

“For we know only in part...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, February 3, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13

Will you pray with me. Wise God, teach us what we yet may be this day. Help us live out the profound message of 1 Corinthians 13 as though it were stamped on our foreheads for all to see and written on our hearts for us to grasp in its fullest intent. May *your* Word be our guide and *our* words be acceptable to you this day. Amen.

There are three ways to say, “The Bible is the Word of God!” If I say, “The BIBLE is the word of God!”, the focus is on the written document that thousands of people around the world take as infallible and indisputable truth. If I say, “The Bible is the Word of GOD!”, the focus is on God, both the eminence and imminence of God, the greatness and the nearness of God. If I say, “The Bible is the WORD of God!”, the focus is on the wisdom, the depth, the multitude of understandings of God. Depending on one’s intonation when they say “The Bible is the Word of God!”, different meanings arise for different people, depending on their religious upbringing or persuasion, or... no such upbringing or persuasion at all.

If someone had said to me in 1992, “The Bible is the Word of God!”, I would have said, “Yeah, right....” and done whatever I could to ease my way out of the conversation, or at the very least tried to be polite while mumbling to myself, “Oh boy.... Another one of ‘those religious fanatic types’ is trying to bring me to Jesus!”

If someone had said to me ten years ago, “The Bible is the Word of God!”, I could very honestly have said, within myself and to others – probably to many of you! – “Yes, the Bible is the Word of God, in that it holds a depth and richness of the holy and sacred messages and meanings of the *presence* of God in the world for thousands of years.”

If someone said to me today, “The Bible is the Word of God!”, I would say, “Yes, the Bible is the Word of God, in that it amazes me daily in what I learn anew in its pages about my sacred ancestors,

what I am reminded of again and again in its stories of God’s actions in the world, and what I relish in the comfort it gives me,

the honesty and depth it teaches me about the relationships between the human and the divine, and the grace it offers as God's guidance for me as a Christian... in ways I never knew possible in 1992."

Yes, the Bible is the Word of God for me. What is it for you?

Professor David Lose, of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, suggests there are three ways the phrase "the Word of God" has been used over the centuries.

First, for Christians, "Jesus is God's Word made flesh, and [the Bible] describes the actual historical events of a first-century Jewish teacher named Jesus.

[Second, Lose suggests] the Word of God refers to the gospel, the *proclaimed word of good news* that tells what God has done for us and all the world in and through Jesus. The gospel is therefore concerned not simply with what happened in the life and death of Jesus, but with what ongoing meanings and significance it may hold for us today. There is no proving the gospel, it remains a confession of faith about why Jesus mattered – and still matters – very much.

[Third, Lose writes,] the Bible is the written Word of God that tells the story of God and the people of God from the beginning of creation to the end of time."¹

Whether we think of the Bible as a literal history, a confession of faith, or a story about God and God's people, it matters. The ongoing and never ending controversy over the Bible is that it matters to different individuals and groups of people in different ways – some of those ways are constructive, helpful and inclusive.... others are damaging, exclusionary, and private ways, as in, "If you don't say the 'right' religious words and pray the 'right' prayers, you're out!"

Professor Lose has written three study guides for congregations to use. One of them is entitled *Making Sense of Scripture*. I thought we might have a weekly study group during Lent and consider this guide, if there is any interest. I've heard Lose preach and lecture several times. He is quite approachable in his teaching style.

There's a great quote by that amazing writer, "Anonymous," that goes, "Reading the Bible without meditating on it is like trying to eat without swallowing." Lent is a good time to meditate on the Bible!

Our responsive reading for this morning, 1 Corinthians 13, is known as "the love chapter" of Paul's words to the first Christians in the city of Corinth. This book of the Bible was written probably twenty-five or so years after Jesus' death. This chapter of 1 Corinthians is one of my favorites in the Bible. It is one of the biblical passages that focuses most clearly on the "bottom line" of the Bible as the Word of God for me – "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor 13:13)

Chapter 13 is often read at weddings and funerals. I've offered it in those settings myself many times – for its focus on love and goodness and faith and hope. But I have to smile every time someone asks me if I can read 1 Corinthians 13 for a wedding or a funeral, because the original intention of Paul's letter to the first followers of Jesus in Corinth, and specifically Chapter 13, was not for weddings or funerals. It was because people were not getting along and

¹David Lose, *Making Sense of Scripture Leader Guide*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009, p. 27.

were exhibiting behavior that was not in the loving and compassionate spirit with which Jesus would have wanted them to act!

