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The B-I-B-L-E

A sermon on 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5

1st in a 3-part series on the Reformation

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I've used this illustration before. But—it's fitting, so I'm going to use it anyway. Back in the early 2000's there was this TV show that I just loved called "Malcolm in the Middle," about the life of a middle class family as seen through the eyes of their middle son Malcolm, who has a genius IQ. I loved how whenever they showed a view of the family's house, the front yard was both overgrown and dead. I really loved the characters of the parents, Hal and Lois, how they were always struggling to make ends meet and managed to enjoy life anyway. And I really loved one particular episode when Hal and Lois go to clean out a closet in their bedroom, which is just absolutely packed with stuff. They clean, and they clean, and they clean, and eventually they discover that it's not a closet at all, but a badly-needed second bathroom. They'd forgotten all about it and couldn't see to use it because of all the stuff that had been piled up in there.

This is a little bit like the relationship many of us have with the Bible.

You know, once upon a time, scripture was a very precious thing. There weren't Bibles in every hotel room nightstand, like there are today. At the church where I grew up, second graders earned their Bibles by spending all year memorizing the books of the Bible in Mary Medley's second grade Sunday School class. It was a big a deal. We didn't just hand them to you because you reached a certain age, like we do here. (Anybody else earn a Bible?)

As we countdown to the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation later this month, we cannot talk about the Reformation without talking about scripture. It is hard to imagine, but there was a time when church leaders did not want people to be able to read the

Bible for themselves. Scripture was for the ordained, and it was their job to interpret it to the people according to the traditions of the church. The people couldn't have read the Bible for themselves anyway, because it was translated into Latin, not common languages that people actually spoke.

The Reformers, led by Martin Luther, insisted that the ultimate authority for Christians had to be scripture. Every other source of authority was secondary. So, tradition—"we've always done it that way"—not as important as scripture. Reason—"doing this just makes sense!"—not as important as scripture. Personal experience—"you know, I just feel in my heart that I should do x, y, and z"—not as important as scripture. Not that these things are UN-important—but they are secondary. They must be evaluated in light of scripture.

Therefore, it's not enough to just accept what somebody in a clergy robe tells you to do, because they could be wrong. Scripture alone is the final authority. If that is true, then people need to know the Bible. They needed to be able to read the Bible in their own language—and they needed to be able to read. One of the positive things that came out of the Reformation was the emphasis on education for the masses, and many schools were formed, including schools for girls. The Reformers wanted everybody to learn to read so that everybody could read the Bible.

But this did not go over very well with those in power at the time, and so when we read about the Reformation, we learn about men like William Tyndale, who was burned at the stake in 1536 for having the audacity to translate the Bible into English.

On the one hand, we have stories of brave people who suffered and died in order that ordinary people might have the privilege of reading the word of God in their own languages. And on the other, we live in a world where it is increasingly difficult to exercise this privilege because our lives are so busy and so cluttered with activities, with more information, news, and

entertainment than we know what to do with. Why read the Bible when we've got the Wall Street Journal, Dave Ramsey, TED talks, and countless self-help gurus showing us how to do life better? Many Bibles tend to gather dust on bookshelves and nightstands.

Have you ever said to yourself, "I really need to read the Bible more," and maybe for a few days you actually do, and then something happens and you get busy and forget? Yet when we do not make God's word a priority, we are in real danger of missing out on a very important resource, much as Hal and Lois missed out on enjoying their second bathroom because their clutter made them forget what they had.

What is it, exactly, that we are missing out on? Paul writes this in his letter to Timothy. "Every scripture is inspired by God." The word inspired literally means "breathed by." The scriptures are breathed by God. There have been countless conversations about how this actually works—does it mean that God breathed each and every word into each writer of scripture, so that the Bible is without error and cannot be questioned? Or does it mean that God inspired scripture the way the life and stories of Julius Caesar inspired William Shakespeare to write the play, "Julius Caesar"? Or something in between? Most Presbyterians I know tend not to use words like inerrant, meaning without error, but we do believe the Bible is true, and trustworthy, and that God still speaks through scripture today. God breathes LIFE into the scriptures, just as God breathed life into Adam in the creation story. I don't know about you, but I am not sure that all the stuff I read on my smartphone and the never-ending arguments I watch on cable news shows really qualify as "life."

