

“SCHOOL DAYS! SCHOOL DAYS!
III – BOOKS
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Christian Education Sunday

Psalm 119:33-49

Luke 2:41-47

Every fall, in the Bunnell household (which most of you know included six children) we needed to have a good supply of brown paper grocery bags on hand. Of course, with a family of eight, having that many empty grocery bags was not a problem. But you know why we had to have them? If you're anywhere near or over my age, I'm sure you do.

We used them to cover our school books. Right? I can still remember how we did it. You took the scissors and cut down a few of the seams, so that all you had left was a single flat surface. You turned it over and you were working with a blank side – after all you didn't want the words A & P or Acme showing! And then you simply folded it. A flap down from the top, a flap up from the bottom. Then you laid your book in the middle, wrapped it around the book, tucked the ends in over the edges of the cover – and voila – you were done. School books protected from wear and tear, and a blank slate for you (or your friends) to write on!

Do kids still cover their books anymore? Dare I ask if they use brown grocery bags? (I know. I know. I'm old!)

Anyway, we covered those books because we valued them. We wanted them to last. We wanted students for years and years to have them.

Books, to me, are precious gifts from God. Books can take you places – to learning things you never knew before, to places you've never visited, into the lives of people who have done ordinary and extraordinary things, to learning more about yourself and about life. And there is no book more precious than the one we're giving today to some of our youngest members – the Holy Bible.

The Bible, the Word of God, the words of God. In II Timothy it is described like this: “Every part of scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.” (II Timothy 3:16, *The Message*)

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, described himself as “a man of one book,” so primary to him was the Holy Bible. Above all else, when faced with a decision in his life, he turned to scripture first and foremost, before turning anywhere else. He started an emphasis in Methodism, which exists to this day, an emphasis on the Word, reading the Word, hearing the Word preached, studying the Word in classes and groups, and most importantly, individual reading and pondering the scriptures.

If you’ve been in or around a United Methodist Church, or probably any church for that matter for any length of time, surely you were given or have a Bible of your own. But the sad fact is that too few people actually read it, and know its power.

Jay Leno once did one of his “man on the streets” interviews where he walked up to some college students and asked them some questions about the Bible. It went something like this:

“Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?” “Freedom of speech?”

Leno asked the next student to try to complete this sentence: “Let one who is without sin . . .” The kid replied, “Have a good time?”

Well, standing nearby watching all of this was another college student rolling his eyes and laughing at the answers being given by his friends, so Leno turned to him. “Who,” he asked, “was swallowed by a whale?” The young man smiled with confidence and said, “Oh, I know that one . . . Pinnochio!” (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 75)

While that’s amusing, it’s actually sad, but a pretty accurate picture of Biblical literacy or, probably better said, Biblical illiteracy these days.

I read about another college student this week whose parents sent him off to college at Duke University with a brand new Bible. While they were under no illusions that he would become a Biblical scholar, they wanted him to have it for strength and direction, for calm during times of stress, and direction in times of uncertainty.

A little while after the school year started, they got a letter from him saying he was struggling a little and needed some money. They wrote back, telling him to read his Bible for guidance, and cited what chapter and verse to read to find it. He wrote back and said that he was reading his Bible, but he still needed money. This went on pretty regularly throughout the semester – every time he wrote, they would write back with scripture upon which he should lean. Finally, he came home at Thanksgiving for the break, and when he asked his parents why they hadn’t helped him out, they said that they knew he hadn’t been reading the Bible, because in the

pages upon which each of those cited passages were written, they had tucked \$10 and \$20 bills! (John Spach, *Reader's Digest*)

Oh, what that young man missed by not reading his Bible, not just the money, but words of life that could help him. And oh, what we miss when we don't read the Bible. We miss the stories of our faith, words of guidance and direction, comfort and support, words that help us know the answers to our deepest longings and fervent needs.

Jesus, himself, immersed himself in scripture. From the time he was a young boy, he was found in the temple, learning from the word, learning from dialogue with others. We heard that in today's Gospel lesson.

He memorized scripture, he took it into his heart and soul for guidance in his life and to call upon in times of need. Remember when he had that famous battle with the devil in the wilderness of temptation? Every time the devil came at him with a challenge, Jesus answered with scripture, quoting word for word from the Hebrew scriptures.

Friends, you and I have been given a great gift from our Lord, a life-giving gift in this holy book. On this Christian Education Sunday, let me challenge you to go deeper in reading it, by talking about what it will do for you.

