

## The Truth about Scripture

2 Timothy 3:16-17

October 23, 2022

Right about this time last year, a small group of Second's pastors and staff gathered in my office. I had invited them to come and discuss an idea that had been living in my mind for some time and whose time I believed had come. As individuals and as a congregation, we had been consumed by various cascading crises of the last two years, and my sense was that we needed to get back to basics, to ask questions like: What draws us together? What is the source and the purpose of our faith? Where do we begin...or begin again?

My idea was to offer four Saturday evening sessions exploring scripture—not exactly a plan for world peace or Church harmony. And yet I was, and I remain, convinced that we in the Church of Jesus Christ must deepen our engagement of and our commitment to these holy texts if we want to experience renewal and offer a compelling witness in a weary world. I was, and I remain, deeply concerned that the Church of Jesus Christ has exchanged the gift of this liberating, life-giving Word of God for polarized proof-texting meant only to undergird our preformed perspective. And so, on four Saturday evenings in February of this year, we gathered to learn, to share, to grow in faith. It was—I pray—a beginning.

This morning, we close a series exploring the topic of truth. We surround ourselves with the sacred gift of music. And we return to the meaning of scripture.

Let's start with this: The Holy Bible, made up for us of sixty-six distinct works written in different contexts across many centuries by many authors, is a diverse anthology. It is a collection of writings. Of poetry and song. Of history and proclamation. Of

narrative and correspondence. And for those of us within the fold of faith, it also contains Truth with a capital T. The Bible is the Word of God. It tells the story of God's unending love for the world, God's will for redemption and renewal for all of creation. The Bible bears witness to a God whose grace is inexhaustible, whose mercy extends around the globe, who walks with each of us and calls us to live lives that reflect the divine image we bear.

As I told the children this morning, it was a love for scripture that first captivated me as a child. Felt boards in Sunday school classrooms telling these captivating stories of God and God's people. It was a love for scripture that ultimately crystalized my call to ministry in the Church. And, because I love the Bible, because I believe and know the sustaining and renewing power of these words, I am concerned about the place of the Bible in the Church today. I am concerned when this living testimony to a living God is recast as a rigid test of ideological conformity to serve self-interest. I am concerned when Christian believers reduce the sacred story to ancient history or fantastic fables with pietistic morals. For each of these approaches, in its own way, restricts the sacred word. We Presbyterians insist that human beings will never grasp the immensity of God. We will never fully realize the vision of God's kingdom. We assert that despite the prideful pontification of many preachers, we must never claim to have God all figured out, for God is on the move, reforming and remaking us in God's own image. We must read the Bible with humility, with a prayerful openness.

That's why I love the image of scripture proposed by the great theologian Karl Barth, who wrote that the Bible is "a strange new world"<sup>i</sup> in which we are

called to make a home. Each text, Barth said, is a call not to understand but to be converted. Too often, I think, we turn to scripture to reinforce rather than reform our perspective. We want confirmation not conversion. Indeed, the best way to tell the difference between a living, sovereign God and an idol of your own making is that the idol will never challenge you, will always share your prejudice, hate your enemies, will never ask *you* to change. The world of the Bible is strange because it does not always support the world we have constructed. The world of the Bible is new because it is God's new creation, not our fabrication. The world of the Bible challenges our assumptions. It unsettles the false stability of our lives.

We all know that a single verse of scripture, taken out of context and wielded as a weapon, can support nearly any argument imaginable. There is a long, shameful history of this in the Church, which has wounded our witness, cut our credibility down. But if you seek within scripture a word of hope not despair, a word of grace and not wrath; if you yearn to bear witness to a faith rooted in the promise of God's love redeeming the world; if you want to proclaim with your full voice and heart that Christian faith is not the sole property of its most divisive and loudest voices; if you want to recover the power of the Bible to form and reform Christian community—then I have good news for you today. There is another way.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.”

Yes, turn your eyes to Jesus, the very Word of God who took on the flesh of humanity. Jesus gives us the clearest picture of who God is and what God asks of us. And fortunately, we do not need to speculate or wonder about how Jesus read scripture. We do not have to guess which texts he turned to most often. The very first time Jesus stands in his hometown synagogue to deliver a sermon, he turns to the words of the prophet Isaiah, and he reads what is written there: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the

poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” And so, his ministry begins, rooted in the promise of the prophet. Later on, when Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment, he turns again to the words of his scripture. First, Deuteronomy: Love God with all you've got: heart, mind, soul, and strength. And then, the words of Leviticus: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is nothing more important than this. Love God. Love what God loves.

Seems simple enough. Certainly uncharacteristically succinct. Words sound good. But it's not enough. Jesus does not command passive, disinterested, half-hearted, abstract love. We are instructed to love *wholeheartedly*, to invest all of ourselves in this work, this difficult, soul-searching, life-changing walk of faith.

And when you do, here is what will happen. You will examine your intentions. You will reconsider your actions. You will reorder your priorities. You will question your commitments. You will ask yourself, “I wonder if God sees it this way? I wonder if my love has been deep and broad enough?” These are among the questions that scripture asks of us. They are also the questions others are asking of the church. Does reading scripture make them more loving? Do they practice in the world what they preach in the church? Friends, you can quote scripture, chapter and verse, until the kingdom comes, but somewhere I read, “By their fruits, you will know them.” The truth about scripture is that we will discover its power when we immerse ourselves in these words, allow ourselves to be challenged and changed by them, commit our lives to reflect them. The truth about scripture comes not in confirmation of our beliefs but in conversion of our lives.

Last Sunday, I had the privilege of preaching at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, a community of courageous witness celebrating 115 years of ministry and our sister congregation just five miles down the road. The service last Sunday, Pastor Appreciation

Day, was filled with the joy of the Spirit and testimony from members including two children of the church, nine and eleven years old, and more than a few shouts of hallelujah and amen. (By the way, those are welcome here too!)

At bedtime on Sunday evening, I was reading with our son Samuel when he closed the book and said, “Dad, I really liked worship today. I was thinking maybe when I am ten years old, I could preach a sermon like those kids.” I asked Sam what he thought his sermon would be about. He gave it ten seconds of thought and replied, “Well, I’m learning about the Bible, so I could start with that. Then I think I would tell people that it’s important for us to love each other. Like, no matter what is different about us, God wants us to love everybody. I think I would end by saying, ‘That’s what life is all about.’ Right Dad?”

And I said, “Amen.”

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Word of God and the Word of Man*, Peter Smith Publisher, 1958, p. 28ff.