

Know and Tell  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 127:1  
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 16:13-20

The HBO series, *Chernobyl*, is a dramatic portrayal of the events surrounding the nuclear disaster that took place in 1986 in the former Soviet Union. In the film, we peek into the tension between science and authoritarian governance, between knowledge and power. Two figures at the center of the dramatization are Boris Shcherbina, a member of the powerful Soviet Central Committee dispatched to manage the crisis, and Valery Legasov, a member of the Academy of Sciences dispatched to advise the response effort.

In the first episode, a gruff and imperious Boris, not being a scientist, directs Valery to tell him how a nuclear reactor works. "It's a simple question." Dismissive and curt, Valery says, "It's hardly a simple answer." So, Boris puts the question before him again, "Of course, you presume I'm too stupid to understand. So, I'll restate. Tell me how a nuclear reactor works, or I'll have one of these soldiers throw you out of the helicopter." Wisely, Valery proceeds to explain the basics of nuclear fission, the instability of uranium 235, the behavior of neutrons, fuel rods, flux, steam, turbines, power. Still gruff and imperious, but also

with a hint of sarcasm, Boris says, "Good, I know how a nuclear reactor works. Now I don't need you."

But Boris does need Valery, and he knows it. As the show progresses, you can see him listening and learning, slowly coming to understand the magnitude of the accident. Eventually, understanding his power and influence, we see Boris testifying at the trial of those charged with negligence in the disaster, clearly and cogently informing the court about what took place, even using a model of the reactor to clarify the reason for the explosion. Thus, the newbie student becomes an expert witness.

In so many arenas of life, we study, observe, listen, and learn so that we may understand and thus, practice, execute, witness, testify, mentor, teach. There's a cliché in health care about not scheduling your elective surgery for July, because that is when the first-year residents begin training. We see a whole nation convulsing as a school year begins, and we are scrambling to find ways to do what has never been done before, using tools we know nothing about, and performing roles for which we are neither equipped nor trained.

Imagine being a first-year teacher three days before classes begin, tasked with teaching a curriculum you have not yet seen on a platform to which you do not yet have access due to a technological glitch. And worse, imagine opening this email from the overwhelmed guy in tech support, "Have you tried Google?" Not helpful.

Maybe you love Jesus and have a measure of compassion and think you would be a good pastoral counselor. Now there are any number of self-titled Christian counselors, who are untrained, ill-equipped, and frankly, dangerous. But that's not you. You want to be a helpful pastoral counselor, trained, prepared, certified. Okay then, as the Bible would say, "Gird your loins."

We'll start with a bachelor's degree, and then, with diploma in hand, you apply to a reputable seminary to pursue a Master of Divinity degree, possibly a dual program that would also allow you to earn a Master's in counseling, or marriage and family therapy. In addition to your studies, you'll do an internship in a clinical setting, earning a credit in CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education), which many graduates would compare to that antique meat grinder your grandmother used to make ham salad.

And as the marketers from Ronco used to say, "And that's not all!" Now, with your three degrees in hand, you get to complete a few more terms of CPE and pass the appropriate exams before you are ready to qualify for certification or licensure.

Excuse me. What was that? Oh, you want to be ordained also. I wish you would have told me earlier, because that is an additional process that takes a minimum of two years and requires you to pass 5 ordination exams and 3 or 4 of these oral exams, two of them before crowds of 200-300 people (Think, root canals without anesthesia). Now, you are prepared, equipped, trained; a certified pastoral counselor; having learned never to say, *Everything happens for a reason*, and to regularly say, *What I hear you saying is....*

I marvel at the intention, purpose, sweat equity, persistence, dedication, and competence so many people apply to their craft, their vocation, their calling. Imagine an auto mechanic that is my age. At the dawn of her career, she may have been newly trained in how to replace a spark plug in your grandfather's El Camino, but today she has to be part old school mechanic, part computer scientist, part electrical

engineer, part physicist. Why do they call it a learning curve if it never plateaus?

Consider these gems from Proverbs – "Desire without knowledge is not good, and one who moves too hurriedly misses the way." And also, "If one gives answer before hearing, it is folly and shame." Conversely, it is also written, "How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver." "The wise of heart is called perceptive ... The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to their lips." "The mind of one who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly!" Sounds to me like the author of Proverbs, like many of us, was tempted to delete his Facebook account after reading the outlandish ideas people post. And don't you think God is tired of asking the question he put before Job? "Who is this that darkens counsel without understanding?"

