Landas 37:1 (2025) 137–142

HOMILY: UNLEARNING AND LEARNING
25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
MARK 9:30–37
22 SEPTEMBER 2024

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I have a brother who is an artist, a good painter. He gives free art lessons to children. But when it's adults who ask to follow his lessons, he charges a fee. I asked him, Why? His answer to me was, "Because they have a lot of things to unlearn before they can learn again." He said teaching adults tends to be more stressful; it takes a lot more effort. He prefers to teach children because, according to him, kids are already natural artists. There is something refreshing about the way they look at the world; it's like they're seeing it for the first time. They are still full of awe and wonder, he says.

My brother also explained that, as people grow older, they tend to pick up some habits that spoil their natural artistry. For example, the moment they learn to use a ruler or a compass, they begin to lose their confidence about drawing straight lines or circles with a free hand. They will start using a ruler to feel more confident about the straightness of their lines or roundness of their circles, whether they're drawing a house or a landscape. They do not realize that imperfect lines and circles are more artful than perfect ones.

Even worse is when they see the works of good artists and begin to feel so inferior to them. They say Van Gogh was not so popular

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in his lifetime because he lived at a time when artists competed with each other in realism. They were expected to paint things as close to reality as possible, complete with all the details. Until, of course, photography made their works almost irrelevant. Van Gogh dared to paint things not as they were but as they appeared to him. He expressed his impressions of people, places, and scenes like a little child and established impressionism as a genre of modern art.

You see, not everything that we learn is right. For art, spontaneity is a big factor. When people are pressured to follow certain standards, they are prevented from expressing themselves and interpreting the world through their art. They begin to lose their imagination and replace it with abstract ideas, concepts, and theories. At LST, I once taught an elective biblical course entitled "Reading Between the Lines of the Scriptures," subtitled "The Role of Imagination in Biblical Interpretation." I worry for our theological students whose imaginations are stifled by their theological formation. They are the ones who would be easily lured by fundamentalism. It was the seminal work of James Barr on this topic that made me understand that Fundamentalism is not a hermeneutical issue, but a mental health issue. Having lost imagination, a fundamentalist can no longer even distinguish between the literal and the literary.

Our Gospel points out two obstacles to learning. They have to do with the things or attitudes that we need to unlearn before we can dispose ourselves to learn. The word disposition seems to be fundamental to discipleship; are we disposed or indisposed to learning? (The French have invested an overload of meaning in the word *disponible, disponibilité.*) I said two things to unlearn: the first is pretentiousness; the second is competitiveness. They are two of the most serious blocks to learning, which Jesus is addressing in today's Gospel.

Mark tells us that after Jesus explained to his disciples the objective of their journey to Jerusalem, "They did not understand what he meant, but they were afraid to ask questions." It's easier to teach people who feel free to ask questions when they do not know than those who

would rather be quiet and pretend to know when they do not know. When I was in college, the Campus Crusaders for Christ popularized the slogan: "Christ is the answer!" We reacted and said, "What was the question?" When we would rather offer ready-made answers than confront the questions asked by the present generation, our faith will regress into the dustbin of irrelevance.

It is understandable, however, why some people would rather shut up because they are afraid to make mistakes, or ashamed to admit their ignorance. That is what happens to those who have been traumatized in their childhood, bullied, ridiculed, or humiliated for asking questions. The learning process requires a lot of humility, the humility to admit that we need help, that there is so much that we do not know, and we do not stop wanting to know.

"Less talk, less mistakes" is the most common reasoning of people who put a premium on making a good impression or gaining people's approval rather than on the act of learning itself. That brings us to the other challenge to discipleship: overcoming the hazard of self-comparison. Unlearning competitiveness.

Mark also tells us Jesus asked his disciples what it was they were arguing about along the way. Earlier, no one would ask a question. Now no one would answer his question. The real reason why they just kept quiet, Mark explains, is because they were actually debating about who among them was the greatest. That's another thing many adults need to unlearn—competitiveness. You would remember what that precious book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said the Little Prince found ridiculous in the behavior of grown-ups: their preoccupation with what he calls "Matters of Consequence." When people no longer have time to sit down and watch the sunset with a friend, or pay attention to a rose, or befriend a fox, that's when they begin to run around like headless chickens in business suits or even clerical garbs.

They say most schools tend to reinforce an unhealthy spirit of competition among students through their systems of grading and honors, rewards, recognitions, merits, and demerits. It's a good thing that many schools are now introducing a different kind of grading

system that does not rate students against each other but only in relation to themselves or their own earlier performances. Many students lose their self-confidence the moment they are compared or rated against their classmates.

I find it interesting how Jesus addressed the power struggle among his disciples through a symbolic prophetic action. "He took a child, placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it said, 'Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me.'" (Mk 9:36) Touché, as they'd say in French.

We are about to enter the second session of the Synod on Synodality. People foresee that the atmosphere is going to be tense in the Synod hall because of the polarities that prevail especially in the local Churches in the Global North. But I am confident that Jesus is doing exactly what he did in today's Gospel, he has also put a child in our midst and his name is Pope Francis.