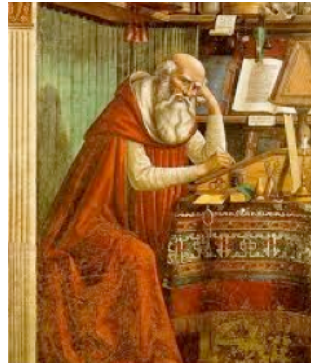




Sermon, September 27, 2020
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Junction City United Methodist Church

Sermon Series: The Way of Ways

“The Way of Scripture Study”



Scriptures:

Psalm 119: 1-16

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.
2 Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
3 who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.
4 You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
5 O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
6 Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your
commandments.
7 I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
8 I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.

9 How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
10 With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
11 I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
12 Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.
13 With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
14 I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
15 I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
16 I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 7:15-29

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good

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tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Study of Scripture

Jesus studied the scriptures of his time, and knew them deeply. On several occasions in the Bible he quotes them outright, or makes comments upon them. For instance, in the chapters in Matthew referred to as the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), Jesus quotes from the books of Deuteronomy, Exodus and Leviticus – three of the books of the Torah. At another point, he disputes with other religious leaders and scholars of his time, the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes, about their interpretations and application of various points of religious law, which was contained both in the written scriptures of his time as well as the oral interpretations of that law.

It is in the nature of Scripture that it bonds a group of people in a shared experience and understanding of God, and what it means to be the people of God, however that may be defined by that group. The Scriptures become that common touchstone that helps to mediate differences, which provides a common language for morality and disciplined living, and describes the means by which we may gain access to mystery. Jesus studied the Scriptures of his time because they were the spiritual teachings and proclamations of his people, and they gave witness to the One he called Abba, “Father.”

To follow Jesus Christ is to identify with him and his teaching and the life he demonstrated. The community of the followers of Jesus should be molded and formed by his life and his teachings. What the New Testament becomes, in this analysis, then, is a manual of spiritual formation. In addition, the New

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Testament is a manual of the Church’s identity. It contains the church’s story—where it came from, how and why it exists, where it is going, and where its place in the cosmos is. But pre-eminently it contains a “program” of spirituality that forms people according to the vision of human potentiality and community that Jesus described and demonstrated.

The Gospels are the primary place to seek out this spirituality. Prayer and the study of Scripture and other Christian writings have been central to Christian spirituality from the very beginnings. In the earliest tradition of the church, such spiritual formation was done in a personal manner. New believers were taught about the Christian faith, lifestyle and ethics by those who were well-established in the Christian faith. This involved a long period of instruction, and always person-to-person. The scriptures were thus taught personally, and persons were formed spiritually through face-to-face interactions with other Christian believers. So, while I have spoken about the Gospels as being a manual of spiritual formation, it was always used in the context of the believing community.

In addition, the Holy Spirit, as promised by Jesus, was the Unseen Teacher involved in the work of spiritual formation. It was the work of the Holy Spirit to guide the process of formation within the individual, whereas the community of believers guided from without. The individual then essentially engaged in a dialogue with the Bible, with the community of believers and with God as expressed in the Holy Spirit.

When reading the Bible dialogically, we assume that the text of the Bible comes to us as a person, and speaks to us. We approach the Scriptures as a person with whom we enter into dialogue. But in order to have any sort of dialogue, we must respect the integrity of the person we encounter and not attempt to mold them according to our own designs and schemes. The same is true of reading the Bible.

There is an untamable wild aspect to Scripture that resists our attempts to sanitize it according to our predetermined expectations. Scripture cannot be corralled as if it were a mustang needing to be broken according to our needs and desires. Rather, it is like the bohemian cousin who went to Harvard and then joined the Foreign Legion, fought alongside communist insurgents, danced

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ballet in Paris, developed computer technology with Saudi Arabia and Israel, and has now settled down to raise organic vegetables, breed miniature horses and trade stock on the Internet. It defies all our attempts to categorize and pigeon-hole it.

Jesus himself seems to have understood this about the Hebrew Scriptures that he studied and quoted from. He quotes scripture in order to raise the sights of people, to lift people out of oppression and misery, to show people the possibilities for life that God presents to us. He had no patience with those scholars and reciters of scripture who didn't seem to be transformed by or subject to the teachings they spouted. He rejected the misuse of the scriptures by people who would use them to have power over anybody else, or to belittle, oppress, or harm anybody.

And, so, we must do the same as we study the scriptures. There is a form of scripture study that has been practiced for centuries in monastic spiritual communities that aims to engage the reader in a dialogue with scripture, approaching scripture not as something to be mastered and conquered, but as the means to enter into dialogue with God by the means of the Holy Spirit. Over time, a pattern of prayer and study developed which came to be known as *Lectio Divina*, or, roughly translated, "Divine Reading." Our spiritual practice for this week will be this *Lectio Divina*.

Spiritual reading is a way to read scripture in a way that speaks deeply to heart and soul. A helpful and simple way to understand and practice the Spiritual Reading which is *Lectio Divina*, is to think of it as four steps, each beginning with the letter "R": **Recitation, Reflection, Ruminaton** and **Resting**. Begin by setting aside uninterrupted time for this. Settle yourself down in an attitude of prayer and openness. Offer the time to God. Ask for the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the words of scripture. Then proceed with the following steps:

- **Recitation.** In this step, you read the scripture text. It is often best to read it aloud. Reading it aloud impresses upon you the fact that it is through this text that God is endeavoring to speak to you, and to provide the spiritual building materials for your new life. Do not read a lot. Concentrate on just a few verses at a time. Repeat the recitation if you wish.

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- **Reflection.** In this step, you focus your thoughts upon the reading. What are the words used? What is said? How does it sound to your ears? What are the images it provides?
- **Rumination.** This step is just what it sounds like: chewing upon the text. This is a form of prayer in which you turn the words over in your mind again and again and allow them to speak to the deepest yearnings and questions of your heart. What questions or challenges arise for you? What resistance do you encounter? Let a conversation emerge within you between the text and your own inner voices. Offer the conversation at all times to God.
- **Resting.** Finally, at the end of each period of spiritual reading, sit in silence as if in the presence of God. Sit as one who is greatly beloved of God. Sit as a child in the presence of the most loving parent you can imagine. Do not seek to do anything or change anything. Simply be. Allow God to be with you as well. Close out the time with a simple prayer of thanksgiving, or you may use the following prayer:

Prayer

O God, search me and try me.

You know the desires of my heart, and the chains upon my feet.

You know what has shaped and molded me, and for what purposes.

You are the true potter, I am the clay.

Remold me, remake me, fit me for your Way.

Amen.