

Michael Jenkins's formative moments

by [Wm. Michael Jenkins](#)

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I remember a conversation my mother and I had one day after worship in the small rural church in which I grew up and where she and my dad are active members to this day. The preacher had preached on the passage "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. 6:34), a text that in its evangelical simplicity and Elizabethan beauty was utterly indecipherable for a small child. I knew it must be important. It was in red in my Bible.

On the way to the car, I asked my mother what it meant. "Hmmm, I guess it means that Jesus doesn't want us to worry about the future," she said. "There's enough for us to worry about today."

That was a lesson my mother, a child of the Great Depression, knew by heart. She then invited me to read the passage with her in the context of the whole text, and gradually the meaning came into focus for me.

What has stayed with me from that conversation was the natural way my mother talked about theological matters. Or, perhaps more, it was the way in which my mother bridged the mundane and the theological seamlessly.

Of all the talks I had with my mother as a child, this one has stuck with me for 50 years—and not least the precise phrasing of that passage from Matthew's Gospel. A contemporary educational researcher could explain to us why it is that something hard to read stays with us better and longer than something easily understood. I suspect that at some intuitive level my mother, and maybe the translators of the Authorized Version, and perhaps our Lord, understood this too. We learn best those things that require some

unraveling. "Let those who have ears to hear, hear" and all that.

The

longer I spend at the graduate level of theological education the more convinced I am that primary theological education is best done when it invites us into the project of deciphering, unraveling, interpreting, figuring things out. My mother probably had no idea how important it was that day that she took the time to read that text with me. She certainly had no idea how important it was to start her lesson with, "Hmmm, I guess" But 50 years later, it's what I do with students on a pretty regular basis.

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