



Roanoke, Virginia
August 5, 2018

***“Learn
Habits of the Heart”***

Psalm 1:1-3; Mark 4:1-9

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Psalm 1:1-3

¹ Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
² but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
³ They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Mark 4:1-9

¹Again [Jesus] began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. ²He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it



had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' ⁹And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen.”

The Word of God can be an elusive and complicated topic. What image comes to your mind when you hear that phrase, “the Word of God”? Perhaps you picture your grandmother’s old family Bible, worn with age, cracked binding and faded gold leaf. Perhaps you envision a dusty old leather-bound book that sits on a shelf. Maybe you remember the children’s Bible your Sunday school teacher pulled out with illustrations of Adam and Eve and Noah’s Ark. Or a version you often turn to on your bedside table. Maybe you even have an app on your phone.

We are quite fortunate. We have gotten so comfortable with our access to the Bible.

There was a time when people of faith rarely saw one, let alone had one of their own. There was a time when only the parish priest could read it. He read it and maybe preached from it in Latin to a crowd who couldn’t understand what he was saying.

The church has had a complex relationship with the Bible from its beginning.

Over the centuries, the Bible was often taken out of the hands of common people and reserved for the elite. Around the 2nd century, the Gnostics claimed these writings were so sacred that they could only be interpreted by people with sacred knowledge. Meaning, of course, only the Gnostics themselves.

But another theologian of the early church, Tertullian, protested this idea and believed common people could understand and should have full access to God’s Word. But in 284 CE, Diocletian became emperor of Rome. A paranoid, power hungry ruler, he believed Christianity was a potential threat to his power. He proceeded to burn every Christian text he could find.

Later church councils forbade access to the Word by anyone but priests, and even then, the Word was received only through sermons, public readings, sacred chant and prayers. Even if the church allowed it, a Bible would have been incredibly rare. It took four years and two months of transcribing to produce one Bible. And then, that Bible was so valuable and so expensive, it was often chained to pulpit.

Then the Dark Ages arrived, and people again had to turn to the priest to read God’s Word.

In 1440, the printing press was invented and made the Bible more accessible. Martin Luther translated it into vernacular German. And in 1560 the Geneva Bible became a version easy for lay people to read on their own. It was the Bible the Pilgrims brought to the New World on the Mayflower, and the version that William Shakespeare would have read. At last, Christians had the Bible back in their hands and in their own homes.

The KJV followed, and the translations haven’t stopped since. Now, we can read the Bible anytime we want, in any language we want. There are over 200 different editions. With the internet, it’s just a Google search or an app swipe. It’s a text that has evolved from oral tradition to



written word. From sacred text to back pocket access. And how we read it, how we use it, matters as much as ever.

Ronald Reagan notoriously said in 1983 that the Bible contains “all the answers to all the problems man has ever known.” Wow – big words. Brother Cadfael, a fictional 12th century sleuth from a series of novels, describes the heated dispute over the resting place of St. Winifred’s bones. Two rival Benedictine houses and one wealthy earl all vie for these prized skeletal remains. They finally agree to settle the dispute by the method of *sortes*. Each claimant approaches the Bible with eyes averted, randomly turning the pages and pointing to a passage. The verse is meant to provide some clue as to how the dispute ought to be resolved.

Some of you may have seen a bumper sticker I’ve seen floating around my home state. It reads: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” This sort of attitude seems to imply that the Bible is a one stop shop, where all of life’s questions are answered and all of our disputes can be resolved. For them, God’s Word is inerrant. Questioning even a single verse leads down a slippery slope to not believing any of it.

Is the Bible such a frail witness to what God is doing in our world? Is God’s Word undermined if it contradicts what we know of history or science? In my experience, wrestling with the Word, asking questions and studying and exploring it critically has only increased my love for it, not undermined it.

History tells us that those who wrote and selected the books that became the Bible likely would have said the same thing. That’s because they never believed the Word of God could be completely captured in the ink on a scroll or in a letter to a church. They believed that these words were meant to point beyond themselves to truths that transcend the ink on a page. Our forefathers of the faith knew that the Word was more like rocks with veins of gold running through them than pure gold itself. This means, like Eric Elnes describes, that we have to be like prospectors, mining, searching, and refining what we know about the text in order to draw out what it truly means for us today.

