Years ago there was some trendy new theory of teaching. I cannot remember its name or a whole lot of the specifics about it which means that this story is not off to a terrific start. But ignoring my complete lack of recall I do remember that undergirding the theory was a belief that education was not top down but rather bottom up. The belief was that students could learn through their own curiosity discovering truths by themselves rather than having information jammed into them by a teacher. One critic, and again I don’t remember who this was, pointed out a problem with this. He said Rome was one of the greatest civilizations the world has ever know with brilliant engineering feats, military prowess and cultural achievements that we still admire today. Yet he said for all of their brilliance, in the field of mathematics, they never stumbled upon the concept of zero. Roman numerals with all of its X’s, M’s and V’s could not tell you that the score in the colosseum was Lions 5, Christians 0. The larger point this critic was making was that while curiosity and exploration should certainly be encouraged there are times where we have to go to outside sources to have a complete education. We cannot give a kindergartener a notebook and a refrigerator magnet and then expect them to come up with Maxwell’s Equations. So, while there are some things we can figure out ourselves much of our knowledge has to come from outside – it has to be passed on and taught to each succeeding generation. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, “Every generation, civilization is invaded by barbarians - we call them 'children.” We owe it to our children to give them the best of what society has come up with otherwise they will remain the Barbarians of which Hannah Arendt speaks. Much of civilization has to come from outside. And as Christians we believe that much of our outside knowledge comes from God himself.

And, fortunately, for me all of our lessons today, to one degree or another, are about learning from someone outside of ourself. Our reading from Proverbs talks of wisdom and tells us to “Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.” The Psalmist tells us to, “Listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” Before I go on let me quote from the *New Interpreters Bible* which says about the term fear in this context. It says “fearing God usually connotes reverence for, trust in, and dependence upon God. In effect, it is synonymous with taking refuge in God.” Okay now that we have settled that you are not being taught to be frightened of God let’s get back to what I was talking about and the necessity of having to be taught from a higher source. Paul tells us to, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.” And Jesus tells us that, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” The idea is that there is something out there which we need to bring inside ourselves. There are certain truths and a certain wisdom that we need to internalize and utilize in order to live a Godly life. There is something higher towards which we are called to submit and it needs to be centered on God not on ourselves.

Some of you probably remember the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes. One of the recuring scenarios in it was something known as Calvinball. It was a game played between the protagonists, Calvin and his tiger, Hobbes. With Calvinball all the rules were made up as the game went along with Calvin and Hobbes constantly overriding one another with their new rules which made the old rule null and void. Or as Calvin explains, the rules of Calvinball are “anything we make up.” Of course, it is funny in the comic strip, but when we do not submit to something higher in the real world, that is when there are no agreed upon rules, life becomes like Calvinball with us all trying to do whatever is most advantageous to us. And of course, when everyone has their own set of rules chaos is the only outcome.

In George Washington’s farewell address, he said, “Let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect, that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” Now having never sat down with George to find out exactly what he meant by this quote you are stuck with my interpretation. But don’t worry, I am a fully qualified English major so you are in good hands. What I believe Washington was pointing out is the fact that we are unreliable arbiters of morality because without something from outside we only have one item against which to judge all ideas and that item is ourself. Without God, morality becomes whatever is best for me and perhaps those whom I happen to like. And I think to some extent our society has started an experiment in trying to maintain morality without religion and from what I can tell it does not seem to be going very well.

Here is what I mean by that. If you look at most of the fights that go on in politics or anywhere for that matter, do you ever notice what the main line of attack consists of? It is generally the accusation of hypocrisy because if you do not have standards higher than yourself the only failing can be on a personal level. In other words, you can’t say that I violated a moral principle because there are no universally agreed upon moral principles to violate so all you can say is that I did something different than I did last Tuesday. The other day I saw something about the Governor of Alabama urging people to get vaccinated. I would assume if you think people should be vaccinated you would be happy about this but almost immediately certain people in the pro vaccine camp criticized her because they said she was being hypocritical. Now I pay very little attention to Alabama politics so really have not idea if she once said no one should be vaccinated, but it would seem that if you were really into vaccines, you would be happy that a lost sheep has been found. But in order to celebrate someone’s change in opinion we must submit to something higher. When we live in the smallness of our own moral system, we do not have the humility or the moral framework to be happy for someone we don’t like.

Back in the exciting days of February 2020 we were doing a book study on the Prodigal Son. It was put on hold because, well, you know. Maybe we will pick it back up for this upcoming Lent. The book we were reading went through the story from the perspective of all the characters and one of those characters was the older brother. Now just in case you don’t remember the story the two second version is that there were two brothers -- the older one who stayed and helped his father and the younger brother who demanded his inheritance and then blew it in the first century Middle Eastern version of Las Vegas. The younger brother returns and the father celebrates his return saying, “This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” The older brother was indignant believing that the younger brother should not be celebrated because he has lived such a notorious life. The older brother’s indignation came from not submitting to something greater. The older brother could only see through the lens of himself. He had done the right things; he had been the good son while his brother had been a spectacular reprobate. So, when his brother repented, he could not see it because he could not see past his own feelings.

Stepping outside of ourselves and submitting to God and God’s ways is not easy but it is the only way we can live as one of Christ’s own this day and forevermore.