

“TUCKED AWAY IN THE BIBLE: IV - TITUS”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
September 27, 2009
Christian Education Sunday

Titus 2:11-3:8

Is there anything more amazing than watching a little child learn, watching their minds develop? I don't think so. I've told you before about following the adventures and antics of my nieces and nephews. It never ceases to amaze me, and even though I've watched most of the twelve nieces and nephews grow up already, watching the latest ones still fascinates me.

Kids are like sponges. They suck in life, and learning, and most of the time, they tell us about it as they do - many times, in the form of questions, especially why?

I read this week of a father named Scott Martens who was raking leaves with his four-year-old son on a crisp Minnesota fall afternoon. All of a sudden a flock of geese flew over them, honking away, and Scott pointed them out to his son, and said “Look how they fly together in a V.” Do you know what his little boy said? “Do they know any other letters?”

That's a child for you. They're always thinking, always wondering.

You know, God created them that way, and God created all of us that way. >From early on, we are created to look and hear and taste and experience and wonder and learn. That's who we are. Kids are so good at it, they just breathe everything in and process it and talk about it constantly.

When they get a little older, they're still learning, but perhaps less likely to talk about it. And sadly, sometimes, by the time we get to be adults, if we're not careful, we stop trying to learn at all. We're just content with what is.

Well, today, on Christian Education Sunday here in the church, obviously we're going to talk about learning, and continual learning and growing, from the cradle to the grave. And this morning's book tucked away in the pages of the New Testament, Titus, will be very helpful to do just that.

Titus, in fact, deals directly with the consequences of not always learning and growing. First, though, let me tell you a little bit about Titus and his situation.

Titus was a contemporary of the Apostle Paul. In fact, he was often a traveling associate of Paul's, along with others like Barnabas. What made Titus

special was that he was a Greek, a Gentile, and he had been converted under Paul's guidance. So Paul and Barnabas took Titus along to show the world that all people were called to Christ, not just the Jews, but Gentiles too.

And Titus apparently specialized in ministry to the converted Gentiles. For fifteen years or so, he worked with Paul, in places like Corinth and Rome, and most particularly, for this scripture at least, on the Island of Crete.

The Cretans were first converted when some of their countrymen were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. They went back to the island and spread the gospel, which spread like wildfire, and thus, the church on Crete was born.

And then, not unlike many of the new churches in that day and time, things began to unravel. After the initial excitement of conversion wore off, they began to slip back into their old ways of doing things, and Paul got wind of it. As one writer described it, "The situation in Crete was discouraging. The church was unorganized, and its members were quite careless in behavior. If the injunctions in chapter 2 were any indication of what the churches needed (he writes), the men were lax and careless, the older women were gossips and winebibbers, and the young women were idle and flirtatious." (On-line, "Investigating the Word of God," Gene Taylor)

He continues, "The situation of the church in Crete was discouraging. The government of the church needed to be set in order, the careless behavior of its members needed to be corrected, and the church needed to be grounded in sound doctrine and stirred to diligence in good works." (Ibid.)

So Paul sent Titus to Crete to deal with it. And he sent this letter to Titus filled with directions on how to get them back on the path to health and wholeness, to be the people God created them to be.

You know, this letter was written by Paul to Titus back in about 63 AD, but friends, it's as valuable for us today in 2009, as it was back then. So I want to share with you for a few moments Paul's advice, for them, and for us.

First of all, one of the things the church was up against back then was lots of false teaching, lots of voices clamoring to be heard and followed. So Paul said to Titus, "Get them back to the basics, get them back to the Word. Make sure they are grounded in scripture, that they know therein lies the truth."

You know, when I read that, and I read about the situation on Crete and all the voices clamoring for attention and indeed, loyalty, I immediately thought of all the voices that call out for attention and loyalty today. And the first thing that came to my mind was how, a few years ago, reading *The DaVinci Code* was all the

rage, and that's okay, but many people began to believe that as Gospel truth. Because they didn't know scripture, they believed a work of fiction, and mixed up the two.

I think that kind of thing was happening on Crete also, so Paul said to them, and indeed to us, "Get back to the Bible, for therein lies the Truth." Our founder, John Wesley, said the same thing in no uncertain terms. For us, scripture is number one, the ground of our being, our authority, our inspiration, our guidance.

