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It was the stories that first caused me to love the Bible. As I mentioned last Sunday, I can barely remember a time when I could not read and I certainly cannot remember a time when I did not have Bible stories read to me before I could read them for myself. Stories of Joseph, of Moses, of Gideon and Samson, of Samuel and David and Solomon, all of these have been a part of my life for so long that I cannot imagine not knowing them. And then, of course, there were the stories of Jesus that carried me from the wonderment of childhood to the realization that what Jesus taught was for me to model in my life, that what Jesus did was not only for the whole world but for me personally, that when the Bible said, “Whosoever,” it surely meant me as well.

Over time, I learned to love other aspects of the Bible besides the stories. The strange visions of the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation and of sections of Ezekiel caught my imagination in the same way as did the science fiction I began reading as a preteen. The beautiful poetry of the Psalms spoke to the part of me that loved to sing and I recognized some passages that were and are still sung as hymns common among us, while the Proverbs sounded like the kind of common-sense advice I heard from my parents and teachers. As a boy, I struggled with books that have since come to be familiar and important to my understanding – Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the words of the prophets, the letters of Paul. I still struggle with Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. But learning and applying the Scriptures is supposed to be a lifelong journey, so I guess that’s ok.

When I was a child, I thought of the Bible as being God’s book or the Word of God in the simplest possible terms. My first conception was that the whole thing was simply handed down from on high to humans like unto the Ten Commandments, a series of tablets inscribed with words carved by God. Later, I began to realize that the outlook and understanding expressed in the Bible shifted from book to book and even passage to passage. I began to hear the voices of the different human servants of God who had been inspired by God to write these very different books. I came to realize that, as Brian McLaren expresses it, the Bible is “the library of a culture and a community – the culture and community of people who trace their history back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” This is no ordinary library, though, but one which, again in McLaren’s words, “has a unique and unparalleled role that none other can claim.” It instructs us for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. It 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. In the still powerful translation of these verses from J.B. Phillips, “From early childhood your mind has been familiar with the holy scriptures, which can open the mind to the salvation which comes through believing in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the faith and correcting error, for re-setting the direction of a person's life and training them in good living. The scriptures are the comprehensive equipment of the children of God and fit them fully for all branches of the work”

I have spoken to you before about my understanding of the importance of the study of the Bible for our growth as people and specifically as people of faith. We’ve looked at how central the Bible has always been in the Baptist Movement. We’ve even spent some time on the issue of how differing understandings of the Bible have divided Christians, Catholic from Protestant, conservative from moderate. But today, on this World Communion Sunday, I want to focus for just a few minutes on how this Book of Books, this gathered library of the community of God’s people and the greatest of all books, binds us together. In the Scriptures, I find the equipment

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that not only fits us for all good work but also that which can bring us together with other Christians, together with other persons of good will and, fittingly for a Communion Day, together with God.

Generally speaking, on World Communion Sunday, one speaks or hears about how the celebration of the Lord's Supper, common to all Christians, is the thing that most connects us across time, distance or confessional divide. But while not all Christians celebrate communion weekly or even monthly, all Christians who make attendance at worship services a habit will read, hear, study or be preached to from the Bible every week. We may not all interpret the things we read in the same way but we all go to the same source. In fact, across the Church as a whole, most Christians will hear the same Scriptures read and taught on the same day. This has been the practice of Roman Catholics for centuries and in the years since Vatican II, more and more Protestant bodies have worked with the Catholic Bishops on a list of suggested readings for each Sunday, now known as the Revised Common Lectionary. I'm occasionally asked why I bother to follow such a scheme and am even admonished for doing so but I think it is incredibly significant that for all our many differences Christians are joining together in this simple act. It is bringing us together in ways I think we are only beginning to understand. I have heard of conversations between members of different churches along the lines of: "What did you do this weekend?" "Well, on Sunday we went to church and our pastor preached about x." "Really? Our guy used that story, too. He said, such and such." "Hey, that's interesting. Our gal said something a little different. She said, thus and so." "Say, that is different. What do you think?" Can you imagine having such a conversation with a neighbor or a co-worker? I certainly hope so. Imagine how much else you could learn, not only about the Bible but about your friend. Imagine how your relationship with that person could flourish as you compare notes about what you've learned about the Bible.

Echoing the apostle Paul, Dr. Nancy Ammerman writes: "Biblical words are, in fact, the common language we speak as Christians, 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." The Bible is a binding agent among Christians because it forms the basis for the way we think about God.

Even as our joint focus on the Bible binds us together in new ways with other Christians, it also opens the door for connections with those for whom the Bible, or at least our version of the Bible, is not a focus. First of all, 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 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

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Christians around the world, but with our brothers and sisters in the other monotheistic, Abrahamic faiths as well.

But the connections that can grow between people because of the Bible are not limited to those who call on the name of the One God. The Bible has had a unique influence on the development of Western Culture, European and American, so that everyone who enters into or studies that culture is exposed to and influenced by the Bible as well, if not as a Sacred Book, then as a touchstone for the majority of other literature and art. 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.

The blessing of this osmotic pervasiveness of our Holy Bible across our culture is that it also gives us some common vocabulary to begin conversation on spiritual matters with our "spiritual but not religious" neighbors. If we remember the words of Paul to Timothy in regards to the Scriptures, that knowledge of them equips one for every good work and if we remember also his later admonition that Timothy should "do the work of an evangelist," we begin to translate the relevance of this passage to our lives. The Bible, Biblical language and especially words like evangelist may have become loaded with negative freight for some of us. The Episcopal scholar Sarah Dylan Breuer says of this passage, "On the live album Rattle and Hum by the rock band U2, lead singer Bono introduces the song "Helter Skelter" with the words, "This is a song that Charles Manson stole from the Beatles. We're stealing it back!" Sometimes that's how I feel about the Bible. Plantation owners may have given slaves the Bible to try to inspire obedience, but in the process, slaves learned the story of Moses. Some people try to steal the Bible so they can conceal their claims to power in it, as some do with the flag. But we're stealing it back." I want to steal back the words evangelist and evangelism from the TV preaching heads, too. The evangel, remember, is Good News and an evangelist is one who brings Good News. I know you all well enough to know that for everyone here, the impact of the Christ event on your lives, the act, if you will, of taking Jesus into your hearts, has been Good News indeed. We have the opportunity using language and ideas that our culture has appropriated from Holy Writ to offer the Good News of new and abundant life to our neighbors who are searching for life's answers. Isn't that Good News?

Finally, our Book of Books binds us more closely to God. As Paul affirmed, it "can open the mind to the salvation which comes through believing in Christ Jesus." There is story after story about people who came to faith or to a richer and more alive understanding of their faith through the reading of Scripture. Augustine of Hippo, the great African theologian of the Latin age, writes in his Confessions of how he had begun to think that the Bible, which he had previously rejected as "old wives' tales," might actually have the answers he sought. As he remembered it, "I was suddenly asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow

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in my heart, when all at once I heard a sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain "Take and read, take and read." At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed the flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul's epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: "Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh (Romans 13:13-14)." I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled." The words of the Bible can convince the seeker that the path to God can be begun in the musty old pages of the Book of Books.

As for us, those who have already decided to follow Jesus, the Bible not only equips us for all good works but it also encourages us when we are low in spirits, reminds us of God's love for us and urges us to experience that love afresh. As we come to the table on this World Communion Sunday, can we think of any sweeter words than these words of Jesus? "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." For the grace of God and the love of Christ Jesus and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, revealed to us in the pages of this remarkable book, thanks be to God.