

“God’s Library”

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9-10-17 Kick Off Sunday

Based upon John 21:24-25; 2 Timothy 1:2-14

“If every one of the things that Jesus did was written down,” John wrote, “I suppose that the world could not contain all the books that would be written.” Talk about an intriguing and frustrating last line! It’s like the ending of the movie *The Empire Strikes Back*, which leaves the audience staring agape at the hero, Hans Solo, frozen alive in metal. “Wait, you can’t end there!” audiences cried when the movie was first released decades ago. “Is he OK? What happens next?” Since then, Lucas has made a career out of continuing the story in both directions. But John could not or did not do the same. So we are still left with a lot of unanswered questions about what stories and teachings about Christ got left out. We are still left yearning for the library that John imagined, bursting at the seams with books containing additional stories about the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But what if there were such a library, just not the kind that John and we imagined? What if there were the kind of library that Morris Lessmore found in the book I just showed the children,¹ where the books were people and the people were books? It turns out there is. In fact, as we can see from today’s lesson from *Second Timothy*, the library was already under construction at the time John wrote his gospel.

Second Timothy claims to have been written by the apostle Paul, as does *First Timothy* and *Titus*. But it pretty clear that they were actually written years after Paul’s ministry because they describe the church in a much more institutionalized and less radical way than Paul did. This suggests that the letters, which were most likely all written by the same author, were actually written by a disciple of Paul’s, or maybe even a disciple of a disciple. Although today we would call what he did, writing in the name of Paul, plagiarism, it was common practice in those days to attribute documents to famous people as a way of connecting to that school of thought. Think of it kind of like making a sequel with a different director, or a second generation computer program. *Second Timothy* is Paul 2.0. It was someone’s attempt to apply “the gospel according to Paul” to post-Pauline churches experiencing problems.

The author, whom I’ll call Pseudo-Paul, had seen firsthand how the Gospel of the first generation of Christians existed in two different forms. The first form consisted of the letters and other documents we now associate with the biblical canon. Paul’s letters, as well as the four gospels we know, had been circulating among the different churches for some time by then. Even though they were not formerly collected in a “New Testament” yet, they had acquired authoritative status among the Christians by virtue of being connected with the original apostles who knew Jesus before or after the Resurrection. So Pseudo-Paul wanted his second or third generation

¹ The children’s sermon was based upon a story by William Joyce called [The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore](#) (Atheneum Books for Young Readers; First Edition/First Printing edition (June 19, 2012)).

audience to hold onto those good teachings. He wanted them to behave like Morris Lessmore in the sense that they made it their job to preserve the “books” on which the church was founded. “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you,” he advised, using the word “guard” multiple times to convey the seriousness of the task and the importance of the subject. “Protect what you have been given and cherish it, for it is ‘treasure.’”

Think for a minute about what you treasure most about the teachings of Christ or the Bible in general. We all have a personal canon of favorites within the Canon, certain passages or teachings which speak to us more than others. Maybe some of the parables made God real for you. Maybe it was one or all of the Passion narratives. Maybe it’s the *Isaiah* prophecies we see fulfilled in Christ. In fact, let’s try a little experiment. I know frozen-chosen Presbyterians aren’t accustomed to interactive worship, but it’s good for us to stretch a little bit every now and then, and since we all have been thinking lately, thanks to the hurricanes, what kind of things we would grab to save if they were endangered, it is good to think that way about the Bible too. So let’s see what would be in our hurricane bags if all the Bibles were washed away. Raise your hand or just shout out either what your favorite Biblical text is or what passages you know well enough to save. **(Answers taken.)**

If we put all of the stories together which we remember because they are meaningful to us, we could probably recreate a decent chunk of the New Testament, and maybe a smaller chunk of the Old. That’s good, but it’s not great as far as preservation goes. We need to preserve more than our own particular version of the Bible’s greatest hits, or otherwise our understanding of God’s Word will be incomplete and potentially mistaken.

For example, I know from years of experience being a female pastor that certain Christians will never forget the single passage in *First Timothy* which says that women should keep silent and never teach the Gospel to men. It never ceases to amaze me in this day and age out of all the texts that are in the Bible how many people still want to put that one in their hurricane bag. But if we remembered only that verse, and did not also remember today’s text from *Second Timothy*, written by the same author, which celebrates how well two women, Lois and Eunice, taught a man, Timothy, the Gospel, then we would not be able to see as clearly that whatever Pseudo Paul meant in his first letter, it clearly wasn’t what he said. If he really felt women should not teach or speak, then he would not have celebrated Lois and Eunice. Similarly, if we know only some verses about how we are saved (by grace or faith), or verses about how humans should love each other, but not others, we could easily get the wrong idea about the Gospel. So if we are going to guard the stories and lessons of God, we must be careful to guard them all. We must study the Bible and know it well, so that we can discern the Word of God from the words of human beings.

I’ll be talking about this more in my class tomorrow night, but Pseudo Paul had reason to be concerned because after Christ’s Ascension, there were lots of letters and gospels floating around. There were gospels which purported to tell stories about Jesus’ childhood and those which claimed to share the Gospel from Mary Magdalene’s point of view. There were texts attributed to disciples like Peter, Philip, and Bartholomew, and even one to Judas. The Church had to decide which teachings were authentic and which were false. So they considered

authorship and dating, and ubiquity of usage. But most of all, they considered whether the text was consistent with the Gospel the majority of churches knew from the first apostles. This is what Pseudo Paul wanted his audience to do—preserve the Gospel and test all the newer versions against the old to be able to discern the false from the true.

