

"Reading and Hearing God's Word"
Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Lectionary Year C
January 24, 2010
Text: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
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I love the Bible. I really do. Part of the utter joy of my job is that I get paid to do what I enjoy most, to dig around in and to extract the riches of this most wonderful of books. I am privileged to spend as much time with the object of my affection and I want to, and what's funny is that I get to call it work. What a blessing that is.

I must admit that it hasn't always been that way for me. I haven't always loved the Bible like I do now. There was a time, particularly in high school and the first couple of years of college, when I thought the Bible is, quite frankly, pretty worthless. Based on what I was told it said from week to week in church, I was not only unimpressed with it, I was rather offended by it.

You see, I was beginning to think for myself, to ask some pretty deep questions about life, and the Bible didn't seem to be of much help in dealing with those questions. In fact, it appeared that if I were going to continue to believe in the Bible, I was going to have to park my brain and discount my experience. The Bible I was exposed to seemed

almost completely unrelated to my life and not relevant to the world in which I live.

But then, through the providence of God, I found myself at church in Waco where the Bible was treated differently than it had been in other churches I had attended. In this church the Bible was called upon to address real issues in my life, the genuine concerns I had, in a way that made complete sense to me and that was consistent with my experience. I began to do some Bible study on my own and in groups and was able to see that this book has real value and worth for me. My love affair with it had begun, and my affection for the Bible has only grown deeper as I have studied it more thoroughly. I wish for you almost more than anything else, that you come to love this book, this word of God, as much as I do. It's a passion I can commend to you highly, for it will help you to grow and develop as a person, and it will change your life.

I think that learning to love the word of God begins with reading it and hearing it as it was meant to be read and heard, as it deserves to be read and heard. Our text for this morning from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah goes a long way toward showing us how best to read and hear the Bible. On the basis of what this text tells me, I want to suggest the following ideas about how we are to approach God's word so that all of us can learn to love it.

I think this text is suggesting that **God's word is to be read and heard in community**. The text tells us that "when the seventh month came . . . *all* the people gathered together . . . [and] *they* told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses (the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament), . . ." Isn't that interesting? Ezra does not summon the people to hear the Bible read; they summon him [Soards et al, p. 117]. They take the initiative. And the Bible (what Bible they had at that time) was read with all the people present, all Israel—men, women, and children.

Bible study is not to be strictly an individual, isolated practice, though there certainly is a place for the personal devotional reading of scripture. For the most part, however, Bible study is an activity meant to be done in a group, with other people, in community. Why is this true? Primarily because all of us read scripture with a certain bias and carrying certain baggage. Each of us comes to scripture with some preconceived notions and foregone conclusions about what it says. Because of our various backgrounds, all of us have our own peculiar take on things. So in order to seek objectivity with regard to the meaning of scripture, we need to be in dialogue with each other, comparing and contrasting our own ideas about what the Bible says and means.

Not only is God's word to be read and heard in community, but this passage from Nehemiah seems to be suggesting that **God's word is to be read and heard with reverence, acknowledging its authority.** Notice, please, how the people responded to the reading of the word of God. The text says that "the ears of all the people were attentive . . ." We are told that when Ezra opened the book, all the people stood up. They said, "Amen, Amen," and they lifted up their hands. "Then," so the story goes on to say, "they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." The people treated the word of God with honor; they approached it with a great deal of dignity, and by so doing, they acknowledged its authority, its place of prominence in their lives and their need to submit themselves to its teaching.

The people demonstrated their reverence for the Bible and acknowledged its authority not just by standing up, lifting their hands, and so forth. That may show respect, but not necessarily display reverence or acknowledge authority. What really revealed that the people revered the word of God and were willing to let it be authoritative for them was the way they paid attention when it was read. They actually were listening to it. They focused their minds and hearts on God's word and what it had to say to them. They concentrated on it in a serious way.

That's what really determines our commitment to the Bible. It's not our doctrine of biblical authority; it's how serious we are about studying it with real interest and attention. We don't just give the Bible lip service; we give it our genuine devotion in terms of our time and energy and creativity in studying it.

