

## AND ANOTHER THING...

Retirement Sunday at Damascus United Methodist Church

June 17, 2018

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*(If reading while viewing the Power Point, the \* signals the slide change)*

The second most difficult sermon to preach is the first sermon in a new congregation. The most difficult is the last. The first sermon is difficult because it is hard to know what to say. Where do you start? What do you first want to say to a people you do not yet know? The final sermon is more difficult because you have to decide how to wrap it up. After years of preaching, what do you finally, ultimately say?

After wrestling with this dilemma, I finally decided just to say it all. Here is my thinking. I have been preaching series of sermons on a host of topics. What all hold in common is that they have all been biblically based. In other words, the series, themes, topics, and content all began with a text, or collection of texts, with the goal of ferreting out what the biblical word of God has to say to us today. Given that, what better way to end than to review the scripture? Together over these five years, we have touched on every part of the Bible. I cannot be completely sure, however, that you remember every sermon and every point made so, as a gift to you, I am going to cover it again for you.

You might be moaning that this is a lot to cover. Many of you have taken the Disciple Bible Study and spent hours each week for thirty-four weeks. Now I am going to do it all in one service? Fear not. I don't want to call you slackers. Taking the time to work through scripture in some depth is a good thing. It is not going to take me thirty-some weeks, though. I can cover it in less than thirty minutes.

You know there are different Biblical translations and paraphrases such as "The Message." Well, I have put together the paraphrase called "The Bottom Line Bible."\* It makes Reader's Digest look like War and Peace. So, sit back and relax. Take notes in case there is a test. Hear the message of The Bottom Line Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Here we go.\*

**(GENESIS)** In the beginning.... Who cares how God created the world, or how long it took? Well, maybe we care if only for curiosity sake. But these questions are best left to science. What the Bible wants us to know is that a creative and powerful God brought the world into being and made it a beautiful and amazing place. So beautiful and amazing it could rightfully be thought of as paradise. All people had to do was tend the garden, soak up the beauty, and live the perpetual three-day weekend.

People were not satisfied with that, however. They wanted more. Don't we always? They wanted to be like God and ended up messing up the whole set-up. Things pretty much went downhill from there.\* It got so bad that God thought about wiping the whole thing out and starting over, but instead only partly wiped things out with a flood. He then started again with a remnant, but it didn't really help. People multiplied and wanted to be like God (here we go again), so God confused their language and scattered them.

\*Finally God called an old guy named Abram and told him he wanted Abram and his descendants to model for the world how to love God and to be loved by God. This was a big deal, especially since Abram did not have any descendants at the time. By the way, the fact that Abram was so old suggests that God is not a big believer in retirement, which is a little disconcerting on a day like this. Anyway, Abram, known as Abraham, did pretty well. His son Isaac did OK, but grandson Jacob was a little sketchy and Jacob's sons were sketchier.\* They sold their brother Joseph into slavery, something most brothers want to do at one point or the other, but thankfully don't. It turned out the joke was on them. After some hardship, Joseph thrived, became powerful in Egypt, and soon all of his brothers lived there with him as one happy, extended family. They prospered.

Hundreds of years later, a Pharaoh came to the throne who was irritated that a wall had not been built in time to have kept the Hebrews out. So, he enslaved them and oppressed them and made life miserable for them. It was time to get out of Dodge.\*

**(EXODUS)** This is a prequel to the gospel. Pay attention because we will come back to this. God sent a deliverer, Moses, to lead the people from slavery. Their freedom was made possible because of the blood of an innocent lamb. Moses led the people through the water to the Promised Land. On the way he gave them the law to teach them how to live. They whined and complained and murmured the whole way there, but they made it.\*

**(LEVITICUS)** The aforementioned law.\*

**(NUMBERS)** The original ancestry.com and the rest of the story of Exodus.\*

**(DEUTERONOMY)** Moses retells the story of Exodus, in case you missed it in Exodus and Numbers.\*

**(JOSHUA)** Then Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and a whole lot more, and the Hebrews conquered Canaan and settled there.\*

**(JUDGES)** The period of the Judges includes stories of faithful, interesting, strange, and bazaar people who help to keep the Israelites from being overrun.\*

**(RUTH)** Ruth is a sweet story of devotion and loyalty showing how foreigners can be amazing people. Lots of people have a Ruth somewhere in the family tree, which is nice. The world needs Ruths.\*

**(SAMUEL/KINGS/CHRONICLES)** We then move into the period of the monarchy with I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles. It begins with Samuel who was part Judge, part Priest, and part Prophet. Really, he was a bit like an Ayatollah, in a good way - the supreme leader and spiritual guide who helped the people. But he was getting old and the people did not much like his sons, and they wanted a king because other nations had kings. Samuel told them it would be a bad idea, but they insisted, so God told Samuel to anoint Saul to be their first king. Saul did OK for a while, but became egocentric, paranoid, and subject to fits of temper, not good traits in a leader; so God lost confidence in him and told Samuel to anoint David as the king in waiting.