When is the last time you spent some time by yourself in its pages? I know that, for many of you, it is a daily practice, but I also know that some of you would be hard pressed to put your hands on your Bible right now - you don't even know where it is. The point is, all of us could do better at spending time in the Word, and Paul reminds us that it is absolutely vital for life.

So first, Paul's advice is return to the Bible, spend time in it and with it. And then, secondly, lean on it. Lean on its promises. That is the only way the Cretans would come around, by trusting in the Word, and leaning on its power and promise.

A pastor named Harry Ironside saw that in living color when he met a man named Andrew Frazer. Frazer was an old Irishman, who had come to southern California, where Ironside lived, to recover from a serious illness. Rev. Ironside went to visit him, and though Frazer was still very weak, he opened his worn Bible and began talking about the deep truths within it in a way that the pastor had never heard before. He was so very moved by Mr. Frazer's words and witness that he said, "Where did you get these things? Could you tell me where I could find a book that would open them up to me? Did you learn them in some seminary or college?" (This is the pastor speaking, remember!)

Frazer gave an answer that Ironside said he would never, ever forget. "My dear young man, I learned these things on my knees on the mud floor of a little sod cottage in the north of Ireland. There with my open Bible before me I used to kneel for hours at a time and ask the Spirit of God to reveal Christ to my soul and to open the Word to my heart. He taught me more on my knees on that mud floor than I ever could have learned in all the seminaries or college in the world." (Online, elbourne.org/sermons)

You see, that old Irishman knew what Paul knew, that it's all about God revealed through His word, and by spending time with the Word, he leaned on it for life and life in abundance.

Andrew Frazer's witness leads me a third thing I think we can learn from Paul's writing to Titus, and it is this, "keep at it." One of the reasons the Cretans had fallen by the wayside, was because, after their initial conversion and passion, they cooled off and turned away from the Word. They weren't committed and went

off the path. Paul admonished Titus to encourage them to return to the Word, to lean on it, and to keep at it. Be diligent.

I think that he would say that to all of us too. Learning and growing is not just for childhood, Bible study and Sunday School is not just for your growing up years. It's for a lifetime. If we fail to keep at it, we are in danger of going away from God.

A man named Howard Hendricks learned about the importance of lifelong learning in an interesting way. When he was a college student, he had a job in the dining hall, and often he would work either the early morning hours or the late night hours. On the way to the dining hall, he would walk by the home of one of his professors, and he would notice, when walking by at 5:30 a.m., his professor sitting at his desk reading. Likewise, when he would work the light shift, and come walking by that same house at 10:30 or 11 at night, he'd see the same thing, his professor sitting at his desk reading. One day he got the chance to talk privately to the professor, and he said, "Would you mind if I asked you a question?" "Of course not," the professor said. "What keeps you studying?" Hendricks asked. "You never seem to stop." The professor's answer? "Son, I would rather have my students drink from a running stream than a stagnant pool." (On-line, elbourne.org/sermons)

Oh my gosh! What a wonderful image - a running stream rather than a stagnant pool. To be honest, the church on Crete had become a stagnant pool. The question of the hour is, "Have you?"

If you have, fear not, for on this Christian Education Sunday, all of us are being reminded of how to get the stream running again, if you will, because we're celebrating all of the wonderful people and opportunities that we have here in this church that get us back to the Word, leaning on it, and keeping at it. There are all sorts of ways in this church for people to constantly learn and grow, both alone and in community. Sunday School, Disciple Bible Study, Beginnings, UMW circles, committees, choirs - all rooted and grounded in Holy Scripture.

In a few minutes, we're going to hear from someone who is/has been involved in intentional growth through Sunday School, and we'll hear about the power of the Word for life. And then we'll see the many people dedicated to helping us stay grounded in the Word, and we'll pray them into another year of doing just that.

Friends, my prayer is that no one will ever have to write to us as Paul did to Titus and the church at Crete, saying "get back to the basics." My prayer is that our Christian Education ministry will keep growing and growing and growing, so that every single person will spend time in the Word, lean on it, and keep at it; that

they will know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and then make Him known to others.
May it be so.

Amen.