

Graduation Sunday
"Delighting in the Law of God"
Psalm 1

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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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Many years ago, I boarded a plane in California to return home to NJ so I could spend time with my family whom I'd not seen for some time. When Sunday rolled around, my mother asked if I was going to church and I suggested we visit the Presbyterian church I had grown up in- the church in which I was baptized and confirmed, went to Sunday School and attended youth group meetings at. However, it had been years since I was back. The last time I darkened its doors, I was a proud and confident atheist, but NOW I'd be returning as one of God's humbled children with a call to Christian ministry on my life. We arrived just in time for the opening hymn and planted ourselves in one of the old pews which were once so familiar to me. Once the service ended, I got in line with everyone else to shake the minister's hand and introduce myself. I shared with him how I was a child of that church, that I'd grown up within those same plastered walls and was now attending a Presbyterian seminary in San Francisco to become a minister myself.

However, before taking our leave, I wanted to take a quick tour of the rest of the facility to see how much it had changed, if ANY. I showed my mom the library, where I often hid out to avoid having to listen to another boring sermon and explored the downstairs area where our Sunday School classes were held. As my mother and I wandered in and out of the different rooms, I explained to her how I had once occupied those same little seats at those same little tables, reminiscing a bit about some of the teachers I had way back when. It seemed very little had actually changed during the years I'd been away.

As we were both about to leave, I noticed out of the corner of my eye how at the far end of the downstairs social hall, there was a small table with some plastic flowers in a vase on top and an old Bible sitting beside it. Out of curiosity, I walked over to take a quick look at it. It was a faux-leather copy of the Revised Standard Version and it looked very similar to the Bible the pastor had handed out to both my brother and me when we were children. I opened up the fly leaf to see if there was a name plate inside or an inscription revealing who the owner was and SURE ENOUGH, there WAS. On the line where the name of the person who owns the Bible is generally inscribed, it read "Presented to David Wood by the First Presbyterian Church of Iselin, N.J. June, 1961." Then beneath it was the signature of the minister, "Rev. David D. Prince."

To my great surprise, it was MY old Bible- the one I had received many years ago in my third grade Sunday School class, resting peacefully there as though it had been waiting all this time for me to return and be reunited with it. For a moment, I stood there slack jawed, finding it hard to believe how after all those years I was now holding in my OWN hands that same book once again. It was one of those experiences where you knew that you knew it wasn't some mere coincidence but that it had to be one of those "God-things" which we often say when such a phenomenon occurs, an unexpected event that could ONLY have been planned and carried out by the Holy Spirit and no other. Those are things we tend to remember for the rest of our life

and I HAVE. As a result, almost everywhere I go, I always make sure I have my Bible in my backpack which I take with me whenever I leave the house.

Over the past half century, I have since accrued a WHOLE COLLECTION of Bibles. Apart from the Gospels, I've come to appreciate the PSALMS more than any other book in it. Years ago, I promised myself that before my ministry concluded, I would preach on every Psalm at least once- all 150 of them. Well, true to my customary iron resolve, I've actually never preached on more than a HANDFUL of them. What I love MOST about the Psalter is that it is essentially a book of life, not so much about life in the here-after as of life RIGHT NOW. They address us in our immediate situation utilizing the whole gamut of feeling and human emotion. That is why they offer so much hope to us in times of sickness or tragedy or death- they speak to us in the language of the heart and to those places we find ourselves most vulnerable.

THIS week we are looking at what is an essential building block for fostering greater spiritual maturity in our lives, and for the writer of Psalm 1, it begins by first developing an enduring love for God's Word and then learning to live by it. In doing so, we soon discover that MORE than a book of laws or moral instruction or beautiful poetry, MORE than a record of God's acts in human history, God's Word is a "love letter" to his people. It is meant to reassure us that we are loved with an everlasting love and how NOTHING will ever stand between us and God's presence OR his love.

Psalm 1 serves as a prologue to the rest of the Psalter and it introduces two great themes that continually recur throughout the others- the blessings of OBEDIENCE before God contrasted with the curses of DISOBEDIENCE. It opens with the words, "Blessed (or happy) is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law doth meditate both day and night." It was the same instruction given by Joshua when he told the people to be strong and of good courage, that by loving the Law and meditating on it regularly, and then doing all that the Law commands, they'd be assured of success wherever they went.

