

Virtues for Reading Scripture  
Sermon preached at  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
Washington, D.C.  
on Sunday, 2 July 2023

Good morning.

I am thrilled to be with you this morning, and I thank Pastor Camille Cook Howe for the invitation. And I bring warm greetings from your DC neighbors at Wesley Theological Seminary.

Would you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen

Introduction

Pastor Camille asked that I address the question of how to read the Bible within the context of what it means to be a Christian. The question is close and dear to my heart. And for better or worse, how we read and interpret the Bible remains an important aspect of our religious life in America, and also our political and social lives. There are the usual hot topics, from the ordination of women in certain denominations, the blessing of gay marriages in others, to the issues surrounding human reproduction. There are also the enduring issues of innocent suffering, social and racial injustice, and the growing inequality between the rich and the poor, to name just a few.

And since it matters how we as Christians read the Bible, we might as well do it well.

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To that end, I thought I would suggest three virtues, what the biblical scholar Ellen Davis calls “the habits of mind and heart,” in relation to how we read the Bible. 1 They are patience, humility, and love.

I. Patience

First, patience.

The Bible is an inexhaustibly complex book and poses innumerable challenges to modern Christians who open it to read it. The most fundamental challenge to reading Scripture is the fact that it was written in ancient languages few of us read, and none natively. Thankfully, this difficulty has been mostly, though not completely, erased by the existence of very good English translations. But other challenges remain.

For example, I've heard it said that reading the Bible is like reading someone else's mail. This is not a bad analogy. Many New Testament books are literally letters that Paul or another wrote to churches in places like Corinth, Ephesus, and Jerusalem. And many Old Testament texts explicitly – and all implicitly – address their ancient audiences, not GPC or Paul Cho, such as Israel and Judah, Tyre and Babylon, and Egypt and Assyria. Because the Bible was not originally intended for us, it is full of historical references, allusions to literature, and cultural expressions that, not surprisingly, defy our comprehension. And exacerbating this situation, the books of the Bible date from across more than a millennium of tumultuous history. And the people of God whom the Bible addresses are not a single people, or even two, but come from a great variety of historical realities. In fact, they may be almost anyone, from a triumphant people under monarchic rule in Jerusalem to traumatized migrants in Babylon and persecuted believers in Jesus Christ in Rome. And the complexities pile on higher and higher.

1 Ellen Davis, "The Soil that is Scripture," in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture* (William P. Brown, ed.; Louisville: WJK, 2007), 36–44, here 37.

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In my seminary courses on the Hebrew Bible, an important goal that I set for myself is to help my students recognize this complexity and this strangeness of the Bible. This process of defamiliarization, as I call it, is laborious for all and can even be painful for some. It is, however, a necessary step toward what is commonly taught at most seminaries in the US: the critical study of the Bible. The critical (or the historical critical) study of the Bible, contrary to what it sounds like, does not mean that we identify, then criticize the parts of the Bible that we don't like or find objectional. At the most fundamental level, the critical study of the Bible aims to describe and understand the many complexities of the Bible, then to move toward their better comprehension through the use of every resource of intellect and learning available to us. In a secular, university context, the final goal of critical Bible study is simply the better comprehension of biblical literature. In seminary, however, I emphasize that the ultimate goal is to love the Bible more truly and deeply, thanks to the better understanding that we hopefully achieve through its critical study and, furthermore, to love the God to whom the Bible bears witness.

I summarize my teaching philosophy in my seminary courses because the virtue that my students must develop to perform the critical study of biblical texts is the same virtue that we all must foster to read the Bible well. Patience. Every one of us, including me, needs to practice patience when we read the Bible because of the many challenges to comprehension that it poses.

Now, the virtue of patience in relation to reading the Bible does not imply passivity. To advise patience is not to advise just waiting around. On the contrary, patience requires the active study of the Bible — the asking of questions, the consulting of commentaries, and formulation of hypothesis — but without a hurried expectation for immediate reward or instant

gratification. Perhaps most importantly, patience is the continued reading and rereading of Scripture, despite the delay the aha moment. Patience, in short, does not give up on understanding. Patience means perseverance with the quiet but firm hope that, if not on the hundredth time of reading a passage, then on the one-hundred-and-first time, the Word of God

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will unexpectedly open up to you and invite you into what Saint Augustine called its wonderful deepness.

