

"The Word – Our Word"

Matthew 21:23-32
November 13, 2016

Pastor Cathy L Hamblin
New Richmond United Methodist Church

Call to Worship

Psalm 19:1-4, 7

Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.

One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known.

Of course, there's no speech, no words—their voices can't be heard—

but their sound extends throughout the world; their words reach the ends of the earth.

The LORD's Instruction is perfect, reviving one's very being.

The LORD's laws are faithful, making naive people wise.

The Word

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching. **They asked, "What kind of authority do you have for doing these things? Who gave you this authority?"**

Jesus replied, "I have a question for you. If you tell me the answer, I'll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. **Where did John get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans?"**

They argued among themselves, "If we say 'from heaven,' he'll say to us, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But we can't say 'from humans' because we're afraid of the crowd, since everyone thinks John was a prophet." Then they replied, "We don't know." **Jesus also said to them, "Neither will I tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things.**

He then told them this parable: "What do you think? A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' **"No, I don't want to,' he replied. But later he changed his mind and went. "The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied, 'Yes, sir.' But he didn't go.**

"Which one of these two did his father's will?" **They said, "The first one."**

Jesus said to them, "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you. For John came to you on the righteous road, and you didn't believe him. **But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. Yet even after you saw this, you didn't change your hearts and lives and you didn't believe him.**

Living the Word

From the earliest days of slavery, the Bible has played an unusually important role in the African American church and family. The reverence that they had for the Bible led many ex-slaves, after emancipation, to flock to schools set up by missionaries and other agencies.

Historian Carter G. Woodson, observed many years ago: "Negroes almost worshiped the Bible, and their anxiety to read it was their greatest incentive to learn."

One freed man who visited a night school for emancipated slaves in Beaufort, North Carolina, tells the story of a black woman who carried a big Bible with her through the swamps and the woods. Though she was unable to read, she "had got her old mistress to turn down the leaves at the verses she knew by heart, and

often she would sit down in the woods and open and open the big Bible at these verses, and repeat them aloud, and find strength and consolation."

Encountering the name of Jesus in the Bible seemed to have always been important. Another story told of one slave, who was a nurse for her master's family, who had been taught by one of the children to spell the name of Jesus and to recognize it in the text. It became her devotion to take the Bible and search for the name, but "since she had no idea in what parts of the Bible it was found, she would open the Bible at random and travel with her finger along line after line, and page after page, until she found "Jesus."

The Local Preacher: or The Trial of Faith published in New York, **1851**

Chapter one: "There you are wrong, my dear cousin," said Mrs. Seaton; "you assume that the sacred Scriptures are not authentic, because you have not given yourself time, or have not taken pains, to inquire into the abundance of evidence which we have of their authenticity."

"Well, my dear Ann," said Mrs. Mannering, "I must confess that it is too true. Mixing, as I have from my girlhood, in a circle of acquaintances, among whom there were none really pious, and hearing too often the Bible spoken of as a book containing a narration of incidents of which many have their doubts, I have gone with the multitude, and pronounced the sentence of 'untrue' on this volume, which you call the Book of Life, without ever really ever examining its claims to our faith."

"A candid confession, dear cousin Charlotte, and one which promises much good. But, let me ask, is not this unfair and unjust? Do we act thus in reference to any of the compositions of men, - any history of a part of the world we live in? Would you, who are so fond of reading, after a thorough perusal of Hume's History of England, for instance, pronounce the events recorded in it as never having happened, without first searching for the proofs of their truth?"

"Certainly not; and the more we converse together, the more surprised I am to think that any of us should condemn a book, and even call it false, which we have never read." "And does not your surprise increase as you reflect upon the incalculable and even eternal interests connected with the perusal and study of the Holy Bible?"

"I scarcely comprehend you, cousin Ann." "Well, I will try to explain myself. The Bible, you know, is unlike all other books. It is of Divine origin, of Divine inspiration: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.' Now in this best of books, God's will to man is revealed, his holy laws are taught us, his plan of salvation is brought to our eyes, to our consciences, and to our hearts.

"It is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path." We are sinners and we know not how to escape the just sentence pronounced against the wicked; but this book tells us how. Now, must we not be very [wrong] to throw aside, as unworthy even of a [glance], the only chart which can conduct us safely over life's tempestuous sea?

Tell me, my cousin if such everlasting consequences are at stake, as the loss or the salvation of the soul, is it not remarkably surprising how anyone can set at naught this holy book? As Mrs. Seaton said this, she held up a neatly-bound copy of the sacred Scriptures.

Mrs. Mannering sighed, and was silent. The other, perceiving that some impression had been made on the mind of her friend, was determined to improve it. Laying her left hand kindly on that of her relative, and

presenting with the other the book which had been the topic of conversation, she continued, "Will my much-esteemed cousin Charlotte accept from me this copy of God's Holy Book; and may I ask, in return, that my friend will read it, - read it carefully, - read it without any previously-concieved prejudice against it, but as a sincere inquired after truth?"

