

Opening the Scriptures

The verses I just read from the Gospel of Luke are perhaps more appropriately linked to the evening of Easter Sunday than to this Sunday. In Luke's Gospel, this appearance of the Risen Christ follows his mysterious journey to Emmaus in the company of two of his unwitting disciples and both events are said to have come later in the day of his resurrection. But there is something that happens both in the story I read and in the story of the Emmaus road that connected with some other things that I've been thinking and reading and I wanted to explore that serendipitous conjunction with you this morning.

In both of these stories in Luke's gospel, Jesus does two things upon being reunited with his disciples. He shares a meal with them and he teaches them. Specifically, he teaches them about the Scriptures. Listen to this passage from the story of the Emmaus journey: ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." I think it is significant that it is these two actions that he undertakes. The first, eating a meal, is the most basic willful act of sustaining physical life. We cannot choose to breathe or not to breathe but we can choose to eat or not to eat and we can choose to share food with others in a way that we cannot, unless we are divers or astronauts, choose to share oxygen. In both stories, Jesus is invited into communion with his friends by the offer of food and by taking it he demonstrates that he is truly alive and one with them. But, as Luke recounts Jesus saying early in his ministry, "It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." The second of Jesus' actions, the teaching of Scripture, is perhaps the most basic willful act of sustaining spiritual life. We may speak of opening ourselves to the presence of God in prayer but that is essentially a passive action. To study the Scripture, to truly hear and engage with a teacher is an active process. We go in search of the truth of God.

The importance of Scripture and the study of Scripture is woven deep into the tenets of our faith. The origins of our Baptist heritage in the radical wing of the Reformation are linked both to the centrality of Scripture for faith, *sola scriptura* as Luther said, and to the drive to bring the Scriptures to the people, read or spoken in the vernacular languages of the time rather than in the Latin which was kept alive only among the clergy and monastics and very few of the laity. Publications explicating the common strands of belief among Baptists, both from the Southern Baptist Convention of my youth and our own American Baptist Churches, USA, emphasize the Scriptures as the foundation of our belief. The booklet, "We Are American Baptists," begins its text with the heading "We are Guided by God's Word." Likewise, the statement of the Commission on American Baptist Identity found in that publication follows its preamble with these words: "Therefore, With Baptist brothers and sisters around the world, we believe: That the Bible is the final authority and trustworthy for faith and practice when interpreted responsibly under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit within the community of faith..."

Baptist emphases notwithstanding, I don't think we could find a single organized denomination or group of Christians who would not claim to take the Bible seriously. And, lest we forget, we are not alone in our assumed devotion to this group of writings. We share well over half of our holy book with our spiritual forebears, the Jews, who sometimes refer to themselves as "People of the Book." And that same appellation, *Ahl al- Kitâb* in Arabic, is used by the Koran to speak

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of both Jews and Christians as near spiritual kindred to the followers of Islam: “And do not dispute with the followers of the Book except by what is best, except those of them who act unjustly, and say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him do we submit.” To speak of the centrality of the scriptures in our lives is to stand in solidarity not only with Christians around the world, but with our brothers and sisters in the other monotheistic, Abrahamic faiths as well.

As the canon of our Scripture developed over the centuries, faithful scribes, prophets and apostles, as well as Jesus himself, held up the importance of previously accepted Scripture for the health of the human spirit. In Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, which may have been put into final form some centuries after the earlier books, we find not only the verse Jesus quoted about not living by bread alone, but also this admonition on how to treat the Scriptures: “⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” Whether those words were meant literally, as held by observant Jews who wear tefillin or post mezuzahs at the entrance of their homes, or if it is a reminder to keep God’s word metaphorically always before us, the value of Scripture is clear. All of Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, is a poem of praise for the Scriptures and Psalm 19 contains these memorable words: “⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. ¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. ¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” Just as Jesus pointed to Torah, the Psalms and the Prophets to explain his own life and ministry, so the Apostle Paul upheld all of what we call the Old Testament in importance: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

With all of this affirmation of the Bible in our heritage, our Baptist heritage, our Christian heritage, and the shared heritage of the Abrahamic faiths, it may seem surprising that there should be any question at all about the importance of Bible study, Bible teaching and Biblically-based preaching in the life of our community of faith. Nevertheless, in recent days, I’ve heard and read some things that tell me that folks are very unsure about how to deal with the Bible in this day and age. Some months ago, I heard a presentation by Dr. Christian Smith and subsequently read his in-depth study Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers. After extensive surveys and discussions with young subjects across the country, Smith and his colleagues have concluded that most teenagers really don’t know the basics of their faith very well, whatever faith they may claim. Smith concludes further that this is probably because their parents don’t know the specifics of their faith very well either or, at least, not well enough to pass on. This alarm was repeated in a fine article by Nancy Ammerman in a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, entitled “Memory Verses.” I found myself resonating with Ammerman’s writing as she told of the deep Biblical grounding of her own youth and her

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concern that her (and my) generation's children were not receiving the same foundational education. And in the last few weeks, I've met people who remarked on the lack of preaching based on the Bible in local churches and who complained that they were unable to decipher the Scriptures in their own, private study.

That last problem, I'm quite convinced, stems from the others. Remember the words I quoted earlier from the Commission on American Baptist Identity, "the Bible is the final authority and trustworthy for faith and practice when interpreted responsibly under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit within the community of faith..." Those words echo the writer of Hebrews: "¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." I also cannot but think of what Paul wrote to the Romans: "¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" It seems quite clear to me that what is needed is more informed, guided and shared study of the Scriptures.

