attitudes which humiliate others who are inexperienced and/or who make identifiable mistakes.

Eight hundred years after Elisha, and in Elisha's tradition, Jesus encouraged and mentored disciples to live with caring and compassion in their everyday work which would nurture healthy, respectful relationships. If Jesus Christ is our major faith-community mentor / Lord / Savior, why would we ever prefer tacky, belittling, condescending, cannibalizing thoughts, words, and actions in relation to others?

The learning experiences of life in community with others do not always have to be negative for persons to realize positive, healthy, respectful, caring possibilities. Remember how Elisha's students responded the day the cabbage and squash stew smelled and tasted so bad, when they simply asked for his help: the cornstarch was not magical; and the stew did not have to be perfect for it to be adequate. ***With or without cornstarch from the pantry, as a Presbyterian community of faith today, with others, may the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ shape and transform each of us in that better, positive, and healthy direction.***

– All honor and praise be to God.