

Bible Study

2 Timothy 3:10-17

Discipleship Essentials - Growing Up in Christ

Rev. Douglas A. Learned

Sunday, January 28, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

My wife Cindy and I were sitting in the family room a few days ago, and I was reading the newspaper. She commented to me, "You must be preaching soon." "Yes I am," I replied, "But how did you know? Did you look on the church calendar?" "No," she said, "I didn't look at the calendar. I know because you got your hair cut. I've noticed, whenever you preach at National, you get your hair cut!"

"Really," I asked.

"Really," she replied.

After nearly 15 years of marriage, and she can read me like a book. Thanks, be to God she remains to me a beautiful and marvelous mystery to me! So all that's to say, I think I'm ready to preach this sermon. Are you ready to hear it?

Let us pray:

Loving God, when we open the books of the Bible, we are amazed at the riches we find. There is much we comprehend at first reading, first hearing; yet there is much that remains a mystery. We pray that your Spirit might help us comprehend the healing, comforting, strengthening message of your Living Word to us in Jesus Christ, revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I mentioned to you at the start, my wife Cindy, in part because whenever I think of Holy Scripture I think of her upbringing as a child. Like many people, when I was young, most of what I knew of the stories and people of the Bible I picked up in Sunday school. But it wasn't until my college years that I really started to sort out in my own mind. Questions like, who came first Abraham or Moses? Why was Paul called an apostle when he wasn't one of the original twelve apostles? Why is Rahab, a prostitute, listed in Jesus' ancestry? Why don't the books of the Bible go in nice, chronological order. Did you ever wonder that?

But when Cindy and I started dating during our college years, I realized she just kind of knew this stuff without much effort. It was part of who she was. And the first time I went to have dinner with her family, I discovered why. At the end of the meal they followed a ritual. Her dad pulled out the Bible, read a chapter out loud from the book they were going through. There were a few minutes of discussion—perhaps some clarifying questions, reflections from the kids and mom, a prayer—and then dessert and coffee.

It wasn't a particularly intense experience. Just a family ritual. But it was a ritual that resulted in Cindy and her siblings just knowing the Bible. Spiritual osmosis. They picked it up without even realizing it. To this day, even though I'm a pastor and preacher, have taught Bible studies, and preached a lot of sermons, I just feel like Cindy has Scripture in her bones in a way that I've had to work pretty hard to attain as an adult.

God has a perfect plan for every one of us. And if you're like me, someone who is still working to get the basics down, take comfort. Take comfort. That's what this place is all about.

We're here together to open the Word of God because we find life and life everlasting in its pages. This isn't a competition. This is a family of folks who want to know Jesus. And we've learned enough in life, to know we can know Jesus if we open the pages of the Bible together. And, my friends, it's that together part that's really important. Amen?

Last week in worship, John Wagner referred us to the web site, www.juniorrocks.com. For those of you

who may be wondering, Junior is the nickname of one of our pastors here at NPC, Eunice McGarrahan. Well, after church last Sunday I went home and tried that web site out! Turns out there's a young rock band in Texas called Junior, and their web site is juniorrocks.com. They even have Subway Sandwich Shops as their sponsor.

I mention Junior here not only because John was right, she does rock, but because she, along with other staff members and ministry leaders from our congregation, have been working to establish a new small group ministry here at National Presbyterian Church, and it's off to a great start.

Groups of three or four, called triads and quads, are beginning to form, using Greg Ogden's book, *Discipleship Essentials*, as a guide. Many of our existing small groups are also using other materials to delve deeper into God's Word. Some groups are small and some are large; some of these groups are brand new, and some have been meeting in our church for decades. There's a lot of Bible study going on here. It's exciting.

The whole focus of this initiative, which fits so beautifully with our Strategic Plan, is that in order to live as disciples of Jesus, we need to know who Jesus is. And the way we get to know Jesus, is by studying the Scriptures that tell us his story and convey to us his teachings. And we want to invite those who don't know Jesus into these groups.

You may know that the church in America is at an interesting crossroads. As many of you know, we can no longer make the assumption that most people in our society have a familiarity with the Jesus story, or know the basics of the Christian faith.

