

“Habits of Faith: Hearing”
Hebrews 4:12-16
Rev. Andrew Connors
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When we gather each and every week we are literally gathering around this book. Which is weird. There’s no other area of your life where you would possibly value anything else in a similar fashion. No one goes car shopping and asks to get the oldest beater on the lot. No one goes to the grocery store and asks for the produce that’s been on the shelf the longest. No one goes to the bookstore and asks for the publication with the earliest printing date if it’s a book you’re actually going to read. Sure, you might value a vintage wine or antique piece of furniture but even in those cases you’d be choosing what pleases you, not what tradition says you *should* value. Yet every order for worship starts with at least one text that we use to build prayers, and choose hymns and anthems. And most of the time Michele and I actually choose to limit our choices by a list of readings called the lectionary which prevents us from choosing the texts that we like the most.

Most of you seem to have accepted this oddity, but not all of you. I get asked occasionally, why don’t we add new stuff to the Bible? The same question, in theological language is: “why is the canon (spelled c-a-n-o-n) closed?” It’s kind of arbitrary if you think about it. Church councils decided back around the 4th century - round about the time when the church got allied with civil power - that we ought to have a uniformity of scriptures - 1 Bible - and those officials started naming what was in and out. And some interesting stuff that had been circulating around congregations got thrown out - the Gospels of Mary and Thomas and the Infancy Gospel where Jesus goes around striking down his playground enemies - my personal favorite. All that got sifted out by someone else’s decision. Rationally, it makes sense that we would reopen the canon - update it - like we do with smart phones, or appliances, or textbooks.

Of course this conversation would be considered heretical - that is, out of bounds - by all mainline, orthodox, and evangelical church teaching - though church teachings differ as to why this is so. Some traditions still believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. That God literally whispered into the ears of authors or scribes, telling them exactly what to write down so that the physical book that we have is the literal voice of God. I know there are some Christians who still believe this, but it makes no sense. First of all, which Bible is the inerrant one? There is no original manuscript sitting in some vault somewhere. The Bibles that you and I read are the final products of thousands of decisions by committees of scholars, sometimes based on fragments of papyri - ancient, often incomplete scrolls. A careful reader will note the presence of

footnotes all through most translations that say things like, “some versions lack verse x or y.” Or look at the ending of the Gospel of Mark - chapter 16 - there’s a shorter ending and a longer ending. Which ending is the one written by God? Then there’s the content of scripture itself where God sometimes takes opposite positions on the same issue. No eunuchs or foreigners in the temple in Deuteronomy, but they’ll be loved better than sons and daughters of Abraham in Isaiah. Competing notions about the foundations for community and who gets to be included in it. There are plenty of ways to deal with these inconsistencies, but it’s pretty difficult if you believe that God dictated every word. And finally there are the translation issues. Anyone who has ever spoken a language different from that of your birth knows that even if you are the most experienced translator in the world, sometimes the meanings carried in those translations cannot be identical.

The theological tradition that birthed Presbyterians, I’m happy to say, recognized some of these challenges early, even before modern historical scholarship made the situation even more complicated. While some Presbyterians continued to uphold inerrancy as their belief, others recognized that scripture isn’t the literal word of God and doesn’t have to be. It’s not just the words on the page that gives these texts authority, but the Spirit active in our reading and in our hearing that enables us to hear a word from God. This is the reason that we nearly always pray just prior to reading scripture - the prayer for illumination - asking God to open the text to us and us to the text so that it becomes the Word of God.

Yet even still, for thinking people like you are me, who have read poetry and existentialist philosophy and novels and myths and stories, how do we know that God speaks to us through this old book, even with the Holy Spirit? And why would we go on behaving - through our liturgy, our weekly order for worship - as though this were the primary way that God continues to speak to the community of faith.

Karl Barth, one of our most important theologians in the development of a theology of the Word, argued that the Bible is the Word of God because it witnesses to Christ. It testifies to God in Christ in the world. Its authority is in the way it functions through the activity of the Holy Spirit. But even then, why would you or I choose to agree knowing that Barth can only get to this conclusion either by referring back to scripture itself - which seems a little too circular in its reasoning, or by trusting the pronouncements of human councils in our history which Protestants have felt free to challenge on other issues?