I'm quite aware, however, that some trends inside the church work against the call of the Scriptures. For many faithful believers whose theology could be described as liberal, moderate or progressive, it seems that a familiarity with the Scriptures great enough to enable easy quotation is the province of those with conservative to fundamentalist views. Too many of the former have felt the effects of being metaphorically bludgeoned with the Bible by the latter. Likewise, some theories of Biblical Inspiration held by fundamentalist or conservative believers may seem dismissive of human worth to others while differing theories held by moderates or liberals may seem to minimize the glory of God in the eyes of some Christians. And, of course, many of us in this congregation know the pain of being cut off from fellowship with previously beloved brothers and sisters because our interpretation of the Scripture did not line up precisely with theirs.

But regardless of what indignities and hurts we may have suffered at the hands of other believers, regardless of whether we believe that God implanted exact wordings of original autographs in the hearts of authors or that saints were energized by the Holy Spirit to write of their deepest personal understandings, the answer is not less Bible study but more. Whether one believes that the Bible is the Word of God or that the Bible contains the Word of God or that the Bible is words about God, this ancient book is a treasure, a guide, a companion. More and more educators in the public sector are worrying that a lack of exposure to the Bible is producing generations of students who lack the basic cultural framework to understand the classics of our civilization. How can one read Milton or Melville, Dostoevsky or Donne, or see or hear the drama of Shakespeare and truly understand those works without a basic knowledge of the Bible? For that matter, more recent works from such writers as Flannery O'Connor or J.R.R. Tolkien, rock groups like U2 or Sixpence None the Richer, or filmmakers like Wim Wenders or Martin Scorsese only reveal their deepest truths in the light of Biblical principles or imagery. Perhaps more immediately important to us is the view of Dr. Nancy Ammerman in the article I mentioned earlier: "Biblical words are, in fact, the common language we speak as Christians,

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part of the tool kit with which we build ourselves and our communities of faith... Thinking again about how scripture works, I have become convinced that having a canon matters, not just because the words are uniquely inspired or holy or true, but because this is the core set of stories that we've all agreed to share and that have shaped us and our forebears in manifold ways... Spending time building up that core, then, is essential. It can later be deconstructed and reconstructed, added to or set aside, but if we don't start here, we may lose something very important."

Elsewhere in her article, Dr. Ammerman notes, "There is reason to worry about the ability of mainline churches to pass on their traditions. In sheer organizational energy invested, the contrast between liberal Protestants and everybody else is quite dramatic. Everybody does some equivalent of children's Sunday school (even Muslims and Buddhists); mainline Protestants, however, are the only group that routinely does nothing else." She goes on to cite "many New England churches" where "religious education shuts down for the summer." Sound familiar? "Even a pretty regular attender in these churches," she remarks, "is lucky to get 20 to 30 hours a year" of Bible study.

After Jesus opened the disciples minds to understand the Scriptures, he told them that "repentance and forgiveness of sins (was) to be proclaimed in his name to all nations," beginning right where they were. He said to them, "You are witnesses of these things." So, too, are we witnesses, for we have witnessed in the truth of resurrection in our own lives, the power of God in the love of Jesus to change us and the world around us. But how can we communicate these great life-changing truths, this Good News to all people, without a solid understanding of "the common language we speak as Christians?" How can we proclaim unless we understand?

I have been slow to suggest changes here at Good Shepherd for a number of reasons. For one thing, you, as a congregation, had already embarked on a program of change before I got here. The plan to turn our 4 and a half acres of mostly unused land into a vibrant, busy campus is a challenge large enough to keep us occupied for the next several years. In 2003, you voted to begin a 10-year journey toward a vision that I have reprinted and inserted in your bulletins this morning as a reminder. Also, even though this is my first long-term call as a pastor, as my friends in Texas say, "this ain't my first rodeo." I've been brought into organizations as a change agent before and my experience leads me, when possible, to do a good deal of listening and watching before suggesting changes. Not long after I arrived, Carol Calkins gave me a book called Ministry Loves Company: A Survival Guide for Pastors and its central image is one with which I heartily agree. This is your party, your family reunion. In many ways, I'm just the guy you asked to coordinate it. But I also believe that you called me here to be a leader and to work with you to change the things that need to be changed so you can reach your goals. So, now I'm going to suggest something. I believe we are doing ourselves, our children, our guests and the vision God has given us a disservice by offering as little opportunity as we do for Bible study. I understand that the Summer Schedule at Good Shepherd, dropping Sunday school and moving the time of worship up by a half-hour, is a time-honored and possibly beloved way of doing things but I think it needs to be reconsidered. So for the next several weeks, I'm going to be circulating sign-up sheets for volunteers to teach our Sunday school classes during the summer. I realize that we are already short on teachers during the school year for some classes but, you see, I take you at your word as you've said in many publications that the education of young

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people is important here. I think I just haven't done a good enough job of recruiting you for specific jobs. So, I'm going to be very overt about it. And, because I don't believe in asking folks to do things I'm not willing to do myself, I pledge that I will either take on one of our classes for the entire summer or make myself available to fill in for different classes every week this summer, except for the few that I am scheduled to be out of town. I invite you all to let me know, honestly and lovingly, what you think of this plan. We can have some time here in the sanctuary after the service and I hope you'll also call, e-mail or come by to chat with me during the upcoming week.

I love to tell the story and I know you do, too. I love to hear and to sing those wonderful words of life and I know you do, too. The time has come, my brothers and sisters, to renew our efforts to keep the Scriptures continually in our hearts, so that together we may experience the leadership of the Holy Spirit in opening our minds to understand the Scriptures, so that we might be effective witnesses in holding out the radiance that shines from these pages and lighting the way to all who pass by this place and our lives. We can be a lamp of burnished gold, for God has given us minds to think, and tongues to speak, and the truth that sets all humankind free. We have indeed been clothed with power on high. Now it is time to continue our preparation to put that power to use. Thanks be to God.