David took the throne and, save for a few failings, did exceedingly well. He turned the twelve tribes into a nation, centralized the government in Jerusalem, and oversaw a period of expansion and prosperity. Solomon followed and built the Temple but, for all of his supposed wisdom, bankrupted the nation. The kingdom then split in two, Israel to the north and Judah to

the south, each with a king. After that, you can count the decent kings on one hand. The rest were idolaters and mostly inept. Eventually the northern kingdom of Israel collapsed, conquered by Assyria, and the southern kingdom of Judah collapsed, conquered by Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed and the people carried off to captivity in Babylon.\*

**(EZRA/NEHEMIAH)** When they were freed from exile in Babylon 50 years later, someone had to lead the rebuilding of the city and Temple and reconstitute the government. The priest Ezra and governor Nehemiah were leading figures. I'll come back to Esther.\*

**(WISDOM LITERATURE: JOB, PSALMS, PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES, SONG OF SOLOMON)\***

Job: Oh my, a lot of calamities befell Job. His experience brings an important but unpopular lesson: bad things can and do happen to good people. It is just a fact. Do not try to make sense of it. Do not try to reconcile it with some kind of divine justice spreadsheet. You cannot. Why me and not them is not a question that can be answered, nor is it helpful. It is far too complicated. Instead, persevere. Stick close to God. Trust in God's ultimate ending.\*

Psalms: Every religion needs a hymnbook.\*

Proverbs: This book includes advice for young men coming into adulthood. It is designed to help them be good people, good citizens and followers of God. Wisdom, not book learning, but wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. In other words, seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. This should be required reading in the White House, Congress, all courts, state legislatures, and all high schools. Well, let's face it. This should be required reading for everyone. If people would pay attention to Proverbs, the term *common sense* would not be an oxymoron.\*

Ecclesiastes: Here we have the ramblings of a grumpy old man who figured out too late that you cannot control life and you cannot take your wealth with you. Look, he says, life happens: the good and bad, the joyful and sad, the ups and downs, life happens. We cannot control that. We can, however, control our attitudes. So, accept what is and find joy in work and play.\*

Song of Solomon: What's it about? Romantic love is a good and beautiful thing. It is a gift of God. Embrace it and relish it.\*

**(THE PROPHETS)** This brings us to the prophets, four major and twelve minor ones. Most have the same message. They begin by saying worship God and God alone. They continue by saying worship God and God alone. They conclude by saying worship God and God along. Look, they tell us, God has taught us how to live. God has shown us how to live. Live that way and things will go well with the people. Ignore God's ways and it leads to trouble. Don't blame God for the holes you are in. Chances are good that you dug them yourselves. When I think of the prophets, I think of God saying, "How many times do I have to go over this with you?!"\*

There are a few prophetic outliers, such as Jonah. This is not a story about a whale, although it is a whale of a story. Jonah's point is simple. God loves people whom you don't. Get over it, quit whining, and care about them, too.\*

Daniel is another outlier that pairs better with Esther. Here the point is that, even if it leads to having to risk your life coming before the king, or getting thrown into a fiery furnace or lion's den, be what you are and who you are and stand with God. In today's context, this means do not be or act Christian only when it is popular or the accepted thing to do, or when it helps you in some way. Be and act Christian when it is not popular, or puts you on the outside, or even if it

is a dangerous thing to do. There are no bandwagons of God-fans – stand with God no matter what. Don't fear the one who can kill the body. Fear the one who can kill the soul.\*

There you have it. We are already to the New Testament! See how easy this is?\*

**(THE GOSPELS)** The New Testament begins with the gospels. The gospels are the sequel to Exodus/Numbers/Deuteronomy. I told you we would come back to this. I hope you were paying attention. God sent a deliverer to lead us from slavery. Freedom was made possible by the blood of the innocent lamb. The deliverer leads us through the water to the Promised Land. This time the deliverer is God's Son, Jesus, instead of Moses. We are in slavery to sin, not the Egyptians. The blood is the blood of Christ, not an actual lamb. The water is baptism instead of the Sea. The Promised Land is the kingdom of God instead of Canaan. That is the essence of the gospel message. It is the salvation of being freed from sin for a new life with God.

