

“Dance With the One That Brung Ya”

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Text: Psalm 119:105-112; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

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You know of my dislike for reality television. I must admit also that I have no interest in the current crop of dance shows. Apparently I'm in the minority – after “CSI,” the most watched show these days is “Dancing With the Stars.”

Other than watching an occasional theater production, my last real experience to dance was when I was in junior high. I took a dance class – ballroom dancing. We seventh graders tried to imitate the dance steps of our instructors – a man in a tuxedo and a woman in a fancy gown. We learned – or tried to learn – the waltz and several other dance steps. The best part of the class for me though, was getting to choose our partner.

I chose Liz Hotchkiss because she was a good dancer, and because I had a crush on her. Now my choice of partner really paid off, because at the end of one particular class session, we had a contest. While one instructor would start the music, we were supposed to dance however we wanted, and then freeze in position when we heard the music stop. The other instructor walked around the dance floor and would signal which couples remained in and which were out. Well, at the end of the contest, Liz and I were the only couple remaining. As winners, we got certificates to the local record store – remember 45 RPM records? – I'll never forget what I got with my certificate – *Harper Valley PTA* by Jeanie C. Riley – go figure! Liz was a great dance partner. I knew if we ever had another contest, she was the one I would choose – I could win a prize with her, I could count on her, I was determined to dance with the girl that made me a winner.

Dance with the one that brung ya – we often hear that around World Series time or Super Bowl weekend or college playoffs. This team is going to dance with the one that brought them here – in other words, this team is going to draw upon the strengths and talents and wisdom that allowed them to make it to the big game. They're not going to run a different offense when that type of game plan has been successful. They're going to turn to that which they already know. They're not going to rely on a new playbook. To continue to succeed, they're going to open up the dog-eared and well-used manual.

You know, it's one thing to be encouraged to learn new things, to probe new vistas, to push beyond our present boundaries into uncharted territory. It's quite another to be told to keep what you have been taught and know to be true. The former values what is new, untested, and potentially eye-opening and life-changing, whereas the latter values what is tried and true. One eyes the future; the other casts a backward eye to the past.

The word from Paul to Timothy in our passage this morning is traditional. He's telling Timothy to keep using the old playbook. He exhorts Timothy to dance with the one that brung him.

Apparently, at the time Paul was providing counsel to a junior clergyman, there were false teachers infiltrating the church. So he urges the young preacher to be steadfast in his adherence to a faith rooted in tradition and sacred scripture. As the collected oracles of the community of faith in whom God has acted and through whom God has spoken, Scripture speaks to us uniquely of God. As the repository of the collected wisdom of Israel and the words prompted by God, Scripture is divinely suited to provide instruction in the life of the faith. Paul tells Timothy that Scripture is useful or profitable in four respects – in teaching, as a source for positive instruction; for reproof, as a source for refuting error; for correction, as a source for guiding people's lives; and for training in righteousness, as a source to provide discipline in right living.

In a wonderful phrase in chapter 4 of our lesson, Paul mentions those with “itching ears,” those whose ears strain to hear and receive the many false and seductive teachings of the day. Against such temptations, Paul urges Timothy and the faithful to remember who they are, who their teachers are, and to hold fast to scripture lest they “wander away to myths.”

Are we dancing with the one that brung us? We Disciples of Christ claim to be a people of the Book. So why do so many of us neglect the one Book we claim to be authoritative and containing the very word of God? Are we like the rest of the world's professing Christians, 85% of whom report they've never read through the entire Bible? While 60% of all Americans attend church at least once a month, only 12% of those read their Bibles. Even with our audiovisual society, we still read other instruction manuals and guidelines, don't we? Why not the Scriptures?

Read the instructions before use. Take only as directed. Consult prospectus before investing. As my Grandmother Engle used to say to us grandchildren, "If you'd read more, you wouldn't be so dumb." Why are some of us dumb (illiterate) when it comes to the Bible? Why do so many of us stumble around in the dark, when we have the Scriptures, which, as our other text this morning reminds us, are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our paths.