For one, you will learn the great stories of our faith. Stories like the perfection of God's creation, and then the fall through Adam and Eve; stories of Abraham and Sarah; Noah, King David, Queen Esther, Ruth and Jeremiah – certainly the story of Jesus (the most important story of all in the Bible), but then the disciples, and women like Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha; and on and on. You'll read Jesus' parables and remember how you're like the lost sheep, or the Prodigal Son, and be reminded that God is always looking for you, ready to envelop you with open, forgiving arms. The Bible stories are more than just stories, they help us remember who we are and whose we are.

Secondly, reading the Bible can literally transform your life. John Wesley knew that scripture was a means of grace – in other words, that people can actually come to faith in Christ through the words of scripture. The great theologian Karl Barth once said that "The Bible becomes the word of God for us, not when we get hold of it, but when it gets hold of us!" And it will, if we will but open its pages and read it.

To this day, it never ceases to amaze me the insights I get from reading scripture, and how, I could read today a scripture I've read a hundred times before, and today it speaks to me in a totally new way that I've never considered – usually in a way that speaks to what I'm going through in that moment. The Bible's words have power to touch our lives, help us through each day, and most of all, change our hearts toward God and God alone.

I mean, what woman can read the story of Mary and Martha without identifying with the sister who's working herself silly in the kitchen and resenting her sister who's in the living room doing nothing but listening to Jesus – and yet, how desperately those same women need to hear Jesus inviting them to rest a while as well.

Or, who could read King David's lament over his sins, his confession before God, and not think of the hundreds of times, we ourselves have sinned and fallen short.

Or what parent could not read about Jairus pleading with Jesus to heal his daughter, and be touched, knowing that watching your children suffer is unbearable?

In all of those stories and more, the Biblical truth of God's steadfast, guiding and forgiving love comes shining through, with the power to transform our lives, if we'll let it.

A third reason to embrace scripture is for its power to carry us through life's struggles. You heard what I said about Jesus' struggle in the wilderness of temptation. Immediately he called upon those scriptures for strength. Well, I know there are many people in this room who know about that, because you remember when struggles came, so too, immediately came the words: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ."

Having scriptures at the ready is like having your own personal arsenal against the struggles and sadness of life. Words to lean on, words to trust, words to carry you through to the other side.

Finally, when you spend time reading the Bible, you are allowing God to speak to you. And I guarantee you, from personal experience of years of reading scripture, that God will always speak in some way.

You know what? In all those studies they did where they discovered how few people were reading the Bible on their own, they found something very interesting. One of the reasons people didn't do it was embarrassment. They were embarrassed because they didn't know the Bible. They were embarrassed that they hadn't taken part in a study. They were just plain embarrassed and didn't really know where to start.

I have come to know that is true. I actually taught one of the very first years of the Disciple Bible study and when I asked the group to turn to the Gospels, one woman – a life-long, very dedicated church member – asked what the Gospels were.

But it's okay. If that's you, if you're one who hasn't been reading the Bible like you could, don't let embarrassment keep you from starting over again. Go home, find your Bible, and just start.

But don't just start with Genesis 1 and try to motor through it page by page that way. I guarantee you books like Leviticus and Numbers might stop you in your tracks. Take it easy. Maybe start with one of the Gospels. Try a chapter a day. Something really interesting to do is read the same passage in different translations – you can do that easily on Google.

Something else that is really helpful is to read scripture out loud. You hear things differently that way. At that preaching seminar I attended recently that I told you about last week, the leader had volunteers read the first lines of the 23rd Psalm out loud, but from different circumstances. You couldn't believe how different those words sounded, from a person whose spouse had died, to a pastor whose church had just been giving a \$20 million dollar gift!

All of that is to say that scriptures sound and read differently aloud and sound and read differently depending on what you're going through in your life.

Of course, I would always encourage you to study scripture with others in a Sunday School class or Bible study. The dialogue and discourse just helps them open up and become more real.

Most of all, I implore you, when you read the scriptures to always ask two questions: "What did this passage mean when it was written?" and then, "What does it mean for my life?" Actually, the best way to ponder that question that I ever came across was in the original Disciple series, and it was this: to ask yourself after reading scripture, "If I took this scripture seriously, what changes would I have to make in my life?"

I want to close today with words of United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase who said this: "The fruit of reading the Bible is not merely to know more about God, but to know God." He continues: "With the continual practice of spiritual exploration, we experience an increasing benefit, a greater openness to grace, a more refined shaping of ourselves by God. Knowing God, with time, mysteriously causes us to become a different kind of person, with more depth, peace, and courage. We become more hopeful, more thankful, less reactive, gentler, more patient, more resilient, less angry, better able to relate. Knowing God (he finishes) changes us from the inside out." (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, p. 75.)

Friends, you have been given a precious gift from God – his holy Word. I pray that, every day, you will reopen that gift and receive the precious life He and it offers. May it be so. Amen.