We live in a time awash with words spoken without understanding, so much so that discerning the wise from the foolish feels like entering a maze without an exit. I shouldn't be surprised by the ease with which any number of people, good people, educated people are led down rabbit holes where misinformation, conspiracy theories,

and falsehoods that should never escape the grocery store checkout line, morph the mind and clog the heart with the absurd. Perhaps the question that will universally asked when reflecting on our era is, "Huh?" Maybe the reaction future generations will have when reading about us in their history books will be: *You have got to be kidding me.*

And very often, far too often, the absurd seeks legitimization by attaching it to the name of Jesus; ideas and agendas that bear no resemblance to the Jesus who fed the 5,000, stilled the storm, touched the leper, welcomed the children, hung out with the sinners and tax collectors.

Of course, misapprehension of Jesus is not a new thing. Jesus understood that. Just prior to today's encounter with Peter, Jesus has warned his disciples to beware of yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, their teachings evolving from suspect to toxic. So, Jesus decides it's time for a live and in-person doodle poll. "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."

Oh, there can be a world of difference between opinion and knowledge. Yet, for all the opinions expressed, how short the supply of wisdom remains. I'm always frustrated by those articles that will appear on the morning of the NCAA Championships in football or basketball, the ones titled, Our far-too-early rankings for next year. If you already know they are too early, why express them now?

I will say, though, the responses Jesus hears from the disciples are at least good guesses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jeremiah; though Jesus might find it a bit unsettling to be identified as three dead guys. But Jesus senses that his disciples know that those guesses, while intriguing, still miss the mark. And so, he probes a little deeper. "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Yes, Simon you are correct, and in addition to this new fishing net, your grand prize includes an impressive new job! So, pardon me Dwayne Johnson, but from here on out, my man Petey, here, will be known as the rock. And "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you

bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

That's heady stuff. You can almost see Peter's head swell in pride. Perhaps, the genius of actor Don Knotts' portrayal of Barney Fife is best revealed when someone pays Barney a compliment. In seconds, you'd watch his face transform from shrinking violet, whiny sidekick to swaggering lawman; from feeling so low he wonders whether he could even get a job as a brine tester at the pickle factory to boasting about "Gun-drawing practice, ten minutes every day. If I ever have to use this baby, I want to teach it to come to papa in a hurry."

Can't you see Peter suddenly standing two-feet taller. "Hear that? The Rock. You got that right! And check this out, keys to the kingdom!"

Whoa Peter! Slow your roll. Yes, you gave the right answer. You've been given a big new job, but don't let that go to your head. Because, it's one thing to know the right answer, and quite another thing to understand what it means. That's why Jesus warns them not to tell anybody yet. For neither do they yet understand the path of this Messiah nor the work to which this church will be called.



That becomes immediately obvious. For when Jesus describes the way of the cross, Peter, the rock, decides it's time to take Jesus aside to manage him. Yes, Peter, the disciple who represents all who will seek to follow Jesus, who represents the church, who represents you and me, decides it is time to manage Jesus. It's time for the believer to tell Jesus what's what. "Jesus, that's crazy talk. Suffering? Death? Not on my watch."

Oh Peter, oh believer, oh church, when will we figure out that having an answer does not signify we understand what it means? Well, Peter's about to find out. Jesus bluntly informs anyone who thinks it's time to manage Jesus, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." In five verses Peter goes from rock to stumbling block.

Why? Peter has an answer, an important answer, but he has yet to understand what it means. Before this chapter ends, Jesus tells Peter, his disciples, his church, you, me, ""If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

We can say Jesus saves, Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is my Redeemer, my Lord ... and we'd be right. Jesus is all those things. The apostles are over there cheering us on like those folks on *Family Feud*, "Good answer. Good answer ... Ding!" However, that doesn't imply that we have understanding.

*Do you know Jesus?* Perhaps, the best answer we can offer to the question is this: I'm learning. We learn so we can tell. We learn so we can represent. We learn so we can serve. We learn so we can teach, nurture, edify, foster, and encourage. We learn so we can love.

Consider this, when Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom, this isn't that overused image of Peter and that big ol' logbook at the pearly gates. Scholars point out that with the keys to the kingdom, Jesus is granting Peter, and consequently the church, the authority to teach. And in these days when the ridiculous is peddled and accepted as truth, folks, we have a lot of teaching to do, witnessing to the Jesus as he was revealed in the gospels, full of grace and truth, mercy and compassion.

In the 11th Century, a theologian by the name of Anselm wrote something that remains central to our essential calling as disciples, our calling as a church:

Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height,  
for my understanding is in no way equal to that,  
but I do desire to understand a little of your truth  
which my heart already believes and loves.  
I do not seek to understand so that I can believe,  
but I believe so that I may understand;  
and what is more,  
I believe that unless I do believe,  
I shall not understand.

Faith seeks understanding - today, tomorrow, to the very end of our days. We learn so that we may know. We know so that we may tell. We tell so that there may be love between us. So, who do you say Jesus is? Amen.