

**STAND UP, SIT DOWN, BEND LOW
(AND OTHER EXERCISES FOR READING THE BIBLE)**

Formed in Christ: People of the Word
Nehemiah 8:1-12; Luke 4:14-21

It was not an overstatement on my part,
when I said to the children that this church would not exist,
were it not for this book.
This book, *and* all the Christian communities throughout history
which helped to shape this book,
and then were shaped *by* this book,
and all the communal ethics and communal practices
that grew out of people *living* with this book—
this has *made us who we are*, as a people.

Now, it's not the book *alone* that did this.
If we believed *that*, we would be making a god out of an object.
It's this book,
in a back-and-forth relationship with the people it belongs to, and
through the power and presence of the God who inspired it—
who called into being the book and its people—
that has made us who we are.
It's impossible to conceive of ourselves, the church,
without taking seriously these scriptures
as being at the heart of who we are.

Some regard the Bible as just an interesting cultural relic,
or beautiful literature, or source of good stories,

but dismiss its importance for how we live today,
and how we understand who we are.

I have two books at home that my mother put together for me.
One is a photo album,
of hundreds of snapshots of me, with captions—
images of me with my family and friends,
from birth through my marriage to Irene.
The other is a thick binder
full of distilled entries from nearly 50 years

of her daily diary entries and family letters,
that tell the story of the family I grew up in,
all the things that make me who I am.
If I regarded those two books
in the same way many people regard the Bible,
I would say, well, those are some cