

**Text: Hebrews 5:11-6:12**

**Theme: Life is a learning experience in Christian education**

**Date: August 20, 2006 (School Opening)**

In the Name of Jesus, Dear Fellow learners of God's Word,

We've all heard the phrase, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." What the phrase basically tries to say is that once we get to a certain point in life we become set in our ways. We do things the way we've always done them, and heaven forbid that we should even think about trying to learn something new. That used to be the prevailing philosophy in education. There was a time, not all that long ago, when it was generally accepted that once you got beyond about age 25 your capacity for learning went way down, so it really didn't pay to bother trying. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks, you know." But then, as people studied the human capacity for learning, they found out that it is very possible for us to continue learning new things well into our old age. This whole "Old dog, new tricks" philosophy was a big fallacy. People started going back to school. People with a high school education realized that to better their employment prospects they needed to pursue a college degree. Professionals pursued masters' degrees and doctorates, and even grandmas and grandpas with a sixth-grade or eight-grade education to go back to school in pursuit of high school diplomas and college degrees—even in their retirement.

But this notion that beyond a certain point we can't learn and grow any more is a notion that dies hard. It's still very common to hear people use their age as an excuse for not learning something new. And sometimes it seems that this idea is still very prevalent in our circles when it comes to spiritual growth and learning. Think about it for a moment. How do we approach Christian education in our church body? We cram as much religious instruction as we can into the first 12 or 14 years of a child's life through Sunday school, Lutheran elementary schools and confirmation instruction—and that's good thing. In our Fond du Lac community we have the added blessing of Christian education on the secondary level at Winnebago Lutheran Academy where every subject, every class, every situation is taught from the vantage point of God's Word. But sadly, that seems to be where our emphasis on Christian education drops off. The years that follow, college years, years as a new parent, those times need to be directed by God's Word just as much as our years of 0-18. Commonly we view Christian education as something that is just for kids. And then we wonder why ongoing spiritual growth after childhood is not a priority for adults, for parents, for the elderly. Folks, today let's learn the lesson that people who are going back to high school and going back to college and going back to study for advanced degrees have already learned: Never stop learning. Never stop growing. **Life is a learning experience in Christian education.**

#### **Part 1: A lack of learning is dangerous to saving faith**

In our text we learn that 2000 years ago the writer to the Hebrews encountered the same problem that we are still facing today. He says: **WE HAVE MUCH TO SAY ABOUT THIS, BUT IT IS HARD TO EXPLAIN BECAUSE YOU ARE SLOW TO LEARN. IN FACT, THOUGH BY THIS TIME YOU OUGHT TO BE TEACHERS, YOU NEED SOMEONE TO TEACH YOU THE ELEMENTARY TRUTHS OF GOD'S WORD ALL OVER AGAIN. YOU NEED MILK, NOT SOLID FOOD.** Then as now, Christian education came to a sudden and abrupt end for some people. They reached a certain point, and they said, "I know this," and they quit growing; they quit studying; they quit learning. The author of Hebrews even expresses his frustration. He wants to take them to the next level; he wants explore some of the deep, fascinating truths of the Christian's relationship with the Savior, he wants to grow in the joy of being a redeemed child of God, one who is waiting for heaven, but he says, "We can't even go there. Instead we have to go back with you over the basics and rehash the same fundamental concepts that should have been appropriated a long time ago." And in the case of these Hebrew Christians, the consequence of their not growing was causing them to fall into sin. They didn't have the maturity to distinguish between good and evil. They didn't have the wisdom to apply God's word to their daily lives. They didn't have the strength to stand against temptation.

So the writer of Hebrews adds a strong warning. He's talking to anyone who thinks that we have graduated from the school of Christianity; he's talking to anyone who tries to justify a life of apathy or sin by saying, "I know all that business about Jesus." He says: **IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THOSE WHO HAVE ONCE BEEN ENLIGHTENED, WHO HAVE TASTED THE HEAVENLY GIFT, WHO HAVE SHARED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, WHO HAVE TASTED THE GOODNESS OF THE WORD OF GOD AND THE POWERS OF THE COMING AGE, IF THEY FALL AWAY, TO BE BROUGHT BACK TO REPENTANCE, WHILE TO THEIR LOSS THEY ARE CRUCIFYING THE SON OF GOD ALL OVER AGAIN AND SUBJECTING HIM TO PUBLIC DISGRACE.** There's a lot at stake here, my friends. If our spiritual weakness, if our lack of growth leads us into persistent, deliberate sin, no amount of saying, "Hey, I went to a Christian elementary school; I went to Sunday school; I was confirmed," is going to change the fact that we are walking apart from God. God's word adds one more word of warning to those who take faith for granted. Our text says: **LAND THAT DRINKS IN THE RAIN OFTEN FALLING ON IT AND THAT PRODUCES A CROP USEFUL TO THOSE FOR WHOM IT IS FARMED RECEIVES THE BLESSING OF GOD. BUT LAND THAT PRODUCES THORNS AND THISTLES IS WORTHLESS AND IS IN DANGER OF BEING CURSED. IN THE END IT WILL BE BURNED.** God tells us through these words that he is looking for production from Christians, fruit of thanksgiving for the free gift of salvation we've received. Individuals who do not grow, who do not mature, whose trust in the Lord is not evident by their love and kindness—such people are unproductive and worthless and have lost the gift that was given to them, even though they still might remember a few things out of the Bible and still claim to believe in God.

## *Part 2: Real spiritual learning is a gift from God*

Dear friends, life is a learning experience. We are never too old to continue growing in the word of God and learning more about Jesus. In fact, the truth is that we're always growing; at any given point in life we're either growing stronger, or we're growing weaker. Now the only thing that causes us to grow stronger is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of his life, suffering, death and resurrection for the whole world. That saving, strengthening gospel comes to us in only two ways: It comes to us when we hear, read and study God's word, and it comes to us in tangible form through the holy sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. It doesn't come to us through our prayers. It doesn't come to us when we contemplate the poofy clouds in the sky, or the beauty of the woods around the campground, or the finely manicured grass of the putting green. It comes only through the word and the sacraments. That's the only way our faith is fed. A strong faith, a strong life with Christ needs a steady diet of ongoing contact with the word of God.

When it comes to the word of God, none of us can say, "I already know it all," or "I covered that material back in confirmation class."

You know, back when I was in high school I had a smattering of physics and chemistry classes, but then I went on to pre-ministerial college—and I'm sure you can guess how much physics and chemistry you get when you're studying for the ministry, right? (None!) Well it's pretty cool when I can walk around the high school here and see kids doing advanced math problems and say, "Yeah, I had that back in high school," like I know something about it—but the fact is, I couldn't solve a physics or chemistry problem today if my life depended on it. I've forgotten most of what I learned. Ladies and gentlemen, where is your knowledge of the Bible at? Is it like my knowledge of physics and chemistry? You know, a lot has changed since you were in confirmation class. God's word certainly has not changed, but your recollection of it has. Many of the truths about the Bible we learned back then have been filed away and forgotten. Remember all those Bible passages you were asked to memorize? No, no, do you remember all those Bible passages you memorized? Your life has changed; you're at a different stage in life. God's word has different applications to make to your life now, compared to back then. That means it's time to renew your commitment to growing in God's word. After all, life is a learning experience, remember?

And what about our children? Thus far my focus has been on lifelong education, but of course that education starts in our childhood and with our children. When I was a kid at home I didn't have a Lutheran Elementary School anywhere close to where I grew up, so I went to public school through eighth grade. I got a very good education, and even though public schools have changed a great deal since you and I were in elementary school, I still know people today who get a fine secular education in the public schools and are well equipped for the workplace. But there's something that I never got in public school: I never got the word of God. I never got the One Thing Needful, the one thing that will determine where we'll spend eternity. I heard a lot of things that could make me smart, but I never learned one thing that could make me wise unto salvation. Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I'm very thankful to my parents, who fostered a Christian home environment where God's word was part of my daily life growing up, but who also made sure that I and my family got to church and Sunday school every Sunday like clockwork, so that we could get the One Thing Needful. I hope that each one of you, especially parents and children, cherish the gift of a Christian elementary school and high school here. That is such a blessing to be able to have a Christian environment where the little lambs of Jesus' flock can grow spiritually in the sheltered pastures of God's word. But remember, parents, that your Christian school is just a tool to help you be the one who makes sure that your children get the One Thing Needful.

Life is a learning experience, and when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, there is so much good to learn. Unfortunately, Satan wants to turn the joy of learning about Christ into a chore. He wants to take the very thing that is intended to lift our burdens—using God's word, reading our Bibles—and he tries to convince us that it's something burdensome. He takes the good news of Jesus which wants to remove all of our guilt, and he twists it so that it becomes a reason for us to feel guilty. Well, folks, don't let the devil fool you. Growing in Christ is a wonderful thing that produces wonderful fruits in our hearts and lives. When you look at what salvation is, what heaven is all about, what it does in our lives right now, we see again that it's something so amazing that we want to learn all we can about that amazing truth. When the straw of this life seems so empty and so unsatisfying, you have the promise of future glory; search the Scriptures and lift your eyes to what's waiting in heaven. When life has you feeling tired and powerless, Christ gives you the gospel, the power of salvation for everyone who believes. When you're feeling burdened and life has got you down, return to him who promises rest! When the parched desert of this world leaves you thirsty for something more, take a drink at the living waters, and find refreshment for your soul! Your Savior Jesus, the God who loves you and gave himself for you, your Savior who bled and died for you, your Savior who rose from death so that you and I can also rise, your Savior who lived for you so that you might live forever—he's not interested in saddling you with more guilt and piling on more burdens. He offers rest and refreshment to your soul, strength for living and power for life in his word! He has cleansed you from your sins, he has covered you with his own holiness. He invites you to more confident rest and a more secure peace in his love and forgiveness.

You know what? It's a good thing that the world has moved past this "Can't teach an old dog new tricks" mentality, but for all the world's emphasis on continuing education, the best the secular world can do is to create a spectacularly well-educated fool. Not so with Christ. May God give us a thirst for wisdom from on high and a hunger for the spiritual food that feeds our souls. May he teach us to imitate Jesus: his life, his holiness, his submission, his humility. And let us learn for a lifetime. Amen.