

## ROMAN GLADIATORS AND SMART PHONES

Formed in Christ: Our Virtual Lives

*Luke 4:1-13*

There is a wonderful gift that everyone of us here  
has been given by our Creator—  
the desire for knowledge.

Proverbs 8:10 says knowledge is more desirable than “choice gold.”  
Aristotle wrote, “All humans by nature desire to know.”  
Our insatiable appetite for knowledge  
runs the engine of human progress.

Every good thing we enjoy—  
apart from the natural world—  
has been developed because of  
this God-given appetite for knowledge.  
To desire knowledge, is to be human.

*But . . .* to say we have an appetite for knowledge  
is *also* to say—as with *other* appetites—  
we need to be discerning.  
Satisfying an appetite can lead to joyful fulness,  
or to heavy, empty weight.  
In the effort to satisfy an appetite, may lie sin or virtue.

In my sermon today, I’m drawing heavily on the work of  
Douglas Henry, a professor of philosophy at Baylor,  
from an article in a journal called *Christian Reflection*,  
and some writings of St. Augustine and others.  
Dr. Henry helped me understand two concepts  
rooted in medieval moral philosophy—*curiositas* and *studiositas*.  
And he also taught me what Roman gladiators and smart phones  
have in common.

Now *that* comment—and my sermon title—is just a heads up.  
You would be doubly wise today  
to make sure your cell phones are turned off.  
If a phone rang in *this* sermon . . .

in addition to embarrassment,  
there would also be some obvious irony.

But before I get to the matter of phones,  
let me deal with medieval moral philosophy.  
But *trust* me. Not only will this be interesting. It will be *elementary*!  
Well, if not *elementary*, at least Junior High.  
I think 6<sup>th</sup> graders won’t have any trouble getting this,  
so listen up.  
And the really *smart* 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, you listen, too,  
and tell me afterwards if you get it.

These Latin words—*curiositas* and *studiositas*—  
have been around a long time.  
Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine wrote about these words.  
In plain English, they mean curiosity and studiousness.

Both are about how we desire knowledge—how we want to know.  
But one is about only being curious.  
The other is about studying to learn more deeply.

Now, we say it’s a good thing to be curious!  
Being curious helps us learn to know new things.  
Knowing something is better than *not* knowing something, *right*?  
In school, curious students are motivated to study.  
They *want* to do their homework.

But the way these *philosophers* used these words,  
curiosity is bad, studying is good.  
And *Christian* philosophers—  
like the ancient Thomas Aquinas,  
or like Dr. Henry at Baylor, who’s younger than I am,  
but apparently *smarter*—  
Christian philosophers say that *curiositas* is sinful.

To them, curiosity and studiousness, are two very different  
ways to desire knowledge.  
Those who are only curious, and those who are studious  
are different

in *why* they desire knowledge,  
and in *what kind* of knowledge they desire.

So, “why” do they want to know something?

The curious want knowledge so they can possess it,  
control it for their own purposes.

Claim it as their own,

and secretly hope others don't get the same knowledge.

It's good to be smarter than someone else.

The studious want knowledge, not to possess it,  
but to participate in it.

They want to get closer to the truth,

to get immersed in it, to bathe in it.

Knowledge is way bigger than themselves.

So big, so infinite, so vast it never runs out.

There's more than enough for everyone.

So the more others share our knowledge,  
the more delightful it is.

The curious live in a world of objects,

things that they can possess, or conquer,  
or even squirrel away in some secret place.

The studious live in a world full of gifts.

*God-given* gifts. *Grace-filled* gifts.

Gifts we receive and celebrate  
and delight in sharing.

The curious are focused on novelty.

They want to know what's new.

And they want to be one of the first to know,

and they want others to know that they know.

They want to be *known* as *knowers*.

The studious don't focus on whether it's new.

They agree with Ecclesiastes,

“There is nothing new under the sun.”

God already knows everything they *could* know.

So they aren't looking for what's new.

They're looking for where they can go deeper.

They don't *mind*—in fact, they *seek*—repetition.

They want to explore the same reality again and again,  
going deeper each time.

They realize they know only in part,

as through a glass darkly,

so they go back and dive in again, and again.

And while the curious like to announce their knowledge to the world,  
the studious are okay with silence.

They discover that words are often inadequate

to describe the beauty and depth of what they know.

The curious are drawn to spectacles. Whatever is spectacular.

Out of the ordinary.

The view right in front of them—even a terrible tragedy—  
is what's most important.

CNN and Reality TV, are their bread and butter.

