

“How Did Jesus Read the Bible?”

August 20, 2023

Matthew 5:17-18, 38-48

Westminster, Greenville

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Ben Dorr

Back when I first started out in ministry, I taught a confirmation class. It was part of a two-year class, in which I taught 7th graders, and the senior pastor taught the 8th graders.

Now I had no experience teaching 7th graders, and the curriculum was up to me. So...I decided that one of the requirements for every 7th grader in my class would be to memorize all 66 books of the Bible.

Well, they did it.

They groaned, they complained.

But every year, every single confirmand did it.

When my wife and I moved to Indiana, I asked the pastor at my former church in Texas if he would preach at my installation at my new church in Bloomington.

He chose two scripture passages for the installation service.

The first was from the Old Testament, and the second was from 1st Corinthians 13, Paul’s famous chapter on love.

But there was a typo that I did not catch in the bulletin.

The scripture passages he chose were correct.

But **Old Testament Lesson** was the label that appeared in front of both passages.

So my colleague and mentor got up in the pulpit that Sunday afternoon. And he told the congregation in Indiana how I always made the 7th graders back in Texas memorize the books of the Bible.

And then he looked at the bulletin.

And he looked at me.
And he said, in front of a full sanctuary:
“Ben, 1st Corinthians is in the New Testament!”

And it was funny, and everyone laughed.

I got to wondering this week, how many of you think you could do as well as those 7th graders, and recite the books of the Bible right now, from memory, if I called on you?

Or better yet, how many of you are secretly wondering if your preacher can still recite them from memory?

I’ll make a deal with you: I won’t test you if you won’t test me...

As I mentioned a moment ago, our first topic in the sermon series this fall is the Bible.

What do Presbyterians believe about the Bible?

We certainly believe it has authority...but my hunch is that we also have a wide range of views in this room about what KIND of authority it holds.

So, let’s establish some parameters right off the bat.

Presbyterians are not biblical literalists.

We do not believe that all scripture is inerrant and infallible.

Because sinful humans wrote it, we do NOT believe every verse of the Bible holds equal authority.

We do believe, however, that it is, by God’s grace, a divinely inspired text. That God is at work when we read these holy words.

That it holds more weight than a poem by Mary Oliver or a sonnet by Shakespeare.

All of which means that scripture is a very high authority for us, but it's not the highest authority.

The highest authority is the living Christ.

The resurrected Christ.

The Christ that is at work and on the move in this world.

We believe Scripture is inspired because Christ guides and leads us and grants us wisdom through the Holy Spirit when we read from this sacred book.

I actually believe that one of the GIFTS of our denomination is that we Presbyterians can approach the same question and come up with different, but faithful biblical answers.

That said, I think we still can find some common ground when it comes to how we read scripture. And one way to get at this question is to take a closer look at how Jesus read the Bible.

Do you remember what constituted the Bible for Jesus?

Not the New Testament—that wasn't written yet!

It was the Hebrew scriptures.

The God that Jesus knew comes from his reading of what we call the Old Testament.

Perhaps you recall the time that Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest?

He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...And... ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Do you know where he got that answer?

Love the Lord your God—that came from Deuteronomy, chapter 6.

And “love your neighbor as yourself”?
That comes from Leviticus 19:18.

In other words, Presbyterians believe that COMPETENCY in the Bible is important, because Jesus believed it was important!

But Jesus didn’t just know his sacred texts.
He looked for the larger themes, the greater message, the broader vision.

And our Gospel text for today is a perfect example.

Jesus says:
“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

“But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer...
Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

What’s fascinating to me about that passage is that when “an eye for an eye” was written in Deuteronomy, it was never intended to be vengeful. It was there to keep people from going too far with whatever punishment or justice took place.

In other words, if someone knocks out your tooth, don’t take their eye in return!

And yet according to Jesus, that's too small a lens with which to read those words.

Jesus was trying to show us something about the love of GOD with these words.

You see, we tend to read scripture and ask what this or that story has to do with us.

How can I ever love my enemies?
That's not the wrong question.
But Jesus asked a different question.

When Jesus read scripture, his first question was what does it say about God.

Do you remember the rationale that Jesus gives for loving your enemies in today's text?

“...so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

In other words, the command to love our enemies is about imitating the love of God.

For Jesus, the Bible is first and foremost a story about God.

So where does that take us, when we Presbyterians read the Good Book?

Is there common ground, when it comes to Scripture, that we can find with one another and with Jesus?

Sure there is.

This past week, I asked the Thursday Morning Bible study what the Bible meant to them—how God acts through the Bible to reach and speak to them.

That group came up with 9 answers.

Nine words, if you will, that describe God’s activity through scripture!

And one of the attendees at the Bible study came up to me afterward and told me that I should tell you I have 9 points that I need to make in my sermon today!

I don’t have 9 points.

I do have three.

Three words that give us common ground because they describe how Jesus approached the Bible.

Word number one: CALL.

Read the Bible as a story about call...

We believe the Bible is about a God who chooses people, who calls unlikely people.

