

Date: August 23, 2026 (Pentecost 13)

1. Texts: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Ps. 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: experience as primary Christian education.
4. Aim: challenge to grow.
5. Proposition: "Christian education builds upon our experience of and relationship with Jesus."

EXPERIENCE AS FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION

For centuries the Anglican Church has based its Christian education on learning complex content delivered by trained experts. People wanting to develop as disciples were encouraged to attend Bible studies led by ordained clergy. Young people whose parents wanted them to be confirmed had to take weeks of confirmation classes delivered by the rector. Couples looking for weddings and baptisms had to take classes, often in weekend workshops. The catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer* is pages of printed content that candidates were expected to know and even memorize. The denomination-wide assumption was that people had to learn content taught by professionals before they could be genuine disciples.

Such content can be important for some people at some points in their lives. But, as Christian disciples, our faith is never about how much content you have mastered. Christian faith is never about **WHAT** you know. Our faith is always about **WHO** you know. The experience of Jesus as Saviour and Lord must always come before mastery of any content. We must know Jesus before we emphasize any content about Jesus.

We Anglicans should have realized this centuries ago. After all, this truth lay at the root of Peter's experience with Jesus.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell

you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.¹

Peter responded to Jesus' question not because of his Bible studies or weekend workshops. His true understanding of Jesus as the Messiah came from his experience of Jesus. He didn't master the content. He related to Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's how he knew Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

It is only with this relationship firmly in place, that the Christian education can have a meaningful impact on how we live out our faith in the real world. We know Jesus as Saviour before we can develop our understanding of that reality. Experience comes before education.

Since sermonizing is our primary tool of Christian education in the Anglican Church, this sermon should apply this understanding this morning—experience before education. This is a little tricky, because you all have had decades of experience with Jesus. Like Peter, you could already say, "Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

But, perhaps, facing the pressure and stress of being a Christian in North America, it could be important to reaffirm that relationship as the basis of all that you understand about Jesus of Nazareth. Let's go through a bit of an experience with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Please, make yourself comfortable, even at the risk of becoming drowsy or dozing off. The Holy Spirit works not because of your alert attention but despite it. Be comfortable. Close your eyes if that works for you. Breathe normally, not with huge gulps of air and not with shallow gasps. Be comfortable, relaxed and at ease in this very familiar public space.

The Holy Spirit has been here since before you were born. The Holy Spirit has been with you since you were born. God has known you since you were conceived and God had a plan for your life from that very beginning.

¹ Matthew 16:13-18.

Frequently, we cannot conceive of such constant attention to our lives. Frequently, we choose actions that push such loving attention away. Sometimes we establish habits that hold God at arm's length. Sometimes we close our ears to God's call. Sometimes...

Call to mind one of those times, whether a recent one or one part of an established habit. Call this one to mind. Do not be afraid to recognize it for what it is.

Here is the truth of Christ for you. As you created this barrier to your recognition of God, the Holy Spirit was already with you, already within you. You were already beloved and trusted. You were already held in the palm of God's hand. By the sacrifice of Christ and through his love for you, be now forgiven. You were always his. And you remain his beloved. "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." You are that friend of Jesus.

Such an experience of loving forgiveness is the foundation on which we build our education.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

The confession of St. Peter was not built upon his study of Scripture or his participation in a weekend workshop. This fundamental truth was communicated to him by the Holy Spirit. His relationship was the channel through which God worked to strengthen and guide his discipleship.

The same can be true in your life. Having experienced the forgiving love of Christ, God can build upon the foundation of this experience to strengthen and guide your discipleship.

But here's now the crux of this understanding. The Anglican Church must abandon its emphasis on learning content. All our workshops, seminars, sermons and presentations must focus first on providing an experience of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. All theology must be introduced by experience. The practice of our faith must follow an experience of that faith.

This will have a direct and tangible impact on you. Oh, not as consumers of Christian education, but as evangelists for Christ.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."²

You are to make disciples *first* and then provide Christian education. You are to provide experiences of Jesus as Lord and Saviour before you open the Bible to them or try to teach them how to believe. You become the proclamation of Christ and the genuine reflection of his existence. Only with that experience will the Christian education or encouragement to believe make sense.

I understand that this is not easy. It is a good idea to start by practicing on each other. We can start by allowing other disciples to see our experiences of Jesus. We allow them to know what we have experienced through the love and sacrifice of Jesus. We reach out through that experience to provide the other person with their own experience of Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

This understanding of disciple-making will take some practice. In addition, I don't think it will correct the centuries of Anglican devotion to content. But it is the best method of following Jesus' command to make disciples everywhere. It is, I think, the best hope for the future of our congregations. AMEN.

² Matthew 28:18-20.