

September 23, 2018

St. Nicholas'

Acts 16:9-15

Psalms 67

Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5

John 14:23-29

The Way of Love Sermon Series: Learn

“Reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus’ life and teachings”

Today is part 2 of our Way of Love sermon series. If you weren’t here last week and to remind those of you who were, this isn’t a program or class but a way of living that reveals God’s Love to the world around us. It is described best as practices for Jesus-centered life.

When I first scheduled this sermon series, I hadn’t considered how appropriate it is that our second practice of the Way of Love to talk about is Learn: the importance of reading and studying scripture as a group of us also begin the journey of reading the Bible in 90 Days. Now, I don’t point this out to make those of you who are participating with us to feel guilty - it is a big commitment that some just don’t have time for right now and I completely understand that - but to encourage those who are participating and ask all of you to pray for and offer words of encouragement and support to those who are doing it.

So again, these next questions are not a judgement but just a survey - how many of you have at least one Bible of some sort at home? How many of you have more than one? How easy is it in this day and age to find and purchase a Bible?

Did you know, that for the first thousand years or so after the Bible was put together as we know it today, the vast majority of believers didn’t read it? Well, for one thing, most people were illiterate. Even most priests. And, copying books was expensive and labor intensive because it was all done by hand. It took a lot of sheep to make enough parchment to copy the whole Bible! Not to mention that from the early 5th century, the only available translation from the original Hebrew and Greek was Latin, the official language of the Church, and most of the “common folk” around the world didn’t speak Latin.

By the middle ages, priests were taught in seminary what the Bible said, or at least what others interpreted it to say, rather than reading the texts for themselves. The reading and interpretation of scripture was reserved for only the most notable scholars and theologians. The word of God wasn’t personal; the only place it was read, if one could understand it, was in church.

Martin Luther, the man who inadvertently kicked off the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, discovered the holiness of God’s word as he entered the monastery to train as a monk. He would spend all his spare time reading and meditating on the Bible and he began to question why it was locked away and kept from most people. In his lifelong struggle to make God’s word accessible to all, he once said, “The Bible is the proper book for people. There the truth is distinguished from error far more clearly than anywhere else, and one finds something new in it every day. ... I have now constantly read and preached the Bible [for 28 years]; and yet I have not exhausted it but find something new in it every day.”

Worship and scripture in the common language of the people was also one of the foundations of the Anglican Church formed by the separation of the English Church from Rome.

The people who fought for the need of everyone to know the word of God knew that the Bible wasn't written to "inform" us but to transform us. Just as God isn't some distant God whom we cannot know, God's revelation of himself isn't to be a book we adore from afar but living words that we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest so that they are written on our hearts and shape who we are.

Eugene Peterson, one of my favorite modern day theologians, describes it this way:

"[T]he words of Scripture are not primarily words, however impressive, that label or define or prove, but words that mean, that reveal, that shape the soul, that generate saved lives, that form believing and obedient lives." EP pg 140

Nowadays the Bible is so common we think we know it when we don't. Adam Hamilton, a Methodist pastor and author, wrote a book titled Half-truths: God helps those who help themselves and other things the Bible doesn't say. In this book he talks about the dangers of convincing ourselves we know the Bible when we really don't. To illustrate, he uses several statements people claim are scriptural but are not. Sayings like: "God helps those who help themselves", "Everything happens for a reason", and "God won't give you more than you can handle".

These may sound "biblical" but they portray the wrong image of who God reveals himself to be and the wrong image of who we are in relation to our creator. Hamilton says that these types of statements can "lead people to conclusions about God that not only are untrue but that may push some people away from God. Some of these half truths are used to avoid careful thinking about complex issues. Some are used to justify our own biases or prejudices. Some, when spoken to others, can bring pain.'

It's an eye opening book and I encourage you to get it and with a small group go through it together. And then continue to meet and study scripture together.

The only way we can know what is and isn't in our holy scriptures is to know our holy scriptures. We must spend time regularly, both in our worship services and in our scheduled bible studies, as well as outside of these walls, independently and in small groups, reading and reflecting on God's word.

Scripture must be interpreted in light of it's own context and God's story as a whole. As Christians, we interpret the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus Christ. And as Episcopalians, we are also taught to use our God-given reasoning abilities and the wisdom and insight of the theologians and holy writers who listen closely as the Holy Spirit guides their interpretation of the God of the Bible.

The Bible proves we are all part of a much bigger story - a story where God is the lead and we are the supporting roles. It is a story of the creation that of immense beauty out of nothingness, it is a story of messed up humans and the God who created us knowing we'd be messy and who loves us anyway and wants to make us his holy people, and a story of the hope of glory not yet fully revealed of the new earth and heaven.

The Bible reveals to us God's nature, who he is as we can understand it in our limited humanness. It also reveals to us our own nature, as painful as it can be at times, to want our own way and to think somehow we know better than God or worse that we don't need to be in relationship with him to be fully human.

The Bible is not out of date or irrelevant in our time. Like Lydia, the woman in the story from Acts, God opens our heart to hear what we need to hear. To live the Way of Love, we are called to keep God's word. And that doesn't mean to keep it on a shelf but to keep it as part of us, to let it shape us into God's holy people, participating with him in the building of his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

So remember at the beginning when I asked about the bibles you have at home? How many of you read and study it outside of Sunday morning worship? You don't have to raise your hands.

And finally, a few more questions to ponder (I'll post these this week as I did last week's):

If you regularly set time aside to read and reflect on scripture, what ways of doing this are most life-giving for you?

If you don't currently have a regular pattern and time for this, what can you change in your schedule to do it?

Who will be your support and encouragement group for the commitment to regularly read and reflect on scripture?

"By reading and reflecting on Scripture, especially the life and teachings of Jesus, we draw near to God and God's word dwells in us. When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture, we learn to see God's story and God's activity in everyday life."

Amen.

Eugene Peterson, [Eat This Book](#)

Adam Hamilton, [Half-Truths](#)

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love>