

Encouragement of Scripture?

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

We don't know exactly what were the circumstances that occasioned Paul's letter to First Church Rome, but, reading between the lines, we can guess that Paul is writing to a discouraged, disheartened group of Christians.

Jesus had promised to return in triumph yet there they were, a tiny group of people huddled together in the heart of the Roman Empire. From their vantage point, it must have been difficult to see much triumph and glory in their situation.

In order to encourage them, Paul writes, "Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures."

When Paul wanted to offer encouragement to the discouraged, what does he do? He cites scripture, the Bible, these ancient writings as a primary source of our encouragement.

You will note that every Sunday, no matter the season of the year or whatever we have before us, there is always that time in the service when you are quiet and attentive. We open up an ancient book and read. Then I try to preach from the words of that ancient book praying that my words might become God's. Christians are "people of the Book," people who are submitting our lives and having our thinking judged and enriched by a collection of ancient writings called scripture.

The Bible has a privileged place in our communication. We are not free, as the church, to rummage about among other authorities, sources of inspiration, and revelation until we have first been encountered by scripture. To be a Christian means to be someone who learns to lay one's life alongside the Biblical text. In that primal, originating act, where the text is set against us in order that we might more faithfully read ourselves into the text, where the word is read and interpreted and the

people respond—this is the sustenance of the People of God who become that way by being the people of the Book.

The church is never ending training in learning to trust the Bible, learning to take ourselves a little less seriously and the Bible a bit more so. We gather on Sunday, the scriptures are opened to the church, we say, “Let’s all believe that this ancient book—written in a time and a language quite different from our own, by a people in many ways different from us—knows more than we do.” Then we attend to scripture. Bending our lives toward the text that reaches out to us through a wide array of literary devices, the church is forever formed, reformed into the church of Christ.

We trust the Bible in much the same way that we learn to trust another person. William Placher notes that, when you trust someone, you know them and allow them to know you. You spend time with that person, some of it with serious intent, some of it simply to be with that person. When you converse together, because you have learned to know and to trust one another, you know that person’s jokes as jokes, their tall tales as tall tales, their admonitions as words addressed to you out of love. Although we may not understand everything about that person, may not be able to connect everything that is said to us by our friend, we learn to trust that person as having our best interests at heart. We trust that we will not be led astray. We take some delight that our friend, even when we may have known her for many years, is still able to shock, surprise, confuse us because such shock and surprise remind us of the delightful, mysterious, not fully comprehensible otherness of our friend. We trust the Bible because it keeps making sense of, as well as disrupting, the world in which we live. The Bible does not just “make sense” in the sense that the Bible is congruent with our present experiences of and definitions of reality. We must read the Bible in a way that is more careful and respectful than simply going to the Bible, rummaging about, picking and choosing on the basis of what we consider to be possible and permissible within our present context. The temptation is to

discard that which makes us uncomfortable or that which does not easily fit into our scheme of things. Therefore, an appropriate hermeneutical question is not simply, “What does this text mean?” but rather, “How is this text asking me to change?”

Richard Lischer notes that in most of our seminary preparation, as preachers we are taught to step back from the text, to attempt to assume a detached, cool, objective and dispassionate disposition toward the text. Scripture as a cadaver to be dissected. In the African American church, says Lischer, the pastor attempts to step in to the text, try on the text, walk around in it, assume some of the roles that are depicted in the text. The pastor, in preaching, leads the church in stepping into the text, trying on the text, assuming a world in which the text’s description of reality is more real than that which we typically privilege as “real,” reality in the sense of the world as it is meant to be, a world where Jesus Christ is Sovereign, rather than Caesar. The reading of scripture has transferred our citizenship to a world where we are residents of the kingdom of God rather than the kingdoms of this world.

John Calvin compares the reading of scripture to the donning of eyeglasses that enable us to see things that, without the glasses, we would not have seen. It is of the nature of scripture to be imperialistic, to impose a world upon its readers and hearers.

Jesus begins a sermon saying, “Blessed are you who are poor.... O how fortunate are those of you who are hungry.... How lucky those of you with a terminal illness.... How blessed those of you who are unemployed..... Curse you who are rich.... Damn those who are content and satisfied.... Pity those of you who are successful.”

The congregation does a double take. What is this? In the real world the poor are doomed to lives of grinding poverty with no exit. In a capitalist economy if you are unemployed you must have some sort of social disease. If you had played by the rules, you wouldn’t be in this fix.

The preacher clarifies, “I was not talking about your kingdoms. I am rendering the kingdom of God. This is the way God is—lover of the poor, protector of the downtrodden, saviour of the lowly. Now you ought to get in step with God’s way or else be strangely out of step with reality now that God’s Son is taking over the world.”

Paul says that scripture is encouraging to us. The Bible does more than describe the world, the Bible is one of the ways that God transforms the world, transforming us in the process. The Holy Spirit insinuates itself into scripture in a way that keeps giving us a world that is better, more truthful, and more hopeful than the world we would have if we had been left to our own devices.

We keep trusting the Bible because we keep meeting God in the Bible. In the words of scripture, we are encountered by the Incarnate Word. We call the Bible “inspired” because the Bible keeps reaching out to us, keeps striking us with its strange truth, keeps truthfully depicting God. God keeps truthfully speaking to us through scripture as in no other medium. We trust the Bible because on enough Sundays we discover that God’s Word has the power to produce the readers that it requires. In the reading of scripture, the Creator is at work, something is made out of nothing, the church takes form around the words of the Word.

To read scripture is to risk transformation, conversion, an exchange of masters. You might think of Sunday morning as a struggle over the question, Who tells the story of what’s going on in the world? Scripture reading can be uncomfortable, as we are made by the Bible to see things we would have as soon ignored, as we hear a word we have been trying to avoid.

Reading is not only a formative activity but also a potentially disruptive means of exiting our culture, of de-familiarizing and making the normal seem strange and the strange seem normal, of having a delightful respite from conventional, culturally sanctioned accounts of “the way things are.” Therefore, the primary interpretive question is not, “Do I understand this passage?” but rather, “How

is this text attempting to convert me to Christ?" Behind all scripture is not simply the question, "Will you agree?" but rather the more political, "Will you join up?"

John Wesley made a central text in his life Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, that we should "be perfect as God in heaven is perfect." Wesley was stunned by these words, wondering to what sort of church these words might be addressed. It would not be the church as he knew it, a church all too imperfect with worldly accommodation. It must be a church that knew how to organize its life together in such a way as to hear and to live such demanding words. It must be a church that knew how to forgive, because a church attempting to be perfect would have much sin to absolve.

Wesley, borrowing from German Pietists, created a movement based upon small groups, face-to-face accountability groups where ordinary Eighteenth Century English people met together, challenged one another, prayed for and forgave one another. Thus was created the Wesleyan revival in England.

Note that Wesley did not consider his role as a biblical interpreter that of modifying the text in order to suit the limitations of the church. Rather, he attempted to change the church to suit the demands of the text. He hoped to produce a church worthy to read and interpret scripture rather than to explain scripture in such a way that it might be easily accessible to and easily dismissed by a compromised and adulterated church. When the authority of the Bible is challenged with, "Is the Bible true?" we are not to trot out our little arguments but rather our little lives. The truthfulness of scripture is in the lives it is able to produce.

Today that's you. You, that is the life you will live on Monday, you are the test for our scripture reading and preaching on Sunday. You. Thanks be to God. Amen.