We do not need to sort out actual texts anymore. But we do still need to study the Bible closely enough that we can discern false teachings from the true because there are still many false teachings floating around in our day. There are teachings which frame the Gospel in terms of who God hates, teachings which frame the Gospel as a way to become materially prosperous, and teachings which claim that God uses weather to punish people. I'll be talking more about that one next week. We must be discerning or we will preserve and share the wrong message.

But even as we do this, we also need to recognize that when it comes to sharing the Gospel, quoting Scripture is not the best way to do this. Case in point: A friend of mine posted on Facebook the other day this image. **[Slide shown of bumper sticker with a cross next to the word unashamed.]** The person was clearly trying to say, "I am unashamed of the Gospel," as Pseudo-Paul said in today's text. He or she was not intentionally sharing false teachings. He or she may have known the Bible inside and out. But the way the bumper sticker was designed, it made some people on the Internet think the sign said, "Tuna-shamed." We cannot simply say, "I treasure the Gospel" and assume that others will know what we are talking about. We need to treasure it and translate it with our lives, so others can learn of it from us.

Lois and Eunice did this. We don't know much about them. All we know from *Acts* is that Eunice, Timothy's mom, was a Jewish Christian married to a Greek (*Acts* 16:1-4). So Timothy was probably exposed to Greek philosophy as well as to Judaism and Christianity. He had lots of teachings from which to choose. But his grandmother and mother transformed the Gospel from a new philosophy into something real and life changing. They not only preserved the words they had received, they also conveyed why the Gospel was good news so persuasively with their own lives that Timothy was willing to spend the rest of his life sharing it as Paul's sidekick. In the imagery of the Morris Lessmore story, this is the difference between a book which sits on a shelf and one that can fly. When we take the full Gospel into our hearts so that it affects "our joys and our sorrows, everything we know and everything we hope for," then the Gospel comes alive in us in a way that someone else will be drawn to read. Then we become another book in God's library.

Think about whose Gospel made the good news real for you? Who first made the good news of God's love and grace in Christ something you not only could believe but could experience? The gospel of your mother or father, of a grandparent, aunt, or friend? In my case a pastor from my childhood, plus two couples I met after law school, made the love of God in Christ leap off the page for me. But even if you came from a family which did not talk about your faith, you still were taught a Gospel; for people's actions speak volumes. They tell the story of how Christ can help us endure difficulties large and small. They tell the stories of how God's love can change the way we see ourselves and others. They teach us about what the kingdom of God is and how to dwell there. They demonstrate what a gift worshiping and serving in community can be.

If we have taken the fullness of the Gospel into our hearts, then when we share the Gospel “according to us,” we do more than share some favorite verses from a hurricane bag. Instead of sharing doctrine or proof-texts, we end up sharing what Presbyterian educator Elizabeth Caldwell called, a “backpack of belonging,” which can be passed from generation to generation and neighbor to neighbor.² Metaphorically speaking, a “backpack of belonging” is a spiritual backpack which holds the essence of the Gospel: love, grace, wisdom, mercy, along with the gifts of the Spirit and the hope that only Christ can give. It holds the stories of how Christ changed the world that we know thanks to John and Paul and the other apostles, as well as the stories of how the living Christ blessed the one who held the backpack for a time. It may also hold the practices that made God accessible to the owner. “Backpacks of belonging” are like the little lending library we have out front. They are made for others more than for us. The backpacks come in different shapes and sizes because we do. But ultimately, they all convey the same message to those who receive them. It is the message Paul and Timothy and John and all the others shared themselves: “You are beloved to God. You are gifted by God. We know this through Jesus Christ. Follow God’s way and find peace.”

Don’t have a “backpack of belonging” or a gospel of your own to share with someone else yet? It’s never too late to create one. You can begin either of two ways: by taking in all of the stories that John and the others were able to remember and record in the Bible, or by taking an old backpack someone who shines with God’s love and grace passed on to you. In that regard, we are a wonderful little lending library here in more ways than one. If you begin with the Bible stories, then you add to them the stories of those who convey to you through word and deed that they are not ashamed of the Gospel but rejoice in its sustaining power. If you begin with the stories of friends and family, then you go back and read the Bible, studying it diligently so you can add to your life the teachings they dedicated their lives to preserving and sharing. Lastly, you add your own stories, your own experiences of Christ as they unfold. When it is full, you pass it on to someone else, so that they may learn the transforming good news that they belong to God and always will.

The great poet and preacher John Donne once wrote a passage about God’s library that is often used at funerals. If I ever get hit by a bus, make sure it is read at mine. But the part I like most about it is not the assurance that it offers us about life after death, it is the reminder that it offers us that John’s dream library is real. More stories of the powers of the living Christ are being written every day. We are the sequels to the greatest story ever told. Whether we are good sequels or bad ones depends upon how well we know and build on the original library. Whether our stories survive depends upon how well we share them. Hear Donne’s words and then ask yourself, “What kind of gospel are you?”

² See Caldwell, Elizabeth F., [Leaving Home With Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of our Youth](#) (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002). Lib Caldwell specifically discusses creating a backpack of belonging for youth to take with them when they leave home. But I believe the idea works in this context too.

“All mankind is of one author, and is one volume, when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language, and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God’s hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.”³

³ See “*Sermon XVII- Now, This Bell Tolling Softly for Another Says to Me: Thou Must Die*” in John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions and Prayers, John Booty, Ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 271.