

That's the Book for Me
August 30, 2015
2 Timothy 3:16-17 (The Message)

This morning's Bible reading from the third chapter of 2 Timothy focuses on the importance of the Bible and its practical application in our lives.

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another - showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way.

Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words, and let us pray. God who speaks in so many ways, help us this day to reconnect with you as one who speaks through the pages of Scripture. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

The B-I-B-L-E yes, that's the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God.

What a song! I know many of you sung it years ago, but I don't even know how to begin to respond.

Huh? What? How? Stand alone? Word of God?

The Bible may be the best-selling book of all time, but it is certainly not a book in the traditional sense. It is a collection of 66 "books." It is a sacred text for those of us who seek to follow the Way of Jesus.

And, Marcus Borg claims that
conflict about the meaning of the Bible – its origin, authority and interpretation – is the single most divisive issue in American Christianity today¹

While it is tempting to stop with this remark in order to avoid any possibility of conflict or controversy, I feel a responsibility to continue.

¹ Marcus Borg. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (HaperOne, 2011), p.55.

Let me start with the most basic difference: the different ways people view the Bible. To keep this simple we will consider three big broad categories.

1. Actual word. Sometimes people in search of a fancy term call this the inerrant perspective. This view sees the Bible as something that should be taken literally, word for word
2. Inspired word. This is the middle position of our three options and holds that God had a role and inspired the Bible but interpreters should not take every word literally.
3. Human words. This view sees the Bible as a piece of great literature written by people that contains legend, history, fable, and moral precepts.

For as long as I have been alive Gallup has been polling Americans by asking them to choose the perspective that best fits their understanding. When I present these possibilities in a classroom setting I often ask people to guess which view is the dominant American view. In a group of any size I always get votes for two choices and usually get at least some votes for all three.

Which view is most popular? In my polling of people about which they assume to be most popular, the actual word usually receives the most votes. It is not, however, the actual dominant view in our culture. Currently, about 3 out of every 10 Americans hold the actual word perspective. In contrast, 2 out of 10 view the Bible as great literature while half - 5 out of 10 see it as the inspired word of God.²

Here is where it gets interesting . . . while we can expect this distribution of views in any large sample of America we should not in any given church. In fact, in most congregations one view is so dominant that those holding other views feel uncomfortable at best and unwelcome at worst.

Our tradition – the Congregational way generally and the United Church of Christ specifically – is atypical.

. . . Okay . . . honestly we are an unusual bunch in many ways, but I will say more about that in next month's sermon series.

² Greg Smith. "How Americans Interpret the Bible".

In the case of Biblical views we are unique because when we are at our best we work to listen to all three perspectives as a part of our life together as a community of faith.

For me, a highlight of this week's Topical Tuesday conversation about the Bible was the varied responses of group members when I asked them to estimate what percentage of our congregation holds each view. I can tell you that the guesses varied widely enough that some saw us as a somewhat theologically conservative group, others as theologically progressive, and still others as somewhere in between.

If you were here last week then you may recall my extended commission just before the benediction in which I stated that we are at our best when we value our diversity and leverage it as a strength. This is exactly what I believe we are doing and must continue to do as we move into the future.

So this morning, I want to give you a few insights that are helpful to people holding all three perspectives who seek to follow the Way of Jesus. I won't assume these are valid for people who follow another religious path. I do, however, know they are true of the Bible for those of us who are trying to live a Christian life.

Here are three ways we can all experience the Bible to be, in the words of this morning's Scripture reading, "useful."

The Bible is approachable. We do not primarily come to the Bible as an academic endeavor; we come to the text in faith. Know that wherever you are on your journey of faith, whatever your educational background, whatever your overall level of biblical literacy may be, you can interact with the Bible on your own. And, trust that the Spirit will guide what happens as the words leave the page and enter your brain.

When you read do so realizing that we are part of a relatively small group of people over the last two thousand years who not only have access to the Bible in our own language, but have copies in our own homes. In fact, many here today have multiple copies at home and can access a variety of versions online for free.

The Bible is beneficial. If you are reading the Bible as though it is a textbook and you will be coming to church for weekly quizzes, then you may be doing it all wrong. The primary reason for Bible reading is not to gather information and increase your likelihood of doing well in a game of Bible trivia though admittedly that may happen as a result. The main

reason for Bible reading – on your and with others – is because you understand it to be an important developmental resource in your ongoing quest to be and become a follower of the Way of Jesus.

There is no recommended dosage. Benefits are associated with all levels of Biblical reading and study. In fact the right amount for you will likely vary a great deal over the course of a lifetime.

And, finally, the Bible is challenging. The Bible offers us the opportunity to learn of God and of God’s interaction with humans and all of creation over time. The Bible is never just about them back then; it is also about us right now. It challenges us to rethink our own ways and to reconsider the dominant norms of our culture. It teaches us that we are not God nor has God asked us to live the life of faith on our own.

The Bible calls us to follow the Way of Jesus and to live consistently with his teachings. It calls us to be transformed. It asks us to love. It invites us to live in relationship with one another and with God.

The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the approachable, beneficial, challenging book for me. I trust it is and will continue to be the book for you.

Amen.