

Reading Scripture

Methodist Roots: “Reading Scripture”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – July 21 2024

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Joshua 1:7-9; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Acts 8:26-35

Reflection: Psalm 119

Greeting: The word of God is a lamp to our feet and a light for our journey. We remember what you have taught us so that we may find joy in your word. Support us in your ways and guide us in the paths of love and mercy. Help us to hear the word you have for us today and to let it be written on our hearts. (Psalm 119)

Prayer: Lord, we ask that you remind us of all the things you have taught us. Help us to remember all that you have said and done that we know from studying the words that record your steadfast love and faithfulness. Let them be a light in the darkness and a beacon upon the hill. We thank you that you are with us in all things, and that you have brought us together in this place so that we may sing your praises and glorify your name. Heavenly Father, watch over us. Let your Holy Spirit guide us and lead us. And may we celebrate the love and mercy found in the life, death, and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, our rock and our redeemer. By your love, it is in his name we pray this day. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 119

How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes. With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth. I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. (Psalm 119:9-16 NRSVue)*

We read the words of Psalm 19 and hear of reflecting on God’s word. That we should meditate on what it is God asks of us and do our best to follow him. That God’s faithfulness is with us when we seek to live by his unending love. Do you regularly study Scripture to grow closer with God? Do you lift up prayers asking for guidance and understanding? Who is it you will lift up in prayers this week? Who can you invite to journey with you in exploring Scripture together? How can you reach out to share the love of Christ with others? How can we live out our journey in Christ together?

Prayer: God, you are there for us before we know that we need you. Help us to remember your love as we study your word and follow your teachings. May you help us this day that we

may remember your steadfast love and faithfulness. We come before you now with the joys and concerns that we share on this day. We turn to you now with the celebrations that we have spoken together. We turn to you with the worries that we have lifted up with each other. We also bring before you the silent troubles and triumphs that we hold within. We pray that you will lift us up in love that we may know your strength. Help us in our laughter and our tears and guide us in sorrow and rejoicing. And may we join together joyfully by faith to celebrate your presence with us in love, forever and always. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading is from Joshua chapter 1, verse 7 through 9.

“Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:7-9 NRSVue)*

Our next reading is from 2 Timothy chapter 3, verse 14 through 23.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17 NRSVue)*

Our final reading is from Acts chapter 8, verse 26 through 35.

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and

*starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.
(Acts 8:26-35 NRSVue*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The next entry in our Methodist Roots series takes a look at how we study Scripture. I often think about the method that we use to understand Scripture. One way that we can think about this is to use what is often referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The name can be a little misleading. Wesley himself did not refer to the shape, but he did refer to all the parts of it. The four parts are Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. One misunderstanding I feel I should clear up is that this isn't four equal sides, but a foundation with three boxes building upon that foundation. The foundational aspect of this is Scripture itself. The other three are the aspects that help us to interpret and understand Scripture. It is through Scripture that hear about God's love. It is through tradition, experience, and reason that we understand and live out God's love. Because whenever we pick up the Bible, we have outside influence. We can use Scripture as the basis of faith, but we also need to understand the many different things that go into understanding what the Bible says. Tradition, experience, and reason help us to better understand God's word for us today.

I picked the readings for today because they help to give us an insight into how we study Scripture. The Bible is our guide, but a guide is not very helpful if you don't know how to read it. Some people talk about the plain meaning or the simple meaning of the text. No matter how many times I read it, the Bible does not come across as simple or plain. Because even the simple concepts have different layers of meaning to them. It can be confusing to try to figure those things out. This is why we study Scripture, so that we learn what it says and learn to apply it to life. This is what we are called to do in our reading from Joshua. We are told that God is with us wherever we go and that by meditating on it day and night, we will let God's word be always on in our mouths. We learn which way to go by studying Scripture. But sometimes we need help, just like the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts. They are trying to read from the prophet Isaiah but needed someone to explain what was being said. So, Philip helps to guide an understanding of Scripture. The explanation is given so that together they learn and they grow. We hear in 2 Timothy that all Scripture is beneficial for us to understand salvation through faith in Christ. That all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching and correction. That studying Scripture will equip us to be able to do good in the world. You might be thinking that this sounds pretty easy and wondering where all that complication comes in. Part of that is understanding that the Bible is a collection of texts from different authors at different times with different messages. We have historical and cultural context that we must take into account because nothing in the Bible comes to us without context or purpose. Here is an interesting thing to think about. When the words of 2 Timothy were written, 2 Timothy would not have been considered Scripture itself. There was not yet a unified Bible in the way we know it today. I don't present this as some kind of trick. I present it as part of what can make the Bible complicated. But when we approach Scripture through tradition, experience, and

reason we begin to form a more complete picture of God. Wesley noted that these are all important aspects that we use in order to understand the Bible as our guide to salvation. He said that the Bible is the source of everything necessary and sufficient for salvation, which I fully agree with. But we still have to take the time to understand Scripture. To quote the United Methodist Book of Discipline, “the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” And I would venture to guess that nearly every one of you has already had to rely upon someone else using tradition, experience, and reason just to begin studying the Bible. Because the Bible was not written in English. We rely upon translators and an editorial staff to do their best to translate ancient Hebrew and Greek into modern English. I imagine the scholars involved have used tradition, experience, and reason.