The studious try to enter into a deeper reality

*behind* what they are seeing on the surface.

Unfortunately, modern western culture specializes in *curiositas*—  
to an extreme.

Why *else* do we obsess about the trivial and immediate and bizarre?

Like what topics are trending

on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Tumbler.

and other websites dedicated to tracking

the newest and trendiest bits of disconnected knowledge.

Why *else* has television all but given up on doing

creative, wholesome, thought-provoking,

and socially-relevant programming,

and opted instead for so-called “reality shows” and contests

that often put the worst of human traits on display

for our mindless entertainment?

Why *else*, when something happens in the world

that's spectacular or scandalous or tragic,

do people stop what they're doing and stare for hours on end

at the reporters on Constant News Network,

yammering on and on about this breaking news,

even when *nothing* new is breaking in the situation?

It's because we, as a culture, collectively  
have bought into *curiositas*, instead of *studiositas*.  
We want a short-cut to knowledge,  
bits and pieces delivered instantly to us personally, privately,  
without any effort on our part to go deeper.  
The more, the quicker, the better.  
Like gorging on candy.

Okay, that's the philosophy lesson.  
Now, before I get to Roman gladiators and smart phones,  
let's talk about Jesus.

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We heard the story of Jesus  
being tempted by the devil in the wilderness.  
Jesus was being tempted to embrace *curiositas*.

The temptations—  
of turning stone to bread,  
of getting authority over the kingdoms,  
of jumping off the peak of the temple—  
those were temptations to take the truth about himself,  
and possess it as an object to manage  
and use to his own advantage,  
to satisfy his hunger,  
to gain control over others,  
to go for the spectacular.  
He was tempted to use his power,  
in *exactly the way* we are *all* tempted  
to use our power of knowledge.

But Jesus had the clarity and good judgement  
to see what he was being tempted with,  
and choose another course.  
He chose *studiositas*.  
He chose to use his knowledge and power as an opportunity  
to go deeper into the truth of who we was,  
and who he was called to become.

*Interesting*, though! This temptation came immediately after  
Jesus was given a gift of new knowledge.  
He heard a voice from heaven, at his baptism,  
pronouncing his identity,  
telling him who he was.

And *immediately*, with the voice still ringing in his ears,  
he was whisked off into the wilderness,  
and there he struggled . . . mightily . . .  
with the temptation to use his newfound knowledge  
as a tool to benefit himself.

These are not unlike the temptations *we* get hit with,  
whenever *we* get new knowledge—  
about ourselves, about others, about the world we live in—  
we are tempted to hold on to knowledge tightly, as our own,  
and use it for personal benefit,  
instead of receiving it as an abundant, grace-filled gift,  
in a world full of gifts,  
a gift that invites us to dive even deeper into that world,  
and into the lives of others,  
and into God,  
and into our truest selves.

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So . . . about gladiators.  
In his article, Dr. Henry relates a story from St. Augustine.  
Seems St. Augustine had a good friend, Alypius,  
who would go to the Roman Coliseum,  
and despite being a Christian, he was captivated by the sounds  
of the gruesome, violent combat of gladiators.  
So he would open his eyes and feast greedily  
on the human cruelty unfolding before him.  
He gave in to his powerful appetite to *know—curiositas*.  
His appetite was filled, but he went away empty,  
having given way to a sinful appetite.

The Roman Coliseum was an ideal vehicle for human *curiositas*.  
It fed the desire to know, without any real relationship

with the subject of that knowledge.  
People could watch from afar, then walk away.  
No need to ponder its meaning, or its morality.  
The knowledge was neither moral nor immoral,  
purely an object, to possess, to keep privately.

In our day, there are countless parallels to the Roman Coliseum.  
I already mentioned reality TV, and constant news.  
There are many, *many* more vehicles that our culture has developed,  
to help us cultivate and satisfy *curiositas*.  
Perhaps *none* as effective, and pervasive, as the smart phone.

I have one. I use it. I enjoy it. A lot.  
It keeps my life organized.  
I have virtually all the information I need to do my job,  
to conduct meetings,  
to call people,  
to find directions,  
to read scripture  
(as I pointed out to the children a couple weeks ago).  
On this tiny device clipped to my belt all day,  
there's an app to accomplish almost *anything*,  
and to access almost any available knowledge, *instantly*.  
Now what could be wrong about such an amazing  
technical innovation?  
Sure, *anything* can be abused.  
But the technology itself is morally neutral . . . *right*?