How do we do that mining, searching, and refining, you might ask? Well, I’m glad you asked. We do it through prayer, reflection, and we do it in community. John Calvin believed we ought never come to God’s Word without praying first. And we ought to know from experience that so much of ourselves can get in our own way when we approach the scriptures. We ought to humble ourselves – acknowledging there is a God, and we are not it. There is God’s Word, and we are bound, at least from time to time, to get it wrong when we go it all on our own.

Thumb through your Bible. You will find that nearly every page cries out for interpretation. Few things are self-evident. We love our simple explanations – a phrase fit for a bumper sticker. But the Bible never talks that way. The Bible is often complex and mysterious. And the authors of the Bible show little interest in clearing it up for us.

Christians believe the Bible is a truthful and trustworthy account of what is going on with us and in the world. We ought to be skeptical of anybody who thinks they can reduce it to something simple and pithy. It is a library of books, all of them telling us something about God. If scripture is telling the truth about who God is, then we ought to expect that truth to be challenging.



As Will Willimon says, “That dear soul who says, ‘I just read the Bible and let it speak,’ that dear soul is self-delusional.” To sit in worship and hear it preached, to sit in a quiet room and read it, or to sit in a classroom or a living room to discuss it, are themselves acts of interpretation. Our goal is always to allow God to speak to us. Deitrich Bonhoeffer said over and over again that we are called to community – and we ought to put ourselves in these places (in community) where the Spirit can move us.

Scripture was written in ancient languages quite different from our own. Even the newest parts are nearly 2,000 years old. You can’t grab a copy of the *Aeneid* or the *Illiad* and expect to get something out of it without some sort of interpretive help.

This isn’t solo work.

When I was first called to Second Presbyterian Church, I was told that this congregation was one who loved wrestling with God’s Word. I thought, “These are my kind of people.” And by that, I meant you are a people who value education, who take the call to study seriously, and recognize the joy of reading scripture in community.

The root word for study is *studiare*, meaning to be diligent or ready. It means to pay attention, to look around, listen, and use everything you’ve got to take something in and reflect on it.

The word disciple means student. That is what we are called to be – students. Jesus was the great rabbi, and we have been a people of the Word from the very beginning.

In Genesis, our faith begins with the words “And God said....” God initiated this conversation, and we’re still having it right now.

Two weeks ago, at Vacation Bible School, we took a close look at another parable. We explored the story of the Good Samaritan. We learned about the Samaritan who was generous in taking care of the wounded man on the side of the road. Each child at VBS was given two coins – like the Samaritan gave the innkeeper coins to care for his new friend – and they were charged with the command to give those coins to someone else. I heard of two boys who found a loop hole, each giving the other his two coins. But I also heard this story of what another child did with his coins. That afternoon after Bible school, someone came to the family’s door, looking for donations for school uniforms. The individual had no official sign that their collection was legitimate, so as the mom was asking questions, trying to do the responsible thing to ensure the request was genuine. Her son quietly went back inside the house, found his two coins, and handed them to the stranger through the front door – no questions asked.

Sometimes, the Living God jumps out and makes God’s self known.

“Let everyone with ears to hear listen.”

That verb, “to listen,” in Mark 4 is in the present tense. To hear God’s Word is not a one-time occurrence but an ongoing characteristic of discipleship. Listening, learning is essential to discipleship. What we read, what we learn in this holy book is not static but dynamic. Not fixed but ever meaningful. Your response to what you hear is just as important as what you hear.

The parable of the sower is not about how much fruit is produced, but it is about the way in which God’s Word has taken hold in you. It is about the sower – the one who refuses to give up on all of us – the one who will not discriminate between rocky and shallow and good soil, but



throws the Word generously on us all. And it is also about us – different kinds of people with different obligations, challenges, and commitments. The good news is that Jesus is still sowing, still seeking, still eager for all of us to know the love and grace we encounter in these pages. So let us treasure this word, and be its students always.

“Let everyone with ears to hear listen.”

Amen.