I pushed Walter Brueggemann on this point one time in a seminary class. Brueggemann has said, famously that what we have in the Old Testament (Brueggemann’s speciality) is speech about God. That “as such, the God of the Old Testament lives with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere

else.”¹ He means, I think, to avoid a supernaturalist understanding of God which most of us hold unconsciously but not from the Bible as much as from western philosophy. We picture God as a supernatural being, first, and then wonder about how scripture relates to that supernatural image that most of us hold without even being aware of it. That supernatural preconception doesn’t originate with our text. It comes from western culture. Brueggemann wants to say, let’s not go with the Greeks. Let’s go with the Hebrews - the only God we worship is the one revealed to us through the text. But I asked Brueggemann, how do you know that? And his response from my memory now, was something like, “well, ultimately it’s an act of faith. But one based on more than just individual judgment. It’s a faith handed through generations of disciples who by their witness testify that life with this God is lived in conversation with this book. By hearing these stories, we end up “hearing” God speaking to us: not a simplistic conversation, but a dynamic, lifelong engagement between us and this book.

And while I would never claim that God speaks exclusively through this book or exclusively to Christians - clearly that’s not the case - I also made a decision at a certain point in my life that there was no way to engage my own tradition enough to reject or accept it without a lifelong engagement with its disciplines. You can’t read the Bible cover to cover one time and make a judgment on it when its own wisdom teaches that faith isn’t a subject matter to be mastered. Faith is a relationship to be experienced with a loving, judging, maddening God who may be impossible to fully encounter outside of the hearing of these texts, the wrestling with them. I’d grant the similar possibilities to other religious traditions. It’s just that the Christian one is my home and I don’t have enough life to go deep into more than this one. Put a different way, you can run around the block to feel what running looks like, but you’ll never experience a marathon without investing in disciplines, patiently and consistently, over time.

It’s that lifelong shaping that is this book’s ultimate impact. I see it all the time. Just this week, I met with someone who is in the midst of major professional discernment. A significant opportunity had presented itself and if the person doing the discerning had been disconnected from our tradition, the choice would be absolutely easy. Instead the self-reflection this person offered was about power. Might they be able to use more of it for good if offered the chance, or would they get wrapped up in its destructive tendencies in ways that our tradition warns. And what would more power do to their own core essence - would they be able to do more good or was that simply a temptation that would not be the price? Neither of us talked about the text, but its shaping influence was all through the conversation.

I think this is what Hebrews means when it says that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, cutting through the b.s. of our lives and leaving us vulnerable for God to see. It’s why the rich man text from Mark’s Gospel is

¹ I’m pretty certain that Walter Brueggemann wrote it this way in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, but have not had a chance to verify the page number.

so uncomfortable for all of us here. Even those of us who are living paycheck to paycheck. We know how much we all rely on stuff, on money, on the whole apparatus of money teaching that are rooted in ideas of scarcity and individualism that challenge biblical notions of care for the whole. We all hold back something from God in relationship to our neighbor and that leaves each of us feeling anxious until we come up with ways to justify our divided loyalties - well, I wouldn't want to give away everything because how would that help? Or yes, but there are so many people who have a lot more than I have. Surely Jesus didn't mean for anyone to literally give away everything? We hear this scripture confronting us with these questions that directly judge our living.

But we can hear that judging in a constructive, life affirming way because, as Hebrew says, we are confronted by a judge who loves us, who suffers with us and on behalf of us; a judge who is profoundly for us. And what's more, this God who has the power to condemn, refuses to do so, choosing solidarity with human suffering instead of reciprocating violence.

This is the God of grace who manages to uphold justice through love and whose love is more than words because it demands justice. And that good news leaves us free to discern our pathway in life and the choices that we are confronted with not out of fear but out of confidence that we can hear God's call and follow it in our own lives.

Stewardship is all about this kind of discernment. Which gifts has God entrusted to you for safekeeping, for growing, for developing? Note I said entrusted, not given. The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it - perhaps the most radical statement of all time. We are owners of nothing. Not land, not money, not people, not even your own life. We are all born into a playground of gifts that did not originate with any of us. How do I know this? From the claims of this book which you and I hear at least each week. How do I know those claims are true? I don't know for sure. But I know people who have given up all they own and lived with the poor because they heard God's voice speaking to them through these stories. I know the stories of young people beaten in bus stations in the south, or chased by the klan in the north - people who were ready to meet that kind of violence with non-violence because they believed God was calling to them. And I continue to observe disciples, day in and day out, discerning God's voice calling them in new directions, in new places - difficult and joyful. People who gathered around this odd book to listen for a Word from God that came to them.