

“...*all scripture is useful.*”

Lessons: Jeremiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

In the next few weeks, we are going to look at the ways we at Northwood work at our mission, and how we are managing the job. October is “stewardship month” on the Presbyterian calendar. But let’s be really honest: “stewardship” means management – and yes, it’s about money, but it’s about a lot more than money! Personally, it’s about how I manage my life to my commitments, and for a church, it’s about how we manage our ministry to our mission.

A long-time Presbyterian minister and friend of mine saying, “We Presbyterians spend more time writing mission statements than we do remembering them.” Well, Northwood did some really good work writing a mission statement, and I thought we would take some Sundays asking how we are doing at remembering it – and living the mission we have stated.

What’s the Mission Statement? It’s right there on the church’s web page! What’s a web page? It’s a primary place these days for showing how we live the mission.

Northwood Presbyterian Church strives to be a community of believers who ...
love and worship Jesus Christ as Lord,
proclaim and follow Christ’s teachings,
minister in Christ’s name to the minds, bodies and souls of all God’s children,
care for God’s world,
understand that we are called to serve rather than be served.

“...love and worship Jesus Christ.” That’s the main thing. All the other things tell us what we need to do, and love and worship Jesus Christ tells us how we need to do those things.

So this week, let’s talk for a few minutes about how we show our love for Jesus Christ by the way we “proclaim and follow Jesus’ teachings.”

There is an assumption behind the proclaiming and the following. Simply put, we cannot talk about or live out Jesus teachings if we don’t know them. So, the basic understanding of our loving and worshiping Jesus Christ as Lord and proclaiming and following his teachings is that we pay attention to that Bible that we have in the pew rack or at home on the shelf.

There is a great irony in Presbyterian tradition – or maybe it is a contradiction. We are the tradition that has always believed that ignorance is not a good thing, that knowledge leads to good things. From our beginnings, we have required our pastors to be seminary educated. And unless the learned divines really disagreed with what we have already thought, we have trusted that they know more about God and the faith and the Christian life than we do.

Irony #1: We demand an educated leader so long as the road we go down looks familiar and comfortable, and *we don’t have to do much learning ourselves along the way*. The great irony of the Presbyterian Church in America is the lack of knowledge about scripture by most people in the pew. I’m not passing judgment here, just making an observation. And I am wondering why

we know so little about the Bible when we have given such importance to knowledge and expertise and learning in most everything.

Let me guess at some reasons...

First and obviously, whatever we think about the Bible, ...it's just a little intimidating. I mean, pastors go to seminary for three years like doctors and lawyers – and sometimes they don't seem to know all that much about the Bible with all the other stuff they have to learn in order to do the job. Since we pride ourselves on what we know, we are little intimidated and more than a little embarrassed that we know so little about the Bible. So in defense, we have developed a tradition of leaving to the experts.

The problem is that the mission of the church is not something that the trained professionals do. The experts are shepherds who teach the sheep how to do their job. Paul tells Timothy to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” Pastors like me are trainers. I'm supposed to help you become better at your job, *your* mission – “proclaiming and following Jesus' teachings.”

Second and just as obviously, whenever we open up the Bible and try to read it, we get lost pretty quickly and are clueless about what is going on. We just can't see the big picture.

Maybe I can help here. Before we ever open the Bible, we have some misguided expectations. We think the Bible is a “book” – a history book or a devotional guide or a self-help manual, because at some time or another we have found those things somewhere in there. We just have a hard time finding them.

Here's a different picture of the parts of the “book” that may help. It's not a “book” at all. It's a library. There is history and biography, poetry and songs, social commentary and spiritual sermons – and even fiction, like a short story about a man and a fish. It's a collection of “sacred writings” as Paul says to Timothy – very different kinds of writing that got edited over the years, and were found to be useful to the gathered community of believers in some way – so much so that people sensed God's leading and collected them as sacred, holy, inspired. God's breathing could be felt in the reading.

Let's see if I can give you some help before you dive in and give up again...