"Yes, Ann, I will accept your present, my cousin," taking the offered volume; "and I will make the promise: for I must confess that since your arrival among us with your husband, our beloved cousin John, and your frequent remarks about religion, I have felt more than commonly interested about these things. I will therefore become your pupil, and you shall be my [teacher] in the study of Christianity."

This conversation took place between two ladies, who resided in one of the West Indies Islands. Mr. and Mrs. Seaton had lately removed to that place, from an English island. They were members of the Wesleyan Methodist Society, and Mr. Seaton was a licensed local preacher. Mrs. Mannering was a relative of Mr. Seaton, and had formerly resided in St Croix, of which island they were both natives.

Written 164 years ago, yet still of value to us today...

Coming forward in history, I would share with you two of my special family Bibles: They are both is Swedish, I can't read them beyond being able to identify the individual books, chapters and verses. They both have my great grandfather's name written in his own hand: 'Chas.' L. Pearson In the first Bible and Charles L. Pearson in the second.

The story goes that he grew up on a farm in Sweden, but he was a younger son, so his older brothers received the home farm and he departed for the US. He came as a single man in the late 1800s and found his way to St Paul, where he 'sowed his wild oats' for a while. Somewhere along the line he met a woman named Mary, though they had feeling for each other, she would not agree to marry him until he would go to church with her. So he did and they were wed.

They had four children and were looking for a farm outside the city to raise their family. They bought a place in Mann Valley, 5 miles west of River Falls. They attended the Swedish Mission Church in the neighborhood. Finally the Holy Spirit 'got a hold of him' and he had a conversion moment. The first Bible is dated 1913, and is his 'conversion Bible.'

Three scriptures that are highlighted in this Bible: Romans 1:16 *"I'm not ashamed of the gospel: it is God's own power for salvation to all who have faith in God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."*

This is a powerful statement from a new believer!

Hebrews 6:10-12 *"For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."* I imagine he had been serving the church for some years, but now there was meaning in his service to God.

The third underlined scripture is from Revelation 22:17 *"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' Let the one who hears say, 'Come!' And let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift."* Chas... was now ready to invite others into what he had found.

The second Bible I have of his is dated 1938 with the inscription: "To grandfather from your grandchildren." Then after the inscription, a verse for him Psalm 62:7 – which reads: "*My deliverance and glory depend on God. God is my strong rock. My refuge is in God.*" One of those grandchildren was my father, who was only 6 in 1938. There are two verses underlined in this Bible, Acts 14:17 "*Nevertheless, he hasn't left himself without a witness. He has blessed you by giving you rain from above as well as seasonal harvests, and satisfying you with food and happiness.*" Often it is easier to see our blessings as we look back from a more mature age and faith.

The second verse is Hebrews 11:6 "*It's impossible to please God without faith because the one who draws near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards people who try to find him.*" In this verse is an understanding of how important our faith can be. For my grandfather these two Bibles share his faith journey. They are special Bibles to me.

Another special Bible is one that I picked up at a sale somewhere. No family connection to me, but a hand-me-down Bible. It has a soft well worn leather cover and you can tell it was cherished. Like many of us heard in the 'old' days – we were not supposed to write in our books. So the only writing is the presentation page, which reads: "Presented to Vera Ellis (about 1913 or 1914) by First M.E. Church" – that would be the Methodist Episcopal Church. No location is given. Across the page, written "To a sweet little Heidi - on Sunday August 2, 1970 – from her "United States Grandma," Vera L Ellis. I wonder what travels this copy of The Word made so far in its lifetime?

Just inside, opposite the picture of children with their guardian angel watching over them, is the title page, which states: "The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments: Translated out of the original tongues; and with the former translations diligently compared and revised, by his majesty's special command. Appointed to be read in churches."

Heidi if she was attending a Methodist Church in 1970, would have received in about 3rd grade a newer version – The Revised Standard Version. But this Bible begins its 1913 intro page with "To the most high and mighty prince, James, by the grace of God, King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, defender of the faith. The translators of the Bible wish Grace, Mercy, and Peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord." So this version is a King James Bible actually translated in the early 1600s.

From the beginning of the church, Christians have been a "people of the Book." In the book Shaped by the Bible, retired Methodist Bishop Will Willimon labors to make the point that our congregations are formed by their confrontations with the Bible. He says Scripture 'forms us, reforms us and challenges' us, even as we hide from the Word, refuse to hear it, and avoid and evade the claims it makes upon us.

The scripture this morning talked of 2 sons. The first son was asked to do something, but he said "No thanks." Yet later he changed his mind and did it. The same was asked of the second son, who said "Yes, sir." But he didn't go. Is it the same with the Scriptures? We are invited into one of the greatest gifts from God. Which son's response do we give back to God?

Indeed Willimon is right. It has been the testimony of the Bible as the living word of God that has enabled a people who were no people to gather as God's people around the Word and the sacraments, which are suggested by the Bible's reports of God's entrance into human life. Show me a vital and healthy congregation, and I will point you to a people who take the Word of God seriously. A congregation that reads it, studies it, listens to God's whispers and shouts in it, will be a changed congregation.