Except, I have to admit . . . though I'd rather *not* . . .  
that this particular technology,  
is especially well-suited . . . *ideally*-suited . . .  
to facilitate and encourage *curiositas*.  
Never *mind* the fact it can connect to the internet,  
and all manner of immoral or morally suspect *content*.  
Never *mind* it would be easy to engage in immoral communications  
or behavior—  
the kind that has already ruined many lives and careers,  
and ended marriages.  
Even *if* your phone—or iPad for that matter—

could not possibly access or send *anything* morally questionable,  
there is still a moral problem to deal with, I'm afraid.

The simple fact that a gadget I can carry around everywhere  
can provide such easy access to knowledge on demand,  
powerfully feeds my sinful hunger for novelty,  
for cheap, disconnected, shallow knowledge,  
it feeds my pride, because I have it visibly clipped on my belt,  
or pull it out in meetings,  
so other people can see that I *have* this knowledge  
at my fingertips,  
it encourages a way of being in the world  
that is more concerned about objects than gifts.

Not *only* is my phone an object that I possess, and protect,  
and am proud of.  
It can easily stand in the way of my enjoying many of the  
wonderful, transcendent gifts that God pours out on me daily.  
If I am walking down the sidewalk,  
or sitting with the family at home,  
or in a classroom, or conference room,  
or at a table with a friend,  
this object very easily gets in the way of, and trumps,  
the ordinary and generous gifts of human existence.

When I'm tethered to my phone,  
ready for every ring, chirp, or vibration it gives off,  
I'm not as apt to notice *other* things.  
When I'm checking Facebook, or email,  
or doing a crossword puzzle, or playing "Angry Birds,"  
I am, by *definition*, distracted and unable to fully engage  
with the gifts God puts in my path—  
be that a blue sky, or the songs of *real* birds,  
or the greeting of a friend or stranger walking by,  
or . . . most tragically, the attention and affection  
of a loved one—spouse, child, parent, friend.

Now, are smart phones sinful, *per se*?  
Should we rid ourselves of them?

Douglas Henry, himself an avowed power user of his smart phone,  
said even though *curiositas*—  
    this sinful appetite for endlessly new knowledge,  
    possessed for private gain,  
    and proudly put on display—  
is made more likely, if not inevitable, by a smart phone,  
he would not say that having mobile connection to the internet  
    *must* be spiritually distracting or deforming.  
*Curiositas*, he wrote,  
    “with its powerful, disordered love for knowledge,  
    tempted God’s faithful long before  
    Steve Jobs presented the world with its first iPhones.”  
The Roman Coliseum being a case in point.  
And Thoreau said, in the 1800s, by the way,  
    “We have more and more ways to communicate,  
    but less and less to say.”

We must establish habits and practices that help us resist *curiositas*,  
and encourage, instead, *studiositas*.  
That encourage us to enter into the lives of others, and ourselves,  
and encourage us to plunge deeper into the truths  
of this world—*both* its beauty and its brokenness.

We should consider internet Sabbaths.  
We should consider establishing phone-free and internet-free zones.  
This sanctuary could be one.  
The dinner table at home *surely* should be one.  
The car ought to be one.

We should cultivate the habit of having long conversations.  
When was *your* last hour-long, face-to-face conversation?  
I don’t mean a planned meeting with an agenda.  
I mean a free-flowing, undistracted conversation  
in which no party needed or wanted to be anywhere else.

We should read novels.  
Or paint.  
Or listen to symphonies.

We should take long walks . . . with our phone turned off.  
Or “forgotten” at home.

We should learn a new skill,  
or study a new topic in depth.

I’m saying this not to scold “you out there.”  
I’m saying this, because I need to hear myself say it.

Our virtual lives can help or hinder being formed in Christ.  
Mobile connectivity *can* be a good thing.  
But it can quickly become a vice.  
A vice takes something potentially good  
and ruins it by loving it too much.

*Curiositas* is like other desires—  
for pleasure, approval, wealth, power, status.  
They are god-substitutes.  
Idolatry.  
They violate the first of the Ten Commandments.

But we *can* have virtuous virtual lives,  
if we develop habits of *studiositas* rather than *curiositas*.

And if we do as the apostle encouraged us in today’s reading,  
“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,  
whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable,  
if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise,  
think about these things.”

Let us do exactly that.  
Let us look for, and see God’s love,  
in the abundant gifts of grace we receive daily.  
And let us allow those gifts to direct our worship  
to the God who gave them.

—Phil Kniss, January 29, 2012