The late Southern Baptist preacher Will Campbell once told the story of his friend and fellow preacher, Thad Garner.

“Thad Garner was...the most profane man I have ever met.

And...the most profound.”

Campbell describes an occasion when the two went on an unproductive bird hunt. At the end of the day, they had caught nothing, but they happened to notice one last covey of quail in a bush.

The dogs flushed them out, Thad got off three shots—and all three missed.

“Though I had not led what one would call a sheltered existence,” said Campbell, “I was not familiar with some of Thad’s words.”

“For a full sixty seconds the big Louisiana field was filled with expletives. At the dogs, at the birds, at me, at the gun, at the manufacturer of the shells, at the Almighty...It was an occasion for a question I had wanted to ask him for some time.

“Thad, why did you ever decide to be a Baptist preacher?”
 “Cause I was called, you fool!”¹

And so are you.
 Not a fool.
 You’re called.

Called not just to go one mile, but to go the second mile.
 Called not to forgive just 7 times, but 70 times 7.

Jesus read the Bible as a story of God calling Abraham and Isaac and Jacob...and then he called the unlikeliest of people to follow him.

Second word: COVENANT.

¹ Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, New York: Continuum, 1994.

Do you know what a covenant is?
It's a promise.

When Jesus read the Bible, he understood God as a God who makes covenants:

the covenant with Abraham...
the covenant with Moses...
the covenant with David...

When Jesus eats with his disciples on the last night of his life, what does he say to them?

“...this is...the new covenant...”

A while back, Craig Barnes wrote an article for *The Christian Century*.

Barnes described how, when he was growing up, his father—who was a preacher—believed it was important to memorize verses of the Bible.

“On Mondays he’d give my older brother and me a verse written out on a little white card. We were expected to recite it from memory by dinner at the end of the week when our father would point to one of us and say something like, ‘Romans 8.28’.”

“If we didn’t start chirping away with ‘For all things work together for good for those who love God,’ we’d have to leave the table.”

Barnes says that by the time he was a teenager, he had “memorized a lot of the Bible, not out of love for the sacred text but because I didn’t want to be dismissed from Saturday evening dinner.”

Barnes then goes on to tell about how, when he was 17, his parents' marriage fell apart.

His father's response was to disappear.

His mother's response was to move to Dallas to live with her sister.

But she didn't move *with* her two sons. She left **without** them.

All of which meant that Craig Barnes and his older brother, at a far too early age, were left to fend for themselves.

The following Christmas, Barnes and his brother decided to go visit their mother. But they had no money, and so they tried to hitchhike from Long Island to Dallas.

“By the end of the first day we were somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It was snowing hard, the sun was long gone, and we stood on the entrance ramp with our thumbs sticking out,” Barnes writes.

“As the snow got heavier, there were fewer and fewer cars. After two hours, we finally saw a pair of headlights pull over in front of us. It was a Virginia state trooper.

“We were expecting a lecture about how dangerous...it was to hitchhike. Instead, he told us that the highway had been closed for two hours and that after attending to an accident up the road he would come back for us...”

As they were waiting for the trooper to return, Barnes and his brother tried to figure out how to pass the time. After a couple of false starts, Barnes' brother finally pointed to him and said, “Romans 8.28.”

“We spent much of that night asking each other to recite the verses of the Bible we had memorized but never truly heard,” Barnes recalls.

At one point I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

“By the time I finished reciting those words, I was crying.”²

What did Barnes discover at that moment?

God’s covenant.

God’s promise to claim him, to walk with him, to never let him go.

Not just words on a page that he had to memorize, but the Living Word, at work in his life...

Craig Barnes, as many of you know, recently retired as the President of Princeton Seminary, and I’m delighted that he will be our Heritage Lecture speaker next January.

I got to thinking...when he was just a teenager, standing with his brother on a closed interstate in the middle of a snowstorm, do you think Craig Barnes could picture what would happen to him?

Do you think he could see the new person, the new creation that God would call him to become and be?

Of course not.

But God could see it.

Which is the third way we Presbyterians read scripture:

² “The night I learned to take chances,” by M. Craig Barnes, *The Christian Century*, April 26, 2017.

Not only as God's call.
Not only as God's covenant.
But also as an account of God's new creation.

From Genesis to the Gospels to Revelation, the Bible is a story of God creating and recreating in the lives of God's children.

I was reminded of that a little over 5 years ago.

Shortly before we moved to Greenville, I attended the funeral of one of the confirmands that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon.

I sat in the pew that afternoon thinking, this is not fair.
This is not right.
He was only 30 years old.

But as I sat there, I saw how that young man's family was surrounded by his church family, people who were called to be there for his family at that moment.

And I heard the preacher talk about God's covenant. How, in the love of Christ, God had never let that young man travel farther than the love of God could go.

He was God's new creation in the living and loving arms of God.

Call.
Covenant.
New creation...telling us that God's love always gets the final word.

God's love always gets the final word.

If you're going to commit anything to memory, I hope it will be those seven words...

Amen.