

**November 26, 2017**

**TEXT: Ephesians 1:15–23**

**TITLE: The Process of Theology**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

The British novelist Iris Murdoch once had the opportunity to meet the brilliant yet difficult German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. As their time together concluded, she said to Wittgenstein that she hoped they'd have a chance to talk again, to which he replied, "Of course, since one conversation with a philosopher is as pointless as one piano lesson." I'm not sure that multiple conversations with Wittgenstein would help understand his philosophy, but as someone who's had years of piano lessons, I did chuckle at his analogy. What can you learn in one piano lesson? You can get yourself oriented at the keyboard—learn how the keys are organized and how their names move from A to G and then start over again. You might even be able to be taught a simple melody before the lesson came to an end. But you wouldn't truly be able to say you now play the piano.

Learning to play the piano is a process. There are scales and chords to be learned. There are exercises and music books to be mastered, like the old John Schaum music series that moved from green to red, blue, and purple books in increasing difficulty. There are Bach two-part inventions that eventually give way to preludes and fugues; sonatinas that lead to Beethoven sonatas, and solo pieces that prepare you for grand concertos with orchestra. And the same can be said of many things in life. There's a process to mastering a foreign language, to learning how to drive, to becoming an accomplished chef, painter or surgeon. Sure, there are moments of insight in which you understand things you didn't fully grasp before. But most things in life unfold over time—in a process emerging and evolving toward a goal of proficiency.

If so much of life is a process, why are we hesitant to say the same thing about Christian faith? The common perception is that faith is like a light switch—you either have it or you don't. It is something either turned on or off in a person's life. You get stopped on the street and someone asks you, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" Most likely they expect a "Yes" or "No" answer, and will not be satisfied if you respond, "Well, I'm in the process of coming to believe in Jesus Christ." Yet there's nothing wrong with being in the process of learning how to play the piano, in the process of gaining an education, or learning what it means to be in a committed marriage, or raising children, or battling cancer, or moving from an addiction to a life of sobriety. Those are all worthwhile processes. In the same way, we can all affirm that we are in the process of becoming Christians, becoming followers of Christ, people of faith because that's the way faith happens.

When Paul or one of his colleagues wrote the letter to the church in Ephesus long ago, it intentionally offered words of encouragement to Christians who were in the process of learning how to live a life of faith. The passage you just heard started with words of encouragement: *I have heard of your faith in Jesus and love toward others, so I don't cease to give thanks for you and remember you in my prayers.* Next came a sentence

about the process of faith: vs. 17—*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him.* What does this “coming to know Jesus” look like? In the passage, several poetic examples come pouring out next—We come to know Jesus as the eyes of our hearts are enlightened, as we come to know true hope, the riches of God’s mercy and grace, the inheritance of the saints, the immeasurable greatness of God’s power at work among us. But the key here is that none of it is immediate. None of it is a simple light switch either turned on or off. All of it is a process—an unfolding of wisdom and understanding—as we come to know what faith is all about. Two chapters later, at the end of Ephesians 3, this same idea is repeated when it says, *I pray that you may comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* This prayer is speaking about a knowledge that takes a lot more than one sermon to grasp. It is a prayer for a lifetime process of faith—and that’s how it should be.

A couple years ago, Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers* proposed that true proficiency in something takes time. He then went on to quantify it as about 10,000 hours: 20 hours a week for 10 years. If that 10,000 was spent deliberately, striving to gain a skill and get better at something, it would be enough to make you into a gifted (blank): a gifted composer or violinist or surgeon or news reporter. There is something precise and attractive about Gladwell’s research. Yet will 10,000 hours make you an excellent Christian?

Think of it this way: We all have the potential to grow in faith over time. We gain life experiences that give us wisdom that help us other times when we’re feeling unsure; we learn inner strength which helps us later when we’re tempted to give up; and we fall back on trusted experiences of hope whenever tempted to surrender to despair. We are all in process and God knows that fact. God relies on that fact. That is why we can say that our faith both exists and is emerging. In all honesty, we are not so much Christians as we are each becoming Christians; for as the Ephesians’ scripture said, we are receiving “a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know Christ.”

Here’s another way to think of this: There was no perfect time—no perfect moment—in church history. The best followers of Christ did not exist in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD or around the table at the Council of Nicaea in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and with Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century or with Calvin and Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or C.S. Lewis and Billy Graham in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or Richard Rohr and Nadia Bolz-Weber in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Theology is constantly moving, flowing like a strong river whose current is shaped by the banks of where it has traveled over the centuries yet it is ever moving into new places, carving out new paths and fresh words for our ancient-yet-timeless faith. God is not static. Christ is not passively seated at the right hand of God. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit moves through us and challenges us daily. That is the process of theology—the process of our living faith.

That is ultimately good news. We come to know Christ and along the way have the eyes of our hearts enlightened. This entire spiritual process moves us to work for justice and

faithful change. For example, we have a vocabulary today about male-female relationships and gender identity that simply didn't exist a generation ago. This development has moved so many people—people of color, women and LGBT people especially—to speak out against injustice and equal protection under the law, which has been a great, God-blessed thing. Similarly, we receive benefits that were given to us as Americans years ago—the Voting Rights Act, Social Security Act, Miranda act and protection under the due process of the law. Yet these things are not static, once-for-all-time achievements. They too are living concepts and political rights vulnerable to being lost unless we remain vigilant and protect the virtues they espouse. We have work to do. Another example: Right now in America it is estimated that there are only a dozen counties and one metro area where a person working full time at minimum wage can afford a one-room bedroom apartment at fair market rent.<sup>1</sup> Coming to know Christ, realizing injustice and inequity exists, moves us further down a road—a process—toward what our faith insists should be done.

If we believe in Christ, if we trust what he said and seek to follow how he lived, then we are committed to this ongoing process of faith. When Jesus gave us his parable of the sheep and the goats, describing how we are to give the hungry food, the thirsty water, the stranger hospitality, the naked clothing, the ill health care, the prisoner justice, Christ knew we couldn't do all these things at once. Christ knew we couldn't master the skills of compassion and faith in one easy lesson. That's why his list feels so long and the tasks seem so diverse and demanding. It is only through giving food today, water tomorrow, clothing and medicine afterwards that we come to understand what must be done. It is only through the lengthy process of healing others that we are healed—only through a process of acting imperfectly yet as faithfully as possible, by God's grace that we move closer to the goals of God's kingdom.

The bottom line is this: You can't master Wittgenstein or Plato or other philosophers in just one reading. You can't play Beethoven's sonatas after just one piano lesson. Your life of faith is a process as well. And despite Malcolm Gladwell's research, it may not be a matter of 10,000 hours. There may well be a single moment of clarity for you—an insight and spiritual awakening that is pivotal for you your whole life long. But more than likely, there is also a process - an accumulation of spiritual knowledge that comes from the sheer fact of waking up and choosing to engage in God's world every day and try to make your little corner of Christ's kingdom a little better. As Annie Dillard once said, *There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less.*<sup>2</sup>

So be not afraid. Walk by faith, not by sight. We come to know the one who opens the eyes of our heart and assures us of a hope that nothing can ultimately destroy or diminish. The process of our faith is lived out with Christ the King, who is above all rulers and authority and powers and dominion in this age and in the age to come. More importantly, he is with us always—every step of the way. For that, thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, "The Wander Years," review of Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland*, *NY Times Book Review*, November 19, 2017, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*, p. 88.