When we look at tradition, we can note that we have a rich history to draw upon. We are drawing upon tradition when we look at our Methodist roots. When we think about the rules of John Wesley, we are drawing upon tradition to understand Scripture. Tradition is not just denominational but helps us with anything that comes from the rich history of people who have done the work to interpret Scripture. It also includes things we have learned within the rich history of the local church, because tradition includes the shared experiences of the church. Tradition doesn't necessarily mean agreeing with everything that people before have said, but it gives us a solid foundation to work with. We can see why people interpreted the way they did and don't have to reinvent the wheel every time we pick up the Bible. We have the history of the church helping us to gain an understanding of what it looks like to live out our mission in Christ. Tradition illuminates Scripture and brings it to life. Joshua reminds us of our shared tradition, going back generation upon generation. Philip was using tradition when explaining Scripture to the Ethiopian eunuch. Because even though it was a newer tradition, it was a shared teaching that Philip had. Philip didn't have to work everything out himself, but shared in the unity, giving him the ability to more easily share the good news with others.

Our shared experience is not the only experience we bring to the table. We also understand Scripture through our personal experiences. Whenever we pick up the Bible to read, we bring our experiences with us. Our experiences help to craft the way that we see the world and how we read Scripture. It is also the reason that our understanding can change over time. Because we also bring our experiences of God into our understanding of Scripture. The more we live, the more experiences we bring to the table when we sit down to unpack Scripture. We will bring memories of heartache and defeat with us. We will have experiences of love and hope. We may bring struggles, failures, and triumphs with us into how we understand Scripture. And those things become relational into how we interpret the Bible. All of those things change how we live out our lives in Christ. That new life that we find in Christ is part of our experience, and when we share that we are helping others to understand why we read Scripture in the way that we do. Because the same verse may mean something to a child, another to a teen, yet another as a young adult, and yet another meaning when older. We

continue to live and grow in Christ, and therefore we continue to change our understanding of Scripture as we journey with the Holy Spirit. Our experience may open our eyes to deeper truths that we understand because of the life we have lived. Our experience may challenge us to reevaluate the position we once held. That is simply growth and should be embraced and not feared. Because when we share our understanding as the body of Christ, we can an even deeper understanding and appreciation of the Bible.

Now, the last thing that we bring as part of this quadrilateral is reason. Reason helps us to make sense of the Bible. It helps us to think out the implications of our interpretations. It helps us to work through the way that we live out the Bible. Reason can also help us to find the nuance we may find in Scripture. Reason can help us to create a cohesive theology that helps us to gain a greater understanding of God's love and helps us to live it out consistently. This is how we can put together social and historical context in a way that helps us to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible. Because we are called to gain wisdom as part of our exploration in faith. We are called to value understanding. Reason helps us to understand how a collection of books from different authors at different times can come together to tell a story about God's love. Contrary to what some may believe, we are called to use our brains for intellectual pursuits as part of our journey in Christ. Reason helps us to find meaning in difficult passages. Reason helps us to decide what is central to our faith, and as we will explore in coming weeks, helps us to work through disagreements so that we can live out our lives together in Christ.

Now, there is an awful lot more I would love to say, but this is a deep topic. I am looking to start some new study groups though, with this as a starting point. If you are interested, please let me know. Because we are called to study Scripture together. We are called to use our tradition, experience, and reason in understanding what the Bible says. As we use those tools that God has given us, we gain a greater understanding of God's love and a more complete picture of what it looks like to live a life in Christ. Because the Holy Spirit is always revealing new things in Scripture. God's word never holds still, because the message God has for us today may not be the same message that God had for us yesterday. Because we are not the same people that we were yesterday. Each day we gain experience that adds to our rich tradition. Each day we apply the reason God has given us so that we can better share the good news. When we come together to understand Scripture as the foundation of our faith, let us come together with tradition, experience, and reason, so that we may learn and grow together in wisdom and in love as we study the word of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Methodist Roots

We begin a series that looks at our Methodist heritage. "Methodist Roots" will be a six week look at the way that we follow Christ as United Methodists. We will be discussing the way that we live our lives in Christ, how we study, and how we interact with each other.

7/14: 3 Simple Rules

7/21: Reading Scripture

7/28: Grace for All

8/4: Good Works

8/11: Think and Let Think

8/18: The Individual in the Community

Neoga Grace UMC

752 Walnut

PO Box 610

Neoga, IL 62447

(217)895-2809

Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St

PO Box 267

Toledo, IL 62468

Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

2799 Etna Rd

Mattoon, IL 61938

Worship 9:30am

Rev Camron D St.Michael

<https://stmichael.pw>

cdstmichael@outlook.com

(316)530-3182 (call or text)

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

* Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

+ Scripture quotations are from the Common English Bible, Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.