“Wondrous is the depth of thy words,” Augustine writes in his Confessions, “whose surface is before us, gently leading on the little ones: and yet a wonderful deepness, O my God, a wonderful deepness. It is awe to look into it; even an awfulness of honour, and a trembling of love” (Chapter XIV).

My hope and prayer for you, brothers and sisters in Christ, is that, as you continue or begin anew the practice of reading the Bible, you will experience such profound ecstasy as Augustine experienced peering into Scripture. I have, and I can tell you that it is intoxicating. And my one word of advice is that such experiences are available only to the patient.

## II. Humility

The second virtue is humility.

In our second Scripture reading this morning, Job professes his desire to have his words written down:

O that my words were written down!  
O that they were inscribed in a book!  
O that with an iron pen and with lead  
They were engraved on a rock forever! (Job 19:23–24)

By the time Job speaks these words, he has been in conversation with his three friends for 17 chapters in what is already the longest dialogue in the Bible. Unfortunately, their communication has been breaking down, becoming increasingly acerbic and accusatory, and not progressing toward mutual understanding. Given this context, we may understand Job’s

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wish for literary inscription as a desire to fix the meaning of his words in the hope that future readers, like you and me, will vindicate him. However, if the freezing of meaning was the goal, what actually happened is the very opposite. As I’ve found out in the course of researching for a book I’m writing on the book of Job, there has been a great proliferation of meaning and not its narrowing.

(If you’d like to hear more about them, I invite you to my office hours, or to class.)

In numerous conversations over the years, I've learned that not a few people find it difficult to see that written-down things can be ambiguous and have multiple meanings. As a consequence, it has been difficult to convince some that the Bible might be ambiguous and open to multiple, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. Indeed, the humility that is required to acknowledge that even our best interpretations cannot claim to have deciphered the one and final meaning of this or that passage, let alone the Bible, has been in short supply for a very long time.

Consider, for example, the debate that took place in 1529 between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, two great Reformers. Luther and Zwingli were arguing about the Words of Institution: "This is my body."

Luther insisted that when Jesus, holding bread in his hands, said, "This is my body," he meant it literally. Luther argued that the plain sense of Jesus's words supported his position that the bread is transubstantiated into Christ's flesh.

Zwingli disagreed. He insisted that when Christ said, "This is my body," he meant that the bread symbolizes his body. For Zwingli, Christ's words necessitated no transformation of carbohydrates into protein. When we break bread in Communion, Zwingli argued, we break and consume a visible sign of invisible grace, which is made available to us through Christ's bodily death on the Cross, but not the literal transformation of common bread into Christ's flesh.

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Luther vehemently opposed Zwingli's interpretation and, quite famous for his colorful expressions, engaged in vicious ad hominem attacks. Luther implied that Zwingli is of the Devil and told him to go to hell.

The consequences of this lack of humility, demonstrated by great and small people of the Church throughout its history, are even now playing themselves out. Hermeneutical pride of one sort or another has meant the separation of family members, the splitting of church communities, and ultimately the scarring of the Body of Christ – cutting it up with little wounds and deep schisms.

As you can see, humility in regard to biblical interpretation is not an easy virtue. It makes it all the more precious.

Practicing hermeneutical humility does not mean that there are no wrong interpretations. There certainly are wrong interpretations that we can and sometimes are obligated to name and reject. And there are also better and worse interpretations. I am not, in championing hermeneutical humility, advocating for some radical postmodern relativism.

What humility does mean is that we engage in genuine conversation with others, especially with those who disagree with us. It also means being willing to put in the honest work to

strengthen and modify our own interpretations in response, for the benefit of others and ourselves. The practice of humility, then, can be understood as the acknowledgement and the celebration of the rich suggestiveness that rises from the complexity and depth of Scripture. It is to acknowledge the comparative human weakness next to the surpassing beauty and greatness of Scripture, thus the inevitable multiplicity of human attempts at understanding Scripture. It is, in this sense, to join with Jewish Rabbis who married hermeneutical humility with the celebration of Scripture's multivocality when they wrote: שבעים פנים לתורה ("There are seventy faces to the Torah").

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And I pray that you will see many wondrous faces of the Word of God. And I've learned that God shows God's face only to the humble.

### III. Love

The third and final virtue for reading Scripture is love.