Accordingly, the way we STAY blessed is to love God's Word and to allow its power and influence to saturate our minds and imagination. When I was in college, I once asked my New Testament professor where one should begin reading the Bible and he told me to concentrate on THE PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER OF JESUS IN THE GOSPELS. He said that if I did, it would eventually work its way into MY heart and imprint itself onto MY nature, MY character. He was saying that if you ARE serious about this book and you give it a paramount place in your life, by slow degrees it will then begin to inwardly reshape you into the image of CHRIST HIMSELF. Christ's nature will slowly become impressed into your OWN so that like the Apostle Paul, you TOO will be able to say, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Years ago, I inscribed in the frontispiece of one of my Bibles an old quote from the famous 19th century evangelist D.L. Moody who once advised, "Get into this book and this book will soon get into you!" I wrote it there in order to remind myself how the Word of God is the "Bread of Life," that rather than put under the night stand to gather dust or leave it on the living room coffee table to impress people with, it SHOULD be "eaten and digested," that it is intended to be lived with and meditated upon each and every day. And if this DOES become an important

discipline in our lives, then, as the Psalmist assures us, we will be like a tree that has been transplanted from dry ground to a NEW place where our roots will be able to draw cool, refreshing water; a tree that will yield its fruit in its season and whose leaves will never die.

To the ancient Israelites, nothing was MORE important than moral education. They took seriously that well-known text from Proverbs, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." It was the father's first duty to teach his children God's commandments and all the wonders that God had done for his people. They were to explain the meaning of the great feasts to their children and show them how each of the customs had a holy significance. They, in turn, were to hand down those same traditions to their OWN children that God's laws and Israel's customs would continue in perpetuity. For those able to attend school, their primary text was the Torah, the holy Law of God- language, grammar, history, and geography were all studied in it. "It is in the Bible," says Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, "that the finest knowledge is to be found, and the source of all TRUE happiness."

We know that Jesus and his disciples lived in the scriptures- it formed and gave life to their faith and convictions; it guided them in their daily living and bolstered their courage in the face of tremendous persecution. Subsequently, the Apostle Paul exhorted his young disciple Timothy to "study and show himself approved, a workman that needeth not be ashamed, but rightly dividing the word of truth." This COMMAND is no less directed at ANYONE who would call him or herself a serious disciple of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, I came across this disturbing quote from the late Elizabeth Achtemeier- former professor of Bible and preaching at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. She wrote:

Through 30 years of teaching in seminaries I have become convinced that the church has largely failed in its mission of educating its people in the apostolic, biblical faith. Every preacher who enters a pulpit these days must assume that the congregation knows almost nothing about the content of the Scriptures. The language of faith, the meaning of the sacraments and the basic doctrines of the Christian church are almost totally devoid of meaning for the average church-goer. Thus our congregations are often at the mercy of the latest kooky cult (witness Shirley MacLaine and New Age religion), and there is no common biblical story that binds them together in their faith. Individuals drift from one church to another, without roots, without religious history, without any Rock or Refuge or any sense that they belong to a communion of saints or participate in an ongoing history of salvation that God is working out in their lives and world.

While pastoring in Indiana, I attended an over-night Presbytery meeting where we heard two dynamic presentations from Dr. Rodger Nishioka, a professor of evangelism at Columbia Theological Seminary. He made it clear that though we Presbyterians have traditionally placed a greater premium upon education than most other denominations, ignorance in our churches abounds as to what the Bible says as well as a lack of knowledge concerning our historic creeds and Reformed Heritage. This doesn't just apply to those who think of themselves as FRINGE members or CASUAL attenders but even to those who occupy these pews SUNDAY AFTER SUNDAY AFTER SUNDAY. The perception of a great many Christians is that we come to

church on Sunday mornings to get our weekly diet of both worship and the Word, convinced that that one hour of devotion is all that is needed to sustain us. After all, isn't this what we pay the minister for- to pray for us, to do all the necessary research for us and then preach to us the fruit of his labors so that WE don't have to pray and study and wrestle with the text ourselves?

The fact is that spiritual maturity and biblical and theological illiteracy among Christians are at alarming levels. For instance, a Gallup poll taken a few years back showed how an overwhelming majority of persons who call themselves "Christian" NEVER or ALMOST NEVER crack their own Bible at home or read it outside of church. What this reveals is that though people REVERE the Bible, they don't READ it, that we spend more time with our nose buried in the daily newspaper or some trashy novel (which I believe are both OK, mind you) than we do trying to divine the Word of God! It also showed that women, Afro-Americans, older people, Protestants, evangelicals, Southerners and the less-educated are more likely to read the Bible and read it more often than OTHER groups.