Wait, you say. What about the teaching and miracles of Jesus? Well, just as Moses gave the Law in the wilderness to show people how to live, so the teaching of Jesus shows us how to live, and the miracles are signs of what it is like in the Promised Land. In the Promised Land all have enough to eat, there is no illness; the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk; death is no more; and there is a place for everyone. Does that sound good to you? Then for Pete's sake, accept the grace of God, let Jesus free you from the power of sin, and follow him. That's kind of the whole point.\*

**(ACTS)** In this part of the story, the apostles finally figure it out, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and start to do incredible things in the name of Jesus. They also figure out that the good news is for everyone, including Gentiles. Who knew? Maybe one day the Church and churches will also figure out that the good news is for everyone, and not just for whomever each church deems worthy.\*

**(THE LETTERS OF PAUL)** Paul tells us that in God's eyes, everyone matters; everyone has a spiritual gift to share, so treat each other that way. Take off the clothes of the world, put on the clothes of the Spirit, and act with grace, mercy, kindness, and peace. Above all, love each other, not superficially, but deeply, the way Christ loves us. In thought, words, and deed, make everything about Christ.\*

**(THE PASTORAL EPISTLES)** Other apostles also wrote letters, such as Peter and John and James and Jude. They encourage us to be a community of faith. It is not just about you. The pronoun *us* is more important than the pronoun *me*. Don't just talk the talk, walk the walk. This means, for one thing, being hospitable. In Hebrews we are told to welcome strangers because we may be entertaining angels unaware. By the way, being hospitable is not the same as being friendly. It is more. Every church claims to be friendly. I know of no exceptions, although a few honest ones put parameters on it.\* For instance, a church near me makes it clear on their sign, they are friendly, but only at 11:00. You see, "Sunday School 8:45, Worship 10:35, A Friendly Church at 11:00." I think I will visit there but I am not going until 11:00. Being hospitable is more than smiling and saying hello. It is being alert to the needs of others. It is including. I do not mean assimilating, which is the act of making others like us. It is more incorporating, which includes while honoring differences.

Being a community of faith is also about empowering each other. It is about giving

strength and dignity to each other. You know the teaching. Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.\* Teach a man to fish and he'll sit on a boat and drink beer all day. Wait, that's not where I was going with that. Let me think. Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. That's it. Actually, I think I had it right the first time. Forget that point.\*

Just remember, we do good things, but, this may sound strange to say about a church, we do good things but ultimately we are not a do-good society, we are an empowering society. We don't want to just help the poor, for instance. Yes, we want to help. That is a good thing. Mostly, though, we want to engage and think and act in ways to make it possible for them not be poor anymore. The first approach can slide into paternalism. The second leans toward empowerment. Everyone has a place, a role, and dignity in the community of faith.\*

**(REVELATION)** Bringing us finally to Revelation, the biblical nod to sci-fi lovers. Don't get lost in the intricate symbolism. Here it is. There is a cosmic battle raging between good and evil, God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell, however you want to say it. It is nasty and what we see in our world is the collateral damage. In the end, though, God wins. We are in the midst of the battle, but we know the outcome. God wins. If you want to be on the winning side, side with God. No matter how it looks at the moment, no matter the immediate consequences, side with God.\*

There it is: The Bottom Line Bible. The Bible in less than thirty minutes. Now the good news. Today only, for only \$19.95 you can have, not one, but two copies of The Bottom Line Bible – one for you and one for another, because everyone knows someone who needs to hear this. Call 1-800-Bottom Line Bible. Operators are standing by.

Seriously, I am half joking, of course. The Bible is rich and deep and nuanced. You can study it for a lifetime and keep discovering truths and insights and, of course, I encourage that. I have often said that I can preach on the same text multiple times and always find something new to say.

But I am only half joking, because it is also true that after all the study and all the nuance, a straightforward message runs throughout. And that message is my final message to you. By all means plumb the depth of scripture.\* At the same time, keep it simple, saints. Follow this trajectory:\*

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8\*

“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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” I Corinthians 12: 1-3, 13\*

“For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” I John 3: 11\*

(Lawyer) “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Jesus) “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” (Lawyer) “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Jesus) “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” Luke 10:25-28\*

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” John 13:34\*

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

**On these two commands hang all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:36-40\***

Do you see a pattern here? The famous rabbi Hillel once bragged that he could recite the entire law while hopping on one foot. When challenged to do so, he began hopping and said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Then he stopped hopping. Looking around he said, “This is the entire law. All the rest is commentary.” All the rest is commentary!

Love God, love neighbor. It comes down to that. Don’t parse words like neighbor and love. All of God’s children are neighbors, and you know what love is. Love is trust of and obedience to God and wanting/hoping/doing the best for God’s children. Yes, it can get tricky and messy and even confusing, but, if you genuinely act out of love, you will act well.

Friends, there is a lot messed up in the world, enough causing anyone paying attention to cry. And there are huge challenges before the church. There are plenty of bumpy roads to walk. I do not want to imply that things are easy or are going to be easy, not at all. But I am saying, if from the depth of your heart and soul, you love God and love neighbor, you will have done what you can do. Trust God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to do the rest. In far more detail that is all that I have been telling you these past five years. It is all that I have for you now. God loves us, every one of us, each of us. Our response is to love God and love neighbor. All the rest is commentary. Amen.