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What is your canon? I am not referring to a large, mounted piece of artillery spelled with two 'n's. I am referring to a body of literature. What I'm asking is what body of literature has authority for you; you know, your go-to source of truth – the *Wall St. Journal*, *The Economist*, the writings of Euripides, Robert Frost, or Betty Friedan?

It seems the pendulum has swung far from the realm of objectivity and that most of the news sources or authors we read these days have a calculated liberal or conservative bent. Some of you, I know, read or listen to a variety of sources to get a variety of opinions.

But whatever we read or consult for news or life philosophy is ultimately *someone else's opinion* that we then adopt or adapt to form our own opinion.

The Bible, however, is a different matter. Today's texts offer an opportunity to consider the role of the Bible in the life of the church as we ordain and install new officers. I tell every class of new elders and deacons – above the Constitution and Confessions of the church – the Bible is our pre-eminent book. Here's why.

When Jesus read from the scroll in the synagogue or when Elaine read from the Bible this morning, I'll bet no one was thinking 'Boy, that reading from Luke was a little too liberal for me' or 'that psalm sounds like the Tea Party.' Whether you think the Bible dropped from heaven or that it is a human document that seeks to capture the experience of God's people--first in pursuit of the Promised Land, then as they heard and responded to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth--what every church *without exception* says is that the Bible transcends human agendas and communicates eternal, living principles, woven together into a story that has the power to change human lives.

One scholar writes: 'the idea that the will of God is preserved in a body of literature was found nowhere in the ancient world outside of Israel. Yes, various gods were understood to have guided their people through codes-of-law like, for example, the Hammurabi Code; and, yes, some epics and hymns described the activities of the gods, but the notion of a divinely inspired anthology of literature that purports to declare the universal will of God is found only in ancient Israel.'<sup>i</sup>

So here's the rub: we live in a culture that buys into the idea that the answers to all of life's questions are located solely within ourselves and our experience.

But to hear the Bible preached upon, to meditate upon Scripture is to initiate a different process; it is to open our lives to the power of God's Word; it is to expose our hearts to and risk being remade by these ancient living texts.

Calvin and Luther said the Bible is the church's book not because of its inspiration, inerrancy, efficacy or anything else but because of the *permanency of its truth*. We value the Bible and find it credible because it was written by committed insiders, not by informed observers, innocent bystanders or sociologists of religion.<sup>ii</sup>

For God's people, the Bible has an authority no other text has. "Sola Scriptura," was the cry of the Reformation. What that means is that the Bible, above all other texts, is the single, authoritative account of the human experience of the Judeo-Christian God. It is the record of God speaking to, leading, disciplining, and finally blessing the people as they listened to, rebelled against, and finally embraced God's purposes.

The Biblical narrative is formative for who we are and what we are called to do as the church because it anticipates every conceivable human response to the presence and power of the Sovereign God in our personal and communal lives. The claim this ancient text makes upon us is a proposition of faith not science and cannot therefore be proven but only accepted and trusted.

I say the Bible is an ancient *living* text. The 'living' part is how it relates to us today. The question I ask myself every week as I prepare a sermon is "what are these texts saying to us now". God speaks to us not in some generic, this-applies-to-all-people-everywhere way, but, through the text which speaks to and through the preacher who delivers a message that is intended for a particular congregation at a given moment in time. Although the biblical stories may be old and familiar we believe the Holy Spirit in our interpretation and application articulates God's will for the church now.

For the Bible to play this kind of role in our lives the readers and hearers must be like empty vessels. Humility and vulnerability are non-negotiable traits for readers of the Bible. Or you could say, it's good to be 'spiritually hungry' when you pick up your Bible. God can't work with people who have all the answers and think of themselves as completely independent and self-sufficient.

Let's consider, for example, the texts we have this morning – the story of Jesus reading the scroll in his hometown synagogue and Paul's letter to the Corinthians about the diversity of the church.

When Jesus reads from the Bible, he reads from the prophet Isaiah that the sick will be healed, the naked clothed, the oppressed set free. Everyone is very pleased; they say, "that's our boy, that's what we like to hear the benevolence and generosity of God."

But then Jesus selected another story which he preceded by saying, "No prophet is accepted in his own country" – a bold thing to say in his own synagogue given the story he is about to tell; it is when Elijah and Elisha were sent to God's people but could do no great work because the people were stubborn and stiff-necked, so the prophets turned to the gentile neighbors of the Hebrews and God blessed *them*.

Jesus uses this story as a mirror, he holds it up so that the smug and self-satisfied synagogue can see themselves as they really were. Suddenly, the mood shifts, smiles turn to frowns, the people try, but fail, to throw him off a cliff.

What's the point of the story for us? As much as the Bible comforts it also afflicts. It takes courage and may be unpopular as a leader of a congregation, as an elder or deacon, to hold yourself and the people who elected you to God's standards; standards which you may find in conflict with your own or with the comfortable norms of this church.

There will be times when you will face difficult decisions; you will consult a variety of sources and the opinions of others, you will search your own soul; finally, I urge you to consult your Bible. We must rid ourselves of the notion that we are the Society of the Saved. The primary message of the church and the Bible is that God is God. Yet, the one institution most in danger of domesticating God and reducing him to a partisan god of the in-group is the church.

If you search the wisdom of the Bible you will lead us where God wants to take us. You are equipped now to do this. You don't need a Ph.D in the Bible.

This goes for us individually too. When we find ourselves in moments of decision or questioning, the more familiar we are with the Bibles the more ways the Holy Spirit will have to open our eyes and hearts to the path of life. The Bible is our operating manual and teaches how to change old habits, find renewal and bring life where there is despair.

I want to note the epistle reading from 1 Corinthians which we did not hear today but is a selection for this Sunday. It is the timeless metaphor of the church as a physical body with many parts: eyes, ears, nose, arms, legs. Each part contributes something special, something none of the other parts can contribute, and, therefore, something the body needs to be whole and complete. So, also, the church has many members. For the church to be the church it needs every member.

Paul was writing to a church in Corinth that had many factions. *We live in a time* when pluralism threatens to undo not just the church but the nation and world. If God who made humans different from one another is the source of our differences, then diversity is the key to becoming who we were meant to be. What keeps the church functioning at its best is the need of each member for the others. Inclusivity is built into our spiritual DNA.

No member is more important than another; each member is the missing piece to the puzzle that makes the beautiful panorama of the church. When one member is missing or suffers, all suffer. You can't run a race if some part of you is hurting. We are all invested in the health and well being of each other for the good of the whole.

What does Paul's text say to Westminster? One of the constitutional duties of elders and deacons is care for the congregation, to give attention to those in need – which includes those visitors who walk through the door for the first time.

Just as the body will heal itself if given proper diet, exercise and rest, so the church body will heal itself if its leaders and members pay deeper attention to one another's needs, concerns, struggles. We are talking about life and death. Four drug and alcohol deaths in this congregation this past year are telling us something. It's time lower our defenses and engage more deeply.

What better arbiter and guide through this dark and dangerous world than the Bible? The Bible's truth is our truth: God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them; without vision the people perish – words more important than even our polity and doctrine. The unfettered word of God awakens us from our slumber. It calls us to spread the word of life to a world in love with death. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, et. al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>ii</sup> William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, January to March, 2016.