Having said that, I think it also is important to notice in this passage of scripture that, as a part of hearing the Bible read, the people "bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." They didn't bow their heads and worship the Bible; they worshiped the Lord. As much reverence as they showed for scripture, their ultimate allegiance was to God. The Bible was for them and should be for us as well, a means to an end and not an end in itself. To worship the Bible as a substitute for God is idolatry and a violation of its intention. The Bible is meant to point us to God and to allow us to appreciate God more completely.

There is something else I think this text is pointing us toward, namely, that **God's word is to be read and heard in a way that will bring about understanding.** There is a great deal of emphasis in this story from Nehemiah on the idea of understanding. Notice how this idea is repeated over and over again. "Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear *with understanding.*" The text goes on to say that "Ezra

read . . . from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and women and those *who could understand*; . . ." And finally we are told in this text that the Levites read from the book with interpretation, and in so doing, "they gave the sense, so that the people *understood* the reading." It's never enough for the Bible to be read and heard. It must be read and heard in a way that leads to understanding, a making sense of what is read and heard.

What was true in this ancient story is still true today. The Bible, in order to be read and heard with understanding, requires proper interpretation. In his book *The Doctrine of Biblical Interpretation*, Russell Dilday writes that

interpretation is essential to a clear understanding of the Bible's message, and clear understanding is necessary before we can obey the Bible's authoritative guidance. If we give the Bible the high place of "sole authority for faith and practice" but misunderstand its message through poor interpretation, the effectiveness of its authority is limited. Good interpretation is a skill learned like any other skill, with practice and constant effort [p. 126].

T. B. Maston, who used to teach ethics at Southwestern Seminary, was fond of telling his students each semester, "the Bible doesn't always mean what it says; it means what it means." And how we get what the Bible means out of what the Bible says is by responsible interpretation.

One thing I am committed to in my preaching and teaching is to make the Bible understandable, like it was in this Old Testament story, so that "the sense" of it is comprehended, that is to say, so that it makes good sense to you. For me, that means we look for the ways these ancient stories and teachings connect with our daily lives by working hard to find out what the author of the biblical text really intended for us to learn, and then trying to apply that to our experience in ways that are genuinely helpful. God's word is to be interpreted, and if we do this successfully, then the Bible becomes a rich and meaningful resource indeed for us.

I think there is one more thing this text from Nehemiah is suggesting to us, and that is that **God's word is to be heard with emotion and followed by action.** I ask you to look again at the emotional reaction the people had to the reading of God's word. They wept, and then they were asked to be joyful. That is what a real hearing of God's word will do to us emotionally. It will make us cry, because when we truly hear it and understand it, we realize how far we are from living up to its truths. We come to see how much we have missed the boat, and that makes us sad. But that is not all the Bible says to us, that we have failed. It also says that ours is a gracious God who forgives our failures to live as we should and gives us the

opportunity to begin again and again and again and again and again. For that we truly can rejoice.

This narrative from Nehemiah ends with the people of Israel being told to go their way, to eat and drink and share with the needy. There is a sense in which this is the final appropriate response to the reading and hearing of God's word. I believe that a genuine hearing of God's word always helps us to celebrate life, to enjoy, as the text says, eating the fat and drinking the sweet wine and sharing the good things of life with our neighbors.

That is the purpose of studying scripture, so that we can take what we learn from it, apply it to our lives, and then see the difference it makes in the quality of our living. That's the payoff; that's the reward; that's the benefit of Bible study. A life lived out in response to the truth found in the Bible is a better life, because it is a life experienced more closely to the way it was intended by the Creator of life. It is a life that is filled with meaning, value, fulfillment, purpose, and joy, because it is lived out in obedience to God's will.

As I said in the beginning of this sermon, it is my hope that you will learn to love the Bible as I do. And I think that by doing these things, the things suggested in this passage of scripture from Nehemiah—studying the Bible in community, approaching it with reverence and an acknowledgement of its authority, seeking to

understand it and its meaning for you, and letting it touch your emotions and move you to action—by doing these things you can fall in love with this wonderful book we call *God's word*.