

Sowing Seeds

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Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-23

My husband Carl and I both love sunflowers. Two years ago, he bought a packet of sunflower seeds, and I bought several packets of sunflower seeds, and unbeknownst to each other, we both planted them generously around our yard and gardens. And we were both baffled when weeks later, nothing had happened. No sunflower seedlings sprouting through the soil. No sunflower plants growing strong and tall. No sunflowers bobbing in the summer sun. What went wrong? Did birds or squirrels find the seeds and eat them? Was the soil undernourished? We don't know –but the seeds did not take root and flourish.

Two weeks ago, I shared with you some guidelines for understanding the Bible. We spoke about taking note of three different time periods – the time depicted in a Bible passage, our own time, and the time when the particular story was written. We spoke about asking the question, “What did this story say to the first people who heard it?”

Last week, Kent mentioned that it's always important to read Bible passages in context – taking note about what has happened before, and sometimes you want to see what comes next, too in understanding why a story comes where it does in the overall passage.

These are good tools in critical study of the Bible to help us understand scripture. Today I want to talk about how we receive a Biblical passage – what impact it has on our lives, how we understand it at the heart level, instead of at the head level.

Now these aren't entirely separate, of course – sometimes you need to have intellectual understanding of a passage before you can fully receive it at the heart level. We might distinguish between these two questions: first, what does the passage mean? And second, what does it mean to me? The second question is related to a question we've often asked: how, then, shall we live? That is, in light of this new information, how shall we live?

And one of the challenges with our intellectual study of the Bible is that we might leave it in the head. Someone once said that the longest distance God's Word has to travel is the distance between the head and the heart. It's easy to leave our understanding at the abstract level – but if the Word of God has no impact on our living, it is indeed like the sunflower seeds that Carl and I planted. The seeds were planted, but nothing flowered.

Let me give you an example. Most of us are familiar with the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It is a beautiful passage on love. The most well-known part is:

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does

not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [1 Corinthians 13:4-7]

This is often read at weddings – and why not? It is a beautiful description of love. And yet, once we try to seek more understanding, we learn that in its context, Paul was not talking about married love. The people hearing this letter at the time it was written were in a church that had a lot of divisions. Paul was writing the letter in large part to give them advice about getting along. He was writing about the love between people in a congregation. So as we get that intellectual understanding, we might appreciate that a church was in conflict, and Paul was helping the people in that church to take a good look at their own attitudes and behavior. But if we stop at that head level, and don't take it further, into our own hearts, we may not get all that the passage has to offer us.

With this particular passage, it is very easy to take it into our own hearts, and ask ourselves, "Am I patient? Am I kind? Am I envious or boastful or rude? Do I insist on my own way? Am I irritable or resentful? Do I rejoice in wrongdoing? Do I rejoice in the truth? Do I bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and does my commitment to others endure all things?"

Ouch. When we don't stop with reading God's Word, but also take time to let God's Word read us, we may find ways that we should change. Sometimes God's Word leads us to changed understanding, other times to changed lives. When we take it to heart, so to speak, God's Word can transform us.

How can we let God's Word take root in our lives? One way is to come to the Bible with what is sometimes called "a teachable spirit." That is, coming to our study of the Bible with openness and curiosity, with an attitude of "what might God be saying to me in this text?"

Kent spoke in his sermon last week about the difference between religion and spirituality. And he said that at the heart of the spiritual life "is an openness to the Holy Spirit's leading." "When you listen," he said, "and are willing to be led, wonderful things can happen." There is a way of reading the Bible that is sometimes called spiritual reading, or holy reading. The Latin name for this practice is *Lectio Divina* – it is a way to seek the Holy Spirit's leading in our reading of scripture. It is a way of reading with the heart instead of the head. It doesn't take the place of other ways of studying the Bible, but it is one tool to turn over the soil in our hearts, to open ourselves to God's wisdom, to allow ourselves to hear God's Word differently.

When we do *Lectio Divina* by ourselves, we read a passage of scripture through taking time after each reading to reflect; in a group, we can listen to the passage as we go through the four, or sometimes five, ways of reflecting that I'll describe to you. There are handouts in the back of the church that go into more depth, for those of you who are interested.

The four steps are known as *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). Sometimes a fifth step of *incarnatio* (living the word) is included.

In the handout, there is a wonderful analogy to *lectio divina* that you might find useful: “The four steps of *lectio divina* have also been compared to “feasting on the Word.” Reading is taking a bite of food. Meditation is chewing food. Prayer is savoring food. Contemplation is digesting food and making it a part of your body.... Slow down. Savor your time in God’s Word and find joy in meeting God.”¹

I’ll give you a little more information as we go along. Now I don’t often do this during a sermon, but I am going to suggest that you close your eyes, make yourself comfortable and listen. I’ll be reading the passage that Donna read from Isaiah, but I’ll be starting a verse earlier. This passage was from a part in Isaiah known as Second Isaiah that was written to God’s people after they were returning from the exile in Babylon. God was preparing them for a new beginning of their life as a nation.

The first time through, we are doing the *lectio* or reading step. Listen to the passage, and notice if there is a word or phrase that leaps out at you, that sort of shimmers for you, that particularly connects with you. Remember that word or phrase, and in the moment of silence that follows the reading, just think about that word or phrase.

Isaiah 55:9-13 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

¹² For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

¹ Phil Collins, PhD “Lectio Divina” found online at
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/scripture-engagement/lectio-divina/home>

Now the second time I read it is the stage we call *meditation* or meditation. Listen again to the passage, and in the silence afterwards, meditate about the phrase or word that seemed to connect with you – reflect on your life and how it might connect with your own circumstances. Think about the emotions that it inspired – were the words challenging? comforting? hopeful? was the phrase one that created an image for you? In the silence afterwards, meditate on these things. [Read the passage.]

The third time I read it is called the *oratio* or prayer stage. In the silence after the reading, offer the thoughts and feelings you've had about the reading to God in prayer. If it connected to your life in some way, or brought some situation to mind, pray about that. [Read the passage.]

And the fourth time we will go over the passage is the *contemplatio* or contemplation stage. In this stage, you simply rest in God's presence. If thoughts come to mind during this time, just let go of them (you don't have to chase them away, just let go). After a minute of this, I'll say "How, then, shall we live?" and you can move to the *incarnatio* or living stage. During this time, you consider how you will live out what the Spirit has brought to your heart. [Read the passage.]

Again, if you were doing this on your own, you would follow the same steps, but you would read the passage silently to yourself instead of listening to it being read. As you can tell, this is different from more intellectual ways of doing Bible Study. This is not a study method, it is a spiritual practice, a way of making space for God's Spirit, a way of experiencing God's presence, a way of learning to trust God's love. It's not a magic trick – like anything else, it is a practice, and takes practice. And we may not find every session of *lectio divina* to be particularly inspiring. But it creates possibilities that critical study does not – possibilities of encountering God in God's word and in our own hearts. It's a way of creating good soil for whatever seeds God might be planting.

Let us pray: God, we want to love you with our minds, with our hearts, and with our actions. Help us to come to you with discerning minds, with open and listening hearts, and let your Word take root in our lives so that our lives bear witness to you. Guided by your Spirit, may we find your Word to be not just historically interesting, but indeed a living word that challenges, comforts, inspires, and guides us today. We pray in your name, Amen.