The 119th Psalm is fascinating in structure and content. You may recall that it is a composition in which the first letter of each successive line appears in alphabetical order – 22 stanzas – 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet – each stanza has eight lines – eight synonyms are used: judgments, decrees, words, promises, precepts, law, commandments, statutes – eight synonyms for God's Torah, instruction, word. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." God's revelation in Scripture is our truly reliable guide to living – help in our daily paths.

Through the process of writing, editing, and compilation of the Biblical material, the Holy Spirit has been at work so that what we have as the Biblical witness is trustworthy and reflects God's revelation in the world and in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible is our source – our guide – our reference point to which we can turn for insight, for strength, and for direction. Yet let me hasten to add that it is always a mistake to sharpen our minds by narrowing them. It is a mistake to look at the Bible to close a discussion – the Bible seeks to open one.

The Bible is a well-spring of wisdom about the ambiguity, inevitability, and insolubility of the human situation. As someone has said, the Bible insists that each of us is a hell-deserving sinner with sleeping hero in his or her soul. It sings praises to a God who bruises our egos but mends our hearts. The Bible shows us both the green pastures and the paths of righteousness. When falsehoods weave their glittering nets around us, it asks us to take upon ourselves the power of truthfulness. The Bible demonstrates that an active faith will arouse official discontent, and it assures us of the security that comes with the knowledge that God will ferret us out of any hiding place. The Bible makes us comfortable with struggle but uneasy in success. The Bible is not a hitching post, but a sign post, pointing beyond itself to God and God's revelation in Christ.

An article in yesterday's *Kansas City Star* is about the author of a new book entitled *The Year of Living Biblically*. A.S. Jacobs spent a year of his life attempting to adhere as literally as possible to some of the 700 rules in the Bible. Jacobs' book would be an interesting read, and I suspect it would remind us that the Bible indeed is not a book of rules, or a book of science, or a book of objective history. It is a collection of books written by humans testifying to the power of God in their lives.

In spite of the usefulness of Scriptures, in spite of the fact that in Scripture we are dealing with the holy words that we are assured of an encounter with God in spite of our oft spoken claim that the Bible is and should be authoritative in our lives and even in spite of the demands of many lay folk that they want more Bible studies, millions of Bibles continue to gather dust in homes across America. A survey several years ago asked 300 pastors, "What do you feel is the major reason Christians don't read the Bible?"

2% – poor eyesight or poor reading skills.

6% – not able to understand what they're reading.

44% – lack of time.

48% – laziness or lack of discipline.

How many of us have made a new year's resolution to read through the entire Bible during the new year? In the middle of Leviticus or the middle of January we lost interest.

The Bible and the Coal Basket

– Author Unknown

The story is told of an old man who lived on a farm in the mountains of eastern Kentucky with his young grandson. Each morning, Grandpa was up early sitting at the kitchen table reading from his old worn-out Bible. His grandson who wanted to be just like him tried to imitate him in any way he could.

One day the grandson asked, "Papa, I try to read the Bible just like you but I don't understand it, and what I do understand I forget as soon as I close the book. What good does reading the Bible do?"

The Grandfather quietly turned from putting coal in the stove and

said, "Take this coal basket down to the river and bring back a basket of water." The boy did as he was told, even though all the water leaked out before he could get back to the house. The grandfather laughed and said, "You will have to move a little faster next time," and sent him back to the river with the basket to try again.

This time the boy ran faster, but again the basket was empty before he returned home. Out of breath, he told his grandfather that it was "impossible to carry water in a basket," and he went to get a bucket instead.

The old man said, "I don't want a bucket of water; I want a basket of water. You can do this. You're just not trying hard enough," and he went out the door to watch the boy try again. At this point, the boy knew it was impossible, but he wanted to show his grandfather that even if he ran as fast as he could, the water would leak out before he got far at all. The boy scooped the water and ran hard, but when he reached his grandfather the basket was again empty.

Out of breath, he said, "See Papa, it's useless!"

"So you think it is useless?" The old man said, "Look at the basket." The boy looked at the basket and for the first time he realized that the basket looked different. Instead of a dirty old coal basket, it was clean. "Son, that's what happens when you read the Bible. You might not understand or remember everything, but when you read it, it will change you from the inside out."

Let us pray: O God – may we go to your word regularly. May we open it prayerfully. May we read it expectantly. And may we live it joyfully. Amen.

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