In the early 1950's, the Episcopal Bishop Theodore Wedel wrote a book entitled *The Christianity of Main Street* in which he observed that the "Christianity of Main Street" in America is in danger of becoming a vague faith in ethical principles and values that have no Biblical or theological rootage, an illiterate Christianity living under the illusion that such illiteracy does not matter very much. The secularized Christianity of Main Street is essentially a humanistic faith, a system of ethical ideals lacking any real relation to the Christian doctrines from which they originally arose. Similarly Will Herberg, in his famous book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, declared that America's high ethical idealism--its "common faith"--had similarly been divorced from its historical roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The conviction is prevalent among church members that religion is in essence an ethical opinion and that religion and ethics are virtually identical. The essential thing is "morality," and religion is a useful means toward achieving this end.

If what Elizabeth Achtemeier says is accurate, that every preacher who enters a pulpit these days must assume that the congregation knows almost nothing about the content of the Scriptures; that the language of faith, the meaning of the sacraments and basic doctrines of the Christian church are almost totally devoid of meaning for the average churchgoer, then the Church is in deep, deep trouble. I believe this accounts for the popularity of a great many preachers and teachers today. Because most congregants don't know the difference, these church leaders are able to pass off personal opinions or the latest psychological and religious fads for biblical truth instead of a genuine encounter with God's Word that can change their lives and help transform the world.

However, I DO offer you this ray of hope this morning. While going through my collection of news clippings, I came across an article concerning an elderly woman who was learning to read for the very first time. This is how it opened:

Dateline: Warner Robins, Georgia. When Ruby S. Williams was coming up, there wasn't much time, or much need, for book learning. Her place, according to her parents and the white man whose farmland they tended, was in the fields, chopping cotton, cutting asparagus, picking peaches and clearing brush. She took the three-mile hike to school only sporadically, and quit by the time she was 14. Although she was two generations removed from slavery, it was hard to

tell: she was black, poor and virtually illiterate.

*Now at age 84, in the twilight of a hardscrabble life, Mrs. Williams is learning how to read. She is not motivated at this stage of her existence by a yearning to scan the headlines or lose herself in a thrill. After the drudgery of sharecropping and domestic work, after 19 pregnancies and 14 children, she wants only to soak up the words that have sustained her all these years. "I want to read my Bible," she said. After a year of tutoring in a state-sponsored program, she can. Slowly, methodically, phonetically, with her right index finger sliding across the lines of the large-print words, Mrs. Williams negotiated her way today through the first chapter of *The Gospel According to John*. "In the beginning was the word," she began, sometimes pausing between syllables, "and the word was with God, and the word was God."*

It was a painstaking process, inching through the Scriptures one word at a time, stumbling over what she called the hard ones, like "shineth" and "comprehended." But HER oratory was more moving than almost any Sunday sermon, and the joy radiated in her face at the end of the passage. "I can read, I can read," she exulted, her country accent as thick as sorghum. "Sometimes I pick up the Bible and read and read and read. I sure do. Glory hallelujah. Thank God." More than ANYTHING, she wanted to be able to read the Gospels and Psalms.

My friends, have YOU ever wanted to pick up the Bible and read it as devotedly and with the same joy as Ruby Williams did? It may be said of her that her highest hope was to "delight in the law of the Lord, and on his law meditate day and night." By learning to read for herself, that hope had finally become a reality, in fact, the SUPREME joy in her life, and like the Psalmist, now she is TRULY "blessed." She wanted MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE to be able to read her Bible, to soak up the words that had sustained her throughout her years. Once a thirsty tree in a dry desert, she was suddenly and gloriously transplanted beside streams of cool, refreshing water, and its pure, life-giving current now nourishes her roots.

You know, it's hard NOT to be humbled by this story of one woman's simple faith and how her intense devotion to God's Word was eventually rewarded. She was like one who was dead but is now alive, was blind but now can see. It's people like Ruby Williams who remind us there is no greater curriculum available, no finer education in all the world than to sit at Christ's feet and to hear him tell us how great our God is and of how tirelessly we are loved by him. I pray that UNLIKE me, YOU don't have a Bible somewhere waiting to be reunited with after so many years, or that it's not sitting atop your living room coffee table like some ancient artifact, collecting dust among so many OTHER old books and magazines you may have lying around. The fact is it is the most priceless treasure you can own, a love letter addressed specifically to you to remind you how much God loves you. Take heed to what the Psalmist is saying this morning, that if we would but plant ourselves in it, in the midst of God's Word and listen intently to what God is trying to say to us THROUGH it, then we TOO--like the Psalmist and just like RUBY WILLIAMS—may become a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season and whose leaves will never die. Let us pray...

Dear Lord, thank you for your love. Thank you for your Son. Thank you for your Holy Spirit. And thank you for your Word which fills our hearts and minds and imaginations with their truths so that we may more faithfully represent them in our lives and in the world around us. Amen.