

“The Hard Questions of Lent: 3) What Makes the Bible So Special?”

a sermon by

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Text: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Recently David Brooks wrote an article in the *New York Times*, which he highlighted the issue of education, particularly as it relates to our political process. For years, conventional politicians have suggested that if we just have enough governmental programs, we will have improvement in our schools and society, and for years these programs have, for the most part, failed. Today, Brooks points out, there are politicians and educators who are saying something that most of us have known for a long time; namely, that the relationships that a child has outside school shape the way children behave in school. Or, as Great Britain’s David Cameron put it recently, “Family relationships matter more than anything else.”

I.

Almost from the very beginning the Christian church has seen an intimate connection between our faith and the home. The language of the faith is derived from the language of the family. We speak of God as our “father.” We speak of all people as children of God. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God in terms of a mother’s love for her child, and the Psalmist speaks of God’s love as the love of a father for his children.

In Paul’s letter to his young friend, Timothy, the Apostle reminds Timothy of the importance of family and faith. Paul knew the faith of Timothy’s mother, Eunice, and Timothy’s

grandmother, Lois. Paul understood that faith, like so many other things, is something that is passed on from generation to generation (II Timothy 1: 3-7).

One of the most pressing issues that faces both our church and society as well is the importance of families to faith. Several years ago *The Wall Street Journal* published a remarkable piece by Dr. Don Browning who taught at the Divinity School in Chicago for a number of years. In this piece Dr. Browning spoke to a paper that was being presented to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), entitled “Living Faithfully with Families in Transition.” In this report it points out the many varieties of families today: single parent families, blended families, and adoptive families- just to name a few. The report went on to say that for the most part all of these family types are doing well and that the church should support all families equally.

Now, surely all families should be accepted. But as Browning points out, there is a lot that the report could have said but did not. The report does not say that Presbyterians are, for the most part, a privileged part of American society. Most do not experience family disruptions to the same degree as the national average. For the most part Presbyterians are better educated than most groups in our society. They are wealthier as well. Three fourths of the people in our churches are married and only 19 percent have experienced divorce.

Then the report goes on to say something very revealing: “Most Presbyterians....were once children in the white, middle and upper class families of the 1950s and 1960s and have been able to repeat that family form for themselves.” In short, most Presbyterians did what their parents did. They finished their education, got married, and then had children. When divorce happens or a baby is born out of wedlock, tradition, education, and income give Presbyterians a much better advantage than many other groups.

II.

But there is something else as well that Paul speaks to his friend Timothy. He reminds him of his heritage in the faith. He reminds him of the experiences of persecution and trial that are a part of the life of every Christian.

Then Paul speaks of something else. He reminds Timothy that from his childhood Timothy had known the sacred Scriptures of the faith. This witness, says Paul, is a witness that leads us to salvation through Jesus Christ. Then the author of Timothy concludes with a very well known verse that forms our text this morning:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped to do every good work” (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Now for Timothy the Scripture that he would have known would have been the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms. By this time even the Old Testament had not reached its final canonical form--certainly not the New Testament. But Paul holds before Timothy this Scripture as essential to the faith, and that is no less true for us today.

So, what makes the Bible special?

III.

First, it shows us clearly who God is and who Jesus Christ is. John Calvin once likened Scripture to the glasses that many of us find essential to our lives. Apart from Scripture we can know God, but we will never fully know God apart the witness of Scripture to God and Christ.

To be sure, there are many questions that people today raise concerning Scripture. What about the Koran? What about the Book of Mormon? Do we believe that the Old and New Testaments are authoritative or do we believe that there are other sacred writings as well?

For many people the Bible is a controversial book. They wonder about the struggle between Bible and science, between the theory of “intelligent design” and evolution.

As Presbyterians, we have always insisted that Scripture was “infallible;” that it is “trustworthy.” It is our most basic truth. But we have always stopped short of worshipping Scripture. It is God we worship. It is Christ we worship. Martin Luther, the great Reformer, once referred to Scripture as the “manger” in which the Christ child lies. Scripture is not Christ, but it houses Christ.

Today, we live in a culture that does not put much emphasis on Scripture, often not even in our churches. For many years in this country the Bible was taught in the public schools, it was studied in the churches, and it was read in our homes. Today, many of us are strangers to the great voice of Scripture. In 1950 over 50 percent of our college and university students studied at church related colleges or universities. In many of these schools the chapel of the school was a center of student life, where very able ministers preached and where on most Sundays the President of the University was present in worship. This was true at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, as well as hundreds of other schools and universities throughout the nation. As recently as thirty years ago, William Sloan Coffin was an important voice on the campus of Yale University where he preached each week at Battel Chapel. This past summer the New York Times reported that Battel Chapel now has no relationship to the University. There is simply no one in church.

There is nothing more important than the transmission of the faith from generation to generation. That is one of the reasons we welcome these young people today that have memorized the children’s Catechism. As a church, we live from generation to generation. The author of Deuteronomy had it right when he said, “And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 6: -9).

IV.

Then, too, there is something else that is special about the Bible. It teaches us how we are to live. The Larger Catechism, in speaking of Scripture, tells that that Scripture not only teaches us what we are to believe, but also how we are to live.

Allen Bloom in his classic book, *The Closing of American Mind*, made an observation of the students that he taught at the University of Chicago. Every freshman at that university, said Bloom, came to school with two things firmly in their mind. The first is that they believe that all truth is relative to culture. Or to be it another way, they don't believe in "Truth" with a capital "T," but only in a series of "truths." The second thing that Bloom found in his students was their belief that ethics is a matter of personal preference. No right or wrong. Only what works for you. And we wonder why underage drinking, alcohol poisoning, and other destructive activities are so prevalent among young people today.

When Ben Long visited with us several years ago to talk about our commissioning him to execute a fresco for us, the committee spent a long time trying to decide what the subject of the fresco would be. We looked at some of the great stories of the Old Testament, the parables of Jesus, and a host of other powerful images. But the one parable that we came back to was the parable of the Good Samaritan. When I talked to Ben about that, he shook his head in agreement. "That," he said, "is the essence of Christianity--helping the neighbor in need."

Ethics, however, apart from belief is never possible. And how can we even do what is right if we do not know what is right. Scripture is our guide. It shows us what God demands of us: "To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8).

V.

Then, too, Scripture is special for yet another reason. As Paul put it to his friend Timothy, "it instructs us for salvation through our faith in Jesus Christ. This is the supreme function of Scripture, to elicit a wise trust in God that leads to forgiveness and personal transformation. There is no hint in Scripture that we are saved by our own wisdom. That is not the kind of wisdom that the Scriptures impart.

Throughout the history of the church the renewal of the church has come about when ordinary women and men came to grips with the magnificent witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ that is present in the Old and New Testament. It happened in the 16th Century when an obscure Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther stood before a German Emperor and declared that he would listen only to the Word of God in Scripture. It happened in the early part of the 20th Century when a young Swiss preacher by the name of Karl Barth rediscovered Paul's words to the church at Rome. Barth compared his reading of Scripture with a man who was in a church where there was no light and was fumbling through the darkness until he found a rope. Unknown to him, the rope was a church bell that when it began to ring suddenly awoke the entire town. That is what happens to people who take the Bible seriously. We find that it is not only God's story but our story as well. We are not only present at the cross of the Red Sea, but also at

the adoration of the golden calf. We are present not only at the Baptism of Jesus, but in the denial of Peter and the betrayal of Judas.

“The Bible,” a young girl once observed in her church school class, “begins in Genesis and ends in Revolution.”

May God grant that it may be so among us as well.

Amen!