

15th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST - 2 Timothy 3:14-4:8, 16-18

The reading of scripture is foundational to our worship, and while sermons usually focus on the gospels or letters in the New Testament, Timothy would not have considered this letter to even be scripture – not yet. When this letter was written, there was no New Testament. There were no gospels. For Timothy, the term “sacred writings” referred to what we call the Old Testament.

Last week, we were warned to beware of idle chitchat and wrangling with words. This week, we encounter the Living Word. Or at least, that is what this letter invites us to do. But to what end? Why do we even need scripture? What role does the Bible have in our lives? What’s the point of reading these same words over and over?

Theologian Lauren Winner says, “The church – and that’s us; we are the church – has groped for ways to talk about how the Bible reveals to us who we really are. We have groped for ways to talk about all the Bible can reveal to us about God.”

How have you groped for clarity and direction in your life? How has the Bible been part of that experience? This portion of Second Timothy addresses the question, “Just what is scripture for? How are we to use it?”

Some people use the Bible like a Ouija board or one of those Magic 8

balls. The idea is that you ask a question, and when you turn the 8 ball over, “The Answer” magically appears. Ask a question of a Ouija board, and the answer will supposedly be spelled out in front of you.

My group of friends used to have one of these, although I don’t remember whose it was. It was fun to spell out our questions and wait for the answers. I did notice that the board seemed to do better with Yes/No questions than the ones that had to be spelled out. Just for fun, a long time ago, some friends and I visited fortune tellers, tea leaf readers, and a Turkish lady who served Turkish coffee with grounds in the bottom of the cup. What was left in the cup was read, predicting future happenings. No one took it seriously, just like the Ouija board.

Sometimes people treat the Bible this way. They throw a question at God, and then let a Bible fall open in their laps, and the first verse they notice is supposed to tell them what God wants them to know. You may have tried this. The problem was that there is nothing in the Bible to tell you which computer you should buy or who you should date. Not directly, and if you get an answer from the Bible on one of those questions, chances are pretty good you had to do some serious ‘interpreting’ to achieve that.

Other people look at the Bible as an instruction manual. There’s even an acronym for this approach: **B**asic **I**nstructions **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth. There is great teaching for ethical living in scripture, and the most

important commands are: follow the biblical commands to love God and love your neighbour.

But the Bible's primary purpose isn't to address each and every circumstance you might encounter in life and tell you exactly what to do in that instance.

The Bible's primary purpose is to reveal God to us through God's Son, Jesus Christ. Paul tells us why: "... from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

Remember that these 'sacred writings' refer to the Old Testament. Christians may downplay the importance of the Old Testament, but Timothy depended on these Old Testament writings to come to faith in Jesus. For Timothy, the teaching he had received from his mother, and grandmother, and from his mentor Paul, all pointed to the same goal: salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

But if the Bible isn't primarily an instruction manual for daily living, what's all this talk about 'equipping for good works?' What, exactly, are we being equipped to do? The core truth is found in these words: *"The first time I was brought before the judge, no one came with me. Everyone abandoned me. May it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me and gave me strength so that I might preach the Good News in*

its entirety for all the Gentiles to hear. And he rescued me from certain death.”

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient and equipped for every good work.

There are three terms in these two verses that need special attention: inspired, reproof, and proficient.

Proficiency generally means that you are capable of performing a task at an acceptable level. Maybe you took piano proficiency exams as a music student, to prove that you could play at least well enough to accompany hymns, and find the right chords to accompany most folk tunes. There was a minimum threshold of correct notes that had to be played in order to pass the exam. That would not make you a pianist. It just proved that you had the minimum skill required to stand in front of an elementary music classroom and not make a fool of yourself.

This is not what Paul means by ‘proficient.’ Paul is not talking about minimum standards. “The Greek word translated as ... ‘proficient’ is ‘*artios*’ which ... means to be ‘*well fitted for some function*.’ There is a big difference between meeting a minimum standard, and being well-fitted for a particular job. Scripture instructs us so that we are fully qualified to share the gospel. Another way to translate ‘*artios*’ is “*complete*.”

Now what about ‘reproof.’ In modern English, this word means disapproval, and it’s associated with words like rebuke, reproach, and reprimand. But the Greek word used here is ‘*elegmos*,’ and it means to refute error. To refute something is to prove it wrong or false. There is no sense of approval or disapproval in *elegmos*. There’s a big difference between a teacher saying, “I see you made a mistake here, let me show you how to fix it,” and “That’s wrong! You are a bad student!” Scripture shows us our mistakes. It doesn’t condemn us for making them. We manage the condemnation part pretty well on our own.