Not long ago I spoke with the parents of two young people in their twenties. When their children were young, they decided they would let them "decide for themselves," which religion to embrace, since they were "all essentially the same." But now that their children are young adults, these parents have discovered their children have chosen no faith at all. And now they're wondering why their children don't share their values. They've noticed, with regret, when they attend a church wedding or funeral, their children don't know the words of the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed.

There's a lot of picking and choosing from the spiritual marketplace going on today. And a lot of people using their choice, to choose nothing.

There are a lot of people in the world today who may know something of Jesus, but don't know Jesus, the person. They have some head knowledge of an historical figure, but they don't know his living character, his personality. Or if they have done some study of Scripture, they've done it on their own, in isolation. They haven't come to know Jesus in the company of Jesus' friends.

Maybe you've tried to get to know Jesus on your own, and it hasn't worked. You're still searching. If that's the case, let me share this. If it hadn't been for Jesus' friends, the church, helping me along in Bible study over the years, I might still be searching as well. I've needed Jesus' friends, to help me along the way. I've needed their prayers, their insights, and their encouragement to follow him.

Truth is the Bible isn't easy reading for a novice. We need to help each other, when we're getting to know God's son. It's this community of faith that keeps Jesus in the center of my life. He stands in the circles of our friendships. He's present in our commitments toward each other.

There are a lot of facts in the Bible, a lot of information to take in from Scripture. But all that information is not there for information's sake. It's there to draw us to a personal relationship with God.

You've heard people say, "You've got to believe in the Bible!" That doesn't mean believing in one translation over another or believing in a certain binding of paper and ink. Those are the things of man. Not the Living Word! It means believing that these writings are our most reliable source for the purpose of drawing us into a relationship with God's Son. We can trust the Bible to do that, to bring us into the presence of our Living Lord by the power of Holy Spirit—the Spirit who is present in the community of faith.

I think that's what Paul's getting at when he writes to Timothy, that "all Scripture (and by extension Paul's own teachings concerning Jesus) are able to instruct [us] for salvation...All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..."

To experience those blessings, we've got to spend time in the Word. And not only time, but time together as a community of Jesus' friends. That's how the Bible goes from being merely information, ink on a page, stories from the past to Holy Scripture. Over the course of a lifetime, the Word of God becomes an intimate friend, a friend who never fails to draw us closer into God's presence.

I've shared with some of you already stories about my grandfather who loved poetry. (This is my grandfather on my mother's side; I mentioned my grandfather from my father's side the last time I got my hair cut.) I used to love my grandfather's visits to our home when I was growing up because, after dinner he used to sit me down by the fireplace and for an hour or two, and recite poetry to me that he had memorized as a young boy.

When he was a boy his father gave him a nickel for short memorizations and a quarter for long ones. The long ones were those long English poems. Intermixed between the poems, he would recite from the Psalms or verses from his favorite hymns. I thank God for those moments.

I remember visiting him in the nursing home just a short time before he died, soon after I was ordained into the ministry. I don't know if you've ever had that experience of seeing someone in the frailty that comes at the end of life, whom you, in your childhood, always thought of as vital and invincible. But the man in that bed, who had recently lost one of his legs to diabetes, didn't look invincible. He looked vulnerable; I didn't like seeing him that way. Before he noticed me, I noticed him staring into the top corner of the room. Finally, he caught me in his sight, and we began to talk.

And in the course of our conversation I asked him, "Grandpa, what do you do to pass the time in this bed?" At first I was shocked at myself, asking the question, because it seemed insensitive. But he didn't pause at all before he answered.

"Remember, Douglas," he said. "I still have my friends." And what he meant by his friends were those poems, hymns, and psalms that he'd carried in his mind all his life. "Whenever I get lonely, I recite them, and my friends have never let me down."

What did Paul write to the Philippians, now found in the pages of Holy Scripture? "...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

I've never forgotten that last conversation with my Grandfather, because it speaks to me of how the Word of God can dwell in our hearts and minds, and shape our lives in a deeply personal way. The Holy Word of God is a personal word to you and me. Not a textbook. Not a book of proofs to argue a point, but rather an invitation to the very best friendship you will ever have. A friendship that will give you life and life everlasting.

Let us pray.

Draw us close, dear Lord. Draw us close to your Living Word. Draw us close to the love that will not let us go. We ask it in Jesus' Name. Amen.