Love as a hermeneutical virtue may be analyzed in at least three ways. Allow me to name the first two before focusing on the third. First, by love, I mean the love we might extend to the Bible, cherishing it as a gift from God, even as we wrestle and record our objection to certain parts of the biblical tradition. Second, by love, I also mean the love we might extend to fellow readers of the Bible, including those who disagree with us. Disagreement about significant matters of both faith and practice is a feature of the Bible itself. There is no reason that it cannot be a feature of Christian communities as well.

And third, by love, I mean the love that God expresses to God's people throughout the Bible.

My focus on God's love arises from my growing conviction that the primary and enduring message of the Bible is that God loves God's people. As a Christian, I believe that this love is most fully expressed in the good news of Jesus Christ. But I also believe that the love of God for the diverse people of God expresses itself throughout all of the Bible, sometimes even in the so-called texts of terror. The lived reality of the many peoples we call God's people varied dramatically one from the other. Recognizing this helps us recognize that the expressions of God's love for God's people must vary in sync with those realities. Consider, for example, the fact that a teenager suffering from suicidal ideation needs a very different kind of love and care from a teenager experiencing hunger. By analogy, it follows that a church of mostly Gentiles in Corinth needs a different expression of love from Judahites living in Jerusalem after the Babylonian destruction of the city and its Temple. And that the love that a blind man needs is

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different, probably dramatically so, from a family whose children have been raped and killed by an invading army. The wide swing of the historical experiences of God's people, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE to the 1<sup>st</sup> CE, has meant that biblical writers has had to be expansive and equally varied in their proclamation that God, even now, loves God's people.

This is not to say that all of Scripture is undeniably an expression of God's love and therefore should be received with unquestioning gratitude. Far from it. We do not relinquish our duty to wrestle with difficult text, to identify and criticize those aspects of the tradition that are ethically and morally objectionable. On the contrary, our attentiveness to the message of God's love provides the very theological standard by which to judge those texts and, if need be, to object.

With those comments, allow me to make two short suggestions on how to practice love in reading the Bible.

One, to practice the hermeneutics of love is to read and interpret the Bible so as to be able to hear God's message of love, starting for the self. This is an extension of the logically prior command to love yourself found in the Golden Rule: "Love one another as you love yourself." I make this suggestion to everyone, but especially to those for whom the love of self has been made difficult by long standing reading practices of the Church that have denigrated the worthiness of certain groups of people. If this describes you, you may be used to forgiving preachers, Bible study leaders, seminary professors, friends and family members, for interpretations that have hurt you and demeaned you. I encourage you to say, No more. And to cultivate for yourself, in concert with others, a love hermeneutic. And I encourage you also to demand that others extend to you the fullness of the good news, and not just the crumbs from the table. For the primary and enduring message of the Bible I read is that God loves you.

Two, to practice the hermeneutics of love is to read and interpret the Bible so as to hear God's message of love for the other. Reading the Bible for the other — whether it is the racial other,

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the gender other, the intellectual other, or the political other — I suggest, is an ethical imperative for everyone, for it is an extension of the other half of the Golden Rule, the command to love one another. This is an imperative for everyone. However, I want to emphasize its importance especially for those who have enjoyed the long benefit of having had the Bible interpreted to mean that God loves you. If the first suggestion of the love hermeneutic raises our expectation that we can hear God's declaration of love for us in the Bible, then the second suggestion sets ethical limits to that expectation. Whenever our interpretation of the Bible for us necessitates that the Bible be read against our neighbor, the love hermeneutic advises us that we abandon such readings and start over.

So, I pray that you will cultivate reading strategies that help you and others hear God's declaration of love for you and neighbor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a Bible professor and scholar, I am devoted to the lifelong study and reading of the Bible. I devoted myself to this vocation because I have, from time to time, experienced its

wondrous deepness and have felt the awful honor and the tremors of love that accompany such experiences. Today, I have tried, with help of others named and unnamed, to say something about how to read the Bible to open up such possibilities for you. But as the theologian Karl Barth writes, the decision to make the human words of the Bible speak and be the Word of God is not our but God's. So, I pray that God decides to do that for you. And a final word of advice. If there is one thing I am quite certain about, it is that no one, not even God, can open up the Bible's wondrous depth for you if you don't open the Bible yourself. So, I hope you'll do that. It's a good place to start.

Would you pray with me these words from Psalm 119:

Oh, how we love your Word!

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It is our meditation all day long.  
How sweet are your words to our taste,  
Sweeter than honey to our mouth!  
Your word is a lamp to our feet  
And a light to our path.

So, open up our eyes, we pray, that we may behold  
Wondrous things out of your Word.

Amen