And that brings us to “*inspiration*.” The Greek word for inspiration is “*theopneustos*.” It’s a word that appears nowhere else in scripture, but its roots are easy to identify. *Theo* means ‘God’ and *pneustos* comes from *pneuma* which in Greek translates to “breath.” It’s where we get pneumonia and pneumatic. Do you hear the air moving? In Hebrew, the word would be *ruach*. Breath. Spirit. All scripture is God-breathed.

Karl Jacobson writes, “What lies at the heart of that word “inspired,” is much more profoundly theological than any claim to literal or infallible truths about the biblical text. ... We read Timothy, and think about the promise “Paul” sings as was used in the early church hymn we read last week:

*“If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;...*

if we are faithless, he remains faithful.”

In Genesis we are reminded of the way that God breathes in the Bible, and how that breath is creative, life- and faith-giving; “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being,” and in John 20:22 we read, “When Jesus had said this, he breathed into them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” All scripture is a means by which God can breathe life and faith and hope and love and forgiveness and resurrection, into people.

Know that God’s Word was given to introduce you to salvation in Jesus Christ, so you could be transformed by God’s own breath, equipped to share that salvation. Or, as John Frederick puts it:

“let us remember that the works that result from a life transformed by a relationship with Jesus Christ are not peripheral to the gospel and they do not function as mere evidences of the gospel. Rather, gospel works are the necessary result of the gospel.”

So where does the danger lie? It has something to do with itchy ears as Paul wrote. “For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your

ministry fully.”

The world is full of false teaching. We see it often on the internet, especially on social media. You don’t have to look hard to find some YouTube preacher out there who offers a message that “suits your own desires.”

In fact, just about everything you see on the internet is designed to do just that. Your browsing history dictates what ads you will see and which friends will appear in your social media streams. It’s all set up to affirm what you already think, to give you what you want – to suit your own desires. The algorithms that calculate what you see online are based on ‘confirmation bias’ – the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of your existing beliefs.

And even when those beliefs seem to be on track with Jesus’ teachings, we tend to pull bits of scripture out of context, to prove what we already have decided is right. We are really eager to be ‘right.’ So eager, that we use scripture as a weapon. Luther Seminary professor Patrick Keifert often talks about using Bible verses like bullets, quoting chapter and verse “on any subject or controversy until we are blue in the face (or our opponents run away!). Using Scripture as a weapon is obviously not a method of teaching, argumentation, admonition, or prophecy.”

This is the exact opposite of allowing scripture to teach us, correct us,

refute our errors, and train us in righteousness. The letter to Timothy points us in a different direction. “The proper use of Scripture and tradition leads us to “every good work.” It leads us to a life that is lived in remembrance of Jesus Christ,” A life that is filled with the breath of God.

As the early priests used to say: “How is God breathing into your life? “How goes your walk with the Lord?” Or as John Wesley would put it, “How goes it with your soul?” Do you hunger for the Word of God to the point that it’s the first thing you desire when you wake in the morning? When you read your Bible, do you take the time to ponder God’s Word? Have you noticed how you think differently when you devote time each day to listening for God’s voice in scripture? Are you letting God’s Word breathe into you, and change you?

The Bible isn’t a Ouija board or a User’s Manual. It isn’t going to tell you how to solve a particular problem or make a particular decision. The Word of God is living and active and it needs to be breathing in you to do any good.

God’s Word is given to introduce you to salvation in Jesus Christ, and to be transformed by God’s own breath, equipped to share that salvation. So stop scratching your ears. Stop looking for your existing ideas to be confirmed. Join with Timothy and Paul and all the other saints who have found God, revealed in the Word made flesh, and who

have been transformed into Good News bearers, carrying out the ministry God has given them – not at the minimum level of competency, but fully proficient, equipped for every good work.

When people see the work of salvation that Christ has done in us through our faithful works empowered by him, they encounter Jesus. And, when they encounter Jesus, he begins a new work of salvation in them and invites them into the transformative, gospel work by which he is reconciling all things to himself, through himself, by means of his Body, the Church.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Lord God, grand architect of the universe, Your design of creation is unflawed. Yet we continue to litter your creation with defects and imperfections. Show us how not to destroy, but to create, not to demean, but to uplift, not to hate, but to love, so that your creation may be made perfect once again. **Amen.**