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“Read a Book”

Last September my congregation had a “backpack blessing” for students and teachers beginning their new school year. We prayed for God’s blessings on their learning, gave thanks that God gave us minds to explore God’s world, and reminded ourselves that educating our minds is part of discipleship, whether in schools of bricks or the graduate school of life.

My denomination, the United Church of Christ, goes back to the Pilgrims through the Congregational line of our heritage. They believed an educated and well-rounded mind was essential for faithful living. They insisted on literacy, so that everyone could read Scripture. A mere sixteen years after establishing their colony, they founded Harvard, the first college in the New World. Later they founded Yale, the Presbyterians founded Princeton, the Methodists founded Drew, the Baptists founded Brown, and the Catholics founded Boston College and Georgetown. Churches educated slaves and free blacks when doing so was illegal, and after the Civil War, established hundreds of colleges for freed men and women, including Howard, Fisk, and Avery. American missionaries founded colleges and schools as Americans moved west, and also all around the world.

This is not meant as a brag piece about my denomination, but to say that for a long time, exercising the mind has been seen as an essential component of faithful discipleship in many Christian traditions (as well as traditions of other faiths). What I find so wonderful about these schools is that their mission was not solely to teach Christian faith or doctrine, but to also offer education in the sciences, math, language, and literature and the arts. Not just an education to do a particular job, but to create a well-rounded person with a curiosity about the world and a desire to keep learning.

My faith is informed by the Bible, of course. It is the primary source things concerning faith. But my faith is also informed heavily by the arts. Theater, literature, paintings, poetry, and music speak about life and who we are in creative and soul-enriching ways. But I especially love books. I love live theater, too, but it does not travel well on planes or summer afternoon patios. Books are gardens planted by others, in which life and humanity bloom for us to pluck, laying open their souls that we might see the secrets of our own. Biographies, histories, social commentaries, how-tos, and stories. Books allow us (require us!) to use our imaginations in ways that video never can. They allow us to digest a story at our own pace. Go into any pastor’s office, and you will likely find his or her shelves filled with hundreds of books, including classic and modern literature: Shakespeare, Hemingway, Dante, Milton, Twain. There is nothing quite as delectable as a good story. Stories reveal truths obscured by reality. They entertain while speaking to our humanity.

Sadly, however, a recent study shows that one in four people do not read books, and those who do read only a median of four books a year. I suggest that is not enough. Instead of watching TV,

read a book. Read as a family. Take turns reading out loud to each other. Read the Bible together, but also read some great fiction, like Huckleberry Finn, Beowulf, or even Harry Potter. The more daring of you can act out a Shakespeare (or other) play. Don't be afraid – it's fun! Our ancestors discovered that the real world grows smaller, more manageable and less frightening, as our mind expands. The public library has books for free. Not sure what to read? Ask a librarian, who will love the opportunity to steer you to a book you will treasure. Browse around the bookstore. Judge a book by its cover: grab one that looks interesting. Your house of worship probably has a library. Consider books as holiday gifts. Christopher Morley said, "When you sell a man a book you don't sell just twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue – you sell him a whole new life. Love and friendship and humour and ships at sea by night – there's all heaven and earth in a book, a real book." I concur. Go enjoy a good read!