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The Living Word
Matthew 7:24-27

Some months ago after I had conducted a funeral service, I was approached by an elderly woman whom I did not know. She thanked me for the service and then said, in effect, "I hope I'm good enough to get into heaven." In response, I commented, "Trust Jesus and you will." "Oh, I do trust Jesus," she replied, "but I'm not worthy of that blessing." Then we were interrupted by others, and she drifted away.

My heart ached for her. Yes, we all have doubts. Faith isn't certainty. We are flesh and blood, mortals with questions, struggles and perplexities. But in the midst of these doubts, I hope we have some very clear convictions. Jesus insists, "In my Father's house, there are many rooms and I am going there to prepare a place for you." My heart ached for that woman because she seemed to face her future with deep anxiety, devoid of any assurance about her eternity destiny.

Beliefs matter. Jesus declares, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Proverbs insists, "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones." "Wisdom . . . is a tree of life to those who embrace her." Paul tells the Romans, "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds," and the Colossians, "Don't let anyone lead you astray with empty philosophy and high-sounding nonsense."

Beliefs matter. As Christians, we believe every human life is precious because we are created in the image of God. Chuck Colson tells of visiting a prison in Ecuador. He says, "As we descended into darkness, we found mold-covered limestone and cells which had four bunks, really just iron slabs, hanging from the walls. Twelve inmates shared each cell so the men had to sleep in shifts or stretch out on the floor, thick with grime and spilled sewage. Yet these prisoners had not even been tried. Many were waiting years to even hear the charges against them. It was like a scene out of Dickens.

But then he told how local churches had transformed another compound in the prison into a brightly-colored, clean, even pristine worship center. He told of watching 200 inmates joyous engaged in worship. But why would volunteers come to a prison? Why enter a place of filth and captivity? Why bother? Because they saw in the faces of those inmates, however distorted, the very image of God. The volunteers believed that every life is important, so they helped transform a piece of hell into a foretaste of heaven. Our beliefs influence our decisions, how we spend our time, our physical and emotional well-being, our impact on others, and our spiritual health.

As Presbyterians, of course, we draw our beliefs and our hope from Scripture. When we await surgery, don't we pray, "Ye, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." When we stand at a candlelit altar to exchange our marriage vows, Scripture reminds us what is needed for the days ahead, "Love is patient; love is kind. . . Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." When we lay a loved one to rest on a gray November day, one thing gives us comfort, the promise of our Lord. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live."

German theologian Gerhard Von Rad insists that the Word of God is dynamistic; it is powerful and creative; it is living and life-creating. The Word is not simply a recording of God's redemptive acts in history, it is the Spirit speaking and creating anew, mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart. As surely as God created the heavens and the earth by His word -- God said, "Let there be light *and there was light!*" -- God continues to capture the imagination, touch the heart, and proclaim truth through His Word. The Word of God is the primary way that God reveals Himself to us. The Word of God is "dynamistic," it is dynamite. Its goal is to change us from the inside out.

God's people discover this again and again. When Israel is crushed by Babylon in the fifth century B.C., when her Temple is razed and Jerusalem is reduced to a pile of rubble, when every priest, artisan and leader is killed or exiled, what keeps Israel from becoming a footnote in a musty history book? Israel survives because the exiles return after 70 years and compile the Old Testament. The "word" no longer merely orders the community; it creates the community.

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with a startling parable. We expect Him to end with on a high note, with a word of encouragement, accenting the positive. What He says is this, "Those who hear these words of mine and put them into practice are the wise ones who build a house on the rock. The rain comes down, the streams rise, and the winds blow and beat against that house, but it does not fall, for it has its foundation on the rock. But those who hear these words and do not put them into practice is like persons who build a house on sand. The rain comes down, the streams rise, the winds blow and the house falls with a great crash." Have a nice day!

Our Protestant heritage took shape during the Reformation, a time of reform sparked by Martin Luther. Luther was the brilliant son of a German coal-mining family. By 22, he became a loyal Catholic priest. But as he studied Scripture, he came to a revolutionary awareness, "we are put right with God through faith." Our sins are not forgiven by paper indulgences that can be purchased like carnival tickets, not by baptism or other ordinances of the church, not by an endless succession of good deeds by which we pile up sufficient merit. We are justified, put right with God, through faith in Jesus Christ. This awareness sparks the reformation, and underscores our conviction as Presbyterians – that God communicates with us through His word.