A little background here is helpful. Eugene Peterson, a well known theologian and pastor who recently died, writes of the setting and time of this letter of Paul's, "The people of Corinth had a reputation in the ancient world as an unruly, hard-drinking, sexually promiscuous bunch of people. When Paul arrived with the Message of the 'good news' [of Jesus] and many of them became believers in Jesus, they brought their reputations with them right into the church. Paul spent a year and a half with them as their pastor, going over the Message of the 'good news' in detail, showing them how to live out this new life of salvation and holiness as a community of believers. Then he went on his way to other towns and churches.

Sometime later [after Paul had left Corinth] he received a report from one of the Corinthian families that in his absence things had more or less fallen apart. He also received a letter from Corinth asking for help. Factions had developed, morals were in disrepair, worship had degenerated into a selfish grabbing for the supernatural.... [So] Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a classic of pastoral response: affectionate, firm, clear, and unswerving in the conviction that God among them, revealed in Jesus and present in his Holy Spirit, continued to be the central issue in their lives, regardless of how much of a mess they had made of things.

[Peterson goes on,] Paul doesn't disown them as brother and sister Christians, doesn't throw them out because of their bad behavior, and doesn't fly into a tirade over their irresponsible ways. He takes it all more or less in stride, but also takes them by the hand and goes over all the old ground again, directing them in how to work all the glorious details of God's saving love into their love for one another. [Peterson concludes,] when people become Christians, they don't at the same moment become nice. This always comes as something of a surprise. Conversion to Christ and his ways doesn't automatically furnish a person with impeccable manners and suitable morals."²

Knowing the background of Paul's 1st letter to those first followers of Jesus in Corinth, the words of 1 Corinthians 13 take on even more meaning than they do when they are offered for wedding celebrations or funeral remembrances. The message of the chapter is timeless. It seems to me it offers the best and fullest of the "Word of God," because it touches on all the attributes of human behavior and holy response: first, the *worst* attributes – those envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, those insisting on their own way, those irritable or resentful; those rejoicing in wrongdoing. Sound familiar to some of what we see in family life, church life, community life, political life today?

And Chapter 13 touches on the best attribute of human life – love... Love is patient; love is kind; love rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. I see those attributes, too, everyday... in the words and actions of many people in our local communities and beyond. Unfortunately our media sources, and sometimes we individually, would rather be "the first with the worst," than "the humblest with the highest" within us and around us.

Fortunately, Paul doesn't just leave the first followers of Jesus in Corinth, or us either, hanging.... wondering if we're really ever going to get right with God, trying to "get it" about "the Word of God." He reminds the Corinthians, and us, too, that we don't know the whole picture yet. We're not in command of all there is or what will happen in the future. If we think we're smart and have a handle on all the knowledge there is to know, we're mistaken.

²Eugene Peterson, *The Message, The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2004, p. 1324.

Have you ever used a two-sided mirror? Like this one – one side with everyday mirroring, and the other side with magnified mirroring. The older I get the more I like the one that isn't magnified – because the higher magnification side shows up too many of my aging features! But we need both sides – we need to see both from a distance, dimly, and know that we are and will be seen close up by God, clearly, with all our blemishes and wrinkles and scars from not very nice behavior, *and* with all our tears of faith, hope and love. The greatest of these is love – don't ever forget that... because God won't.

Whether we read the Bible literally as a semi-historical document, spiritually as a confession of faith, or religiously as the story of God and God's people, we have an amazing textbook before us. It comes with this instruction – open and read, for we “know only in part” now, but we “will know fully” down the road a piece. (1 Cor 13:12) The Bible *is* the Word of God for me. What is it for you?

Let the people say, “Amen.”