1. Find a translation that is easy to understand. Fourth grade readers are different from poetry by Shakespeare. Keep your old Shakespeare-like King James on the shelf and buy a translation you can understand. Today, I read from The Good News Bible and The Message, two very readable and very accurate translations.
2. Don't let yourself be intimidated by the whole thing. Pick one writing, and read it. Then pick another. Start with Matthew, not Genesis or Revelation.
3. Read an introduction to each writing before you jump in to some verses. You might even look up the book in Wikipedia.
4. Read in paragraphs and sections, not verse-by-verse, or chapter by chapter. Those italicized “breaks” help you see the big picture of what the writer is saying.

5. Get some simple help along the way. Matthew for Everyone just sounds like it is for anyone. It is. Commentaries for everyone help you get the message that is for you.
6. Remember: The Bible is a community experience, not a solo book. It is best learned in groups where sharing happens.

The other irony in Presbyterian life is how we go to the wrong place to learn the right things. Very few adults are involved in on-going communal learning. Only a minority of Presbyterians are involved in a Sunday School class or Bible Study.

We all have busy lives, but we come to church and we think our hour here is enough to teach us the Bible, teach us the basic beliefs of the faith and our tradition, teach us about how to live our lives, teach us about how to see the world as God's world. That's a lot to cover in an hour a week. No wonder we have a hard time cramming that agenda into one hour – with all the other stuff we seem to think we have to cram into it.

Let's be honest about the limits of worship. The major reasons for worship are its limits. The purposes of worship are right there in the bulletin: Praise, Confession, Proclamation, Response, Dedication and Sending. Yes, we receive instructions along the way, but worship is more for inspiration than for instruction. This space does not look much like a classroom, and what we do is not much like a class. Learning needs a class or a seminar or some independent study, and that takes time beyond worship. You need time for worship, and you need *additional* time for learning.

So, think about the places where you spend time regularly and by habit. Maybe it is reading the paper daily or checking Facebook or the Internet. Maybe you have a fitness routine, or you have those television shows you can't miss. How much more would you know about the Bible – and how much deeper would be your understanding of how you and God can manage your living – if you spent about 20 minutes 5 days a week reading three pages in Matthew for Everyone? How can you know what a difference it might make in your life and in this community's management of our mission together to proclaim and follow Christ's teachings? Well, it's that first step of trying to know the teachings better, and asking how we can follow that moves our own lives and our life together in Christ's direction.

That is the point of scripture – to use the sacred writings to help us all get better in the following and proclaiming. Study is a means to an end, and the end is applying Jesus example to our situation, following Jesus' way in all our ways. Like Paul says, "all scripture is useful...for correction and training in right living." And the parts that point to right living become the instructions in life-management. Like the mission statement says, "loving Jesus Christ means telling and following his teachings."

My father was an auto mechanic, refrigeration repairman, and a pretty ordinary churchgoer. He grew up Baptist, like the majority of people who came from frontier Texas who were not German Lutherans or Mexican Catholics – all good ways to be Christian. He went to church most every week (which meant Sunday morning for what was worship, and Sunday evenings and most Wednesday nights that were more classroom teaching than worship, and he was part of a

men's Bible class where they talked about the Bible. I don't remember seeing him early morning or late night reading the Bible – not once.

By the time I was in seminary, I was well on my way in the learning department. I came home Christmas, and he and I sat down at the round oak dining table to solve the world's problems late into the night. Talked turned to theology, and I was trying to explain to my father what this German named Jurgen Moltmann was saying about the resurrection. I had read Theology of Hope through three times, and the light had finally gone on. I was excited. My Dad was impressed, but not excited. Then he said something to me that I would write down as sacred writing if followers were still doing that, but I will just pass it on to you. "Son, it's not what I don't understand about the Bible that gives the most trouble. The problems I have are with the parts that are too easy to understand."

The Bible is for everyone and each one. And the parts we understand and still give us trouble are the inspirations of the present that move us to follow Christ in deeper ways. The more we grow our understanding of Jesus' teaching, the better able we are to follow him. It is by following and the telling that we manage to love and worship Christ. When we learn and live, follow and tell – personally and in community – the mission is more than a statement.