All of this is immensely practical. How do we grow in faith? Dwight Moody once said, "I kept praying for greater faith, expecting that one day faith would come down and strike me like lightning. But faith did not come. One day I read the 10th chapter of Romans, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." I had up to this time closed my Bible and prayed for faith. I now opened my Bible and began to study. My faith has been growing ever since."

How do we learn to pray? One way we learn to pray is by praying the Psalms. Most of Scripture is God's word to us. The Psalms, the prayer-book of ancient Israel, are our prayers addressed to God. Without the Psalms, our prayers tend to be self-centered and shallow. But our prayers are enriched when we echo the Psalmist, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is a man or woman that you are mindful of them?" John Calvin said that the "Psalms are an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." Everything that we can feel, experience, or say is brought into expression before God in the Psalms. We learn to pray by praying the prayers that have endured for 2500 years -- the Psalms.

Where do we see a vision of what the world is to be like – in Scripture! I recently saw an episode on PBS about the Civil War. It described a scene from the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913. Confederate and Union veterans came back to eat and drink, to listen to speeches, and to remember the dark days from long ago. Late in the day there was a reenactment of Picket's Charge. Only this time the Confederate troops advanced not with rifles and bayonets, but with canes and crutches. Slowly they limped across what had once been a blood-stained field, drew near to Seminary Ridge and let out one last rebel yell.

Eyewitnesses said that a moan arose from the Yankees behind the stone wall. Unable to restrain themselves, they flung themselves upon their former enemies, not to do battle, but to throw their arms around each other and weep. Brothers once more, some in blue uniforms and some in grey, they longed for the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision, "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation; nor will they train for war anymore."

We all agree that Scripture is important, but yet if we're honest, we share a certain awkwardness concerning the Scriptures. Most of us know some Biblical stories--Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, Jesus changing the water into wine, Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road -- but lack any overarching perspective on how these stories fit into a larger framework. I was no exception. In my first seminary class, the professor asked me to read from the book of Hebrews. I could not find Hebrews. I still think Hebrews should be in the Old Testament.

Scripture can be misused without guidance. Perhaps you've heard of the pastor who visited a man who was struggling financially. With pastoral concern, she suggested,

"Read the Scriptures. They'll guide you." Several months later she met the man again. He was impeccably dressed, wearing a Rolex, and driving a Porsche. "I'm so grateful for your advice," he told the pastor. "I opened the Scriptures and received the advice I needed. I read these words: chapter 11."

I raise this issue of Scripture this morning for three reasons. First, our children's education team want to keep stressing that the family is the most important place for the cultivation of faith. Children spend perhaps 30 hours a year in Sunday School, but hundreds of hours each year at home. Faith, in fact, is more caught than taught. So it is essential that we parents and grandparents be grounded in Scripture. The rituals of saying grace and bedtime prayers; encouraging our children to read their children's bible; letting them see our own devotional practice; sharing in mission as a family are all ways that we help our children connect with Jesus and His mission.

Second, our adult education committee has wrestled with the issue of Sunday morning adult education. We had an excellent response to adult classes here at the downtown campus when we had a dedicated church school last fall. But since our current worship times work so well, Session wants to maintain our current three worship service schedule.

But I've shared three possible approaches to the committee. One alternative is to have a "core" curriculum that we could offer year by year – covering essentials like Old Testament 101, prayer and reformed theology. A second alternative is to have a diversity of courses – courses on social concerns, contemporary culture, news of the week, the Bible, and spirituality. The third alternative is to create a series of groups, like a post-college group, a young married group, or a grandparenting group. Before the offering we'd like you to complete a survey to list your interests.

And third, as a "servant-missional" church, we're focused on touching and blessing this community. We're trying to see and hear and sense what our Lord wants us to do. In a sense, we do not so much plan for the future, because we live in a time of discontinuous change, as we prepare for the future. It is by study and reflection that we become alert to what our Lord is doing and how He is at work.

So perhaps the challenge is to heed the slogan of Nike: Just do it! Read the Scriptures! Meditate on their implications! Let them offer you both reassurance and challenge! Don't deprive yourself of the nutrition that feeds your soul. And as a family of faith, let's find ways to study and grow together!