The reason Paul bothers to explain that scripture is inspired by God is because Timothy is going to need it. Paul says, Timothy, you just gotta preach it, buddy. Do it when it's easy, do it when it's hard. Correct, confront, and encourage. The NRSV, the translation you have in your

pew Bibles, says convince, rebuke, and encourage, but I like correct, confront, and encourage, so I'm sticking with the Common English Bible today.

Let's talk about correcting for a minute. We sometimes have very negative feelings about correcting. But being corrected can be incredibly helpful, like when my piano teacher would point out a wrong note I kept playing, and when I started playing the right one, the whole piece of music sounded better—and was actually easier to play!

Sometimes we have ideas about God that really need correcting. I remember a young man in a youth group I helped with back in seminary. He had a few small physical abnormalities—I think because of a birth defect or something. One night in small group time, this sweetheart of a young man started sharing about how he knew that God must be disciplining him for something he had done, and that's why looked the way he did. That idea needed some correcting. This young man needed to hear the story of Jesus and the man who was born blind, who everybody thought must have sinned because he was blind, and Jesus declared that this was nonsense. He needed to hear Paul's words about how God's grace is made perfect in our weakness, and how all things work together for good for those who love God. There's a lot of bad theology out there, and bad theology hurts people. When we know the stories and teaching of scripture, we can help.

On a related note, a lot of people mistakenly attribute things to the Bible, like “God helps those who help themselves,” and “God will never give you something you can't handle,” and “Everything happens for a reason,” none of which are actually in the Bible. Adam Hamilton of Church of the Resurrection once did an entire sermon series about non-biblical quotes like that, called “Half-Truths”—because there is truth in those sayings, but not the whole truth. Scripture is wonderful for providing correction and clarity when we hear half-truths.

Let's talk about confronting. Shudder, shudder. I thought about confronting as I prepared this sermon for today. I thought, gosh, how do I preach about scripture today without making people feel bad for not knowing it better, or reading it more, or doing more with it? Too many of us just have too much going on. We don't need to be coming to church and getting scolded. I thought, how do I soften this message, and make it more appealing? How do I put a more positive spin on it?

And then I saw that word "confront." And I thought, maybe I don't. Maybe I just let the scripture say whatever it needs to say today, even if it isn't fun to hear. Maybe we also need to let scripture do that with how we use our time, and how we spend our money, and how we talk *to* people, and how we talk *about* people.

Recently, I have been confronted with some weaknesses in the way I manage my time. I, who thought I was so great at maintaining boundaries and being tough, said yes to too many things and chose to do too many things myself rather than trust others to help me. Someone pointed out to me that there's a tiny chance I've been enabling others to lean on me a little too much. I have allowed my desire to be approved of and appreciated to set my priorities. As I looked back on how I let this happen, I realized I had really been slacking off on two things: reading scripture on a daily basis, for my own enrichment rather than just sermon preparation, and honoring the sabbath. Both things that scripture upholds as very important activities. The irony is, neglecting those things had NOT saved me any time. I had more time and more energy when I was more faithful about those things. (Shrug). Through scripture, and through the wisdom of friends, whose wisdom Scripture confirms, the Spirit confronts me, and steers me back to a life that is really life and not just a checklist or a race to the finish line. Perhaps this has happened for you too.

Confronting is not fun, but isn't it the most incredible gift? It's one we are all called on to give and receive from time to time. I look back on my life and I give thanks for everyone who has ever had the courage to confront me, when they've done it out of love and with patience.

Third, encouragement. We finally get to a fun one. If for no other reason than to become excellent encouragers, we need to immerse ourselves in scripture. When we know scripture, we can encourage our grieving friends, "There is a time to weep, and this is your time, and it's OK that you don't feel like celebrating Christmas yet." We can say, "The sun'll come out tomorrow, bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow, there'll be sun." (That's from Annie, not the Bible). We can confidently say, "I know you've messed up, but nothing in this life including you can ever separate you from the love of God, and somehow or other, all shall be well." People who love God and love scripture are the best encouragers in the world. They can see Christ in you, and they can name it. They see Christ in you when you can't (even).

So let us give thanks for the gift of scripture, including the less fun parts of scripture, like this one. Let us give thanks for any feeling some of us might have that we haven't treasured scripture as we ought, for perhaps that feeling is there to nudge us into holy action. Let us clear away the clutter that keeps us from taking full advantage of the gift we've been given. Let us embrace the study of scripture, so that we too might participate in correcting, confronting, and encouraging, in ways that are truly helpful and out of love, not out of ego. Amen.