

Being Transformed: Back to School Sunday
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Sept. 11, 2022

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Proverbs 1:2-9

Hymns: VT 509 – See the Children Here Before Us; VT 549 Be Thou My Vision

Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite 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. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Proverbs 1:2-9:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
³for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
⁴to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
⁵let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
⁶to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.
⁸Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
and do not reject your mother's teaching;
⁹for they are a fair garland for your head,
and pendants for your neck.

It's that time of year again! There is a crispness in the air and some of the leaves are beginning to change colours. That means it's back-to-school time for kids, teachers, and students of all ages. It's become a trend on social media to post first day of school photos of kids, and I love seeing everyone's smiling faces as they head off to a new year, full of possibility, excitement, and wonder. Ever since the pandemic shut down our schools, the routine of heading back to school for a new year has seemed all the more precious. I know I don't take it for granted anymore, but consider it a profound gift.

Schools are, after all, about more than just learning to read, write, add and subtract.

They're part of the "village" that helps raise children. This is especially clear in the situations of children from struggling families, for whom schools provide a safe, stable place and square meals that they don't necessarily get at home, alongside the friendships and education that all kids need.

Over the past couple of years at our house, we have been reading the Harry Potter books out loud to our oldest. Rereading these books as an adult (books that I first read as a teen!), I've been struck by just how central a role the school – Hogwarts – plays in the main character Harry's life. Not only does Harry learn magical history and potions and charms at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; it's also a place of safety and home for him unlike what he experienced growing up with his abusive aunt and uncle. He learns how to be a good friend, how to work with others, leadership skills, conflict-solving skills, responsibility, compassion, awareness of the wider magical world. He learns a sense of belonging, affirmation, and self-worth. In other words, education shapes who he becomes as a person. It's a set of ideas and practices that become formative – even transformative – in being lived out in community. Does that sound familiar?

In the church, we also speak of something called formation. Part of the work of the church is teaching and preaching, bible studies and other forms of learning which help shape people into who they are called to be. That's why we have our church schools – RJC High School here in Saskatchewan, and post-secondary schools: Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg and Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo. This is also why we mention "education" as part of our congregational mission statement – you know, the one that's written on the wall in the foyer. It says that our

mission as NPMC is: *“To be a biblically-based community for redemptive nurture, worship, invitation to faith, prayer, education, outreach & service in the context of the global church.”* As part of that mission, then, we have a Christian Education deacon on our board (currently Lori Weiler-Thiessen), and we run programs for all ages that nurture study and learning. This is why we have an excellent church library. This is why we support bursaries for students and educational projects through Mennonite Central Committee and other organizations. In all of these ways, faith and education go hand in hand in this community.

The Bible, too, links faith and learning, as we can see in our Scripture passages for today. Our Deuteronomy passage includes the Shema – the “Hear O Israel” statement of faith that remains the central prayer of the Jewish tradition, and is still recited every morning and evening. “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” (Deut. 6:4-5). Importantly for us as Christians, this is also what Jesus points to when asked about the most important commandment, alongside loving your neighbour as yourself. These are the keys to being disciples of our teacher-rabbi, Jesus.

But notice that no sooner is the Shema recorded, than the Israelites are instructed to teach it to the children in their midst. They are to “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. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (v. 6-8). So from the very

beginning, our faith traditions were meant to be taught to the next generations; our faith was always meant to be teachable, meaning that teaching and learning are inseparably part of faith.

Notice also, however, what kind of teaching and learning is described here. This is less about a lesson being learned and more about steeping one's whole life in these teachings. This is "faith-immersion"! These teachings are to be kept in one's heart. If we remember that in the Hebrew worldview, one's "heart" was where one's decisions were thought through and made (not the seat of emotions only, the way we think of it). This means that "keeping these teachings in one's heart" means they are to guide one's decision-making. They are also to be discussed with one's children morning and evening, whether at home or away – they are part of one's daily routines, one's family life, wherever they may go. They are to be bound to one's hand and forehead, and to the doorposts and gates of one's home. They are, in other words, to be integrated into one's everyday life, woven into the very fabric of how one lives. In us, these words are made flesh as we practice them and live them out. We are to surround ourselves with God's Ways, and in doing so, we will be formed and transformed into the people of God.

Our second Scripture passage draws attention to the kind of knowledge that we are to "keep in our hearts" – namely, wisdom. Wisdom, as Patrick and I will be discussing in our upcoming Fall worship series on "Making Sense of the Bible," is one of the central – and much misunderstood – forms of knowledge in the Bible. Biblical Wisdom is not only about intellectual or head-knowledge, nor about assenting to a set of abstract beliefs without question. Rather, it's about learning to think and discern for oneself; it's about cultivating the skills to apply the values and truths of one's faith to

whatever one experiences in life. One of my courses in my Master's program at Conrad Grebel College was called "Thinking Theologically," and that's really what this kind of Wisdom is all about – learning to think, make decisions, and live creatively, joyfully, peacefully according to one's faith.

Proverbs becomes downright poetic when discussing Wisdom, speaking of Wisdom here as adornments that we wear: "a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck." Strikingly, it is not only the young or the inexperienced that are called to seek Wisdom, but the wise and the aged, too: "to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young – let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill." All ages are therefore encouraged to learn "about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity." And all of these aspects of wisdom are rooted in faith, since "fear of the Lord" – meaning "awe" or "wonder" or "reverence" for God – "is the beginning of knowledge," according to Proverbs.

Something I've always appreciated about this community of NPMC is the value it places on education and on life-long learning. With adult education, men's study, and women's Bible study, we see that discussing and learning together does not end in childhood or youth. I would venture to say that for those who actively participate in these groups, studying in community is a spiritual practice. This explains, in part, why these gatherings have continued to draw people to participate, even when they had to occur over Zoom video calls for the last couple of years.

This Fall marks an exciting time in the educational programs of our church community as these three programs – adult ed., men's study, and women's Bible study

– return to in-person gatherings. It’s a joy to contemplate meeting around a table rather than through a screen to listen and learn together. There is also renewed energy around our children’s programming, as children’s Sunday school resumes (coordinated by Rachel Regier) and as the new Kids’ Club and Choir program begins. As you might know, we have been running Peace Club for school-age kids once a month for two years now. This Fall, it’s being expanded into once a week, with most weeks involving half an hour of children’s choir (led by Lynne Driedger-Enns) and half an hour of learning a skill (craft, cooking/baking, etc.) or a peace lesson (still once a month, like Peace Club was). I’m so grateful for the enthusiasm and hard work of Brent and Marie Guenther in having the vision for this revitalization of our program, and for the volunteers they’ve already organized. We had our first gathering of Kids’ Club and Choir on Thursday, and it’s great to see the interest and excitement around this program from NPMC children and those from other Mennonite churches in Saskatoon and beyond! In making these programs our priority, we are truly “reciting” God’s ways to the children in our midst, as Deuteronomy calls us to. I for one can’t wait to see how this will influence and transform the rest of the congregation, as we both teach and are taught by the children and their wisdom.

As we begin a new school year – both in the schools and in our church programs – let’s take some time to be thankful for this gift of education and learning. Let’s bless the teachers and educators who are willing to share of themselves and give guidance to those under their care; we pray for strength, courage, and wisdom for them as they undertake this important task of nurturing wisdom. We pray for open hearts and minds in those of all ages, that we may all take on the task of learning with curiosity and

wonder. We pray for God to be present and at work forming and transforming us. And in this way, may we be reminded of the words of the apostle Paul as we undertake this new year of teaching and learning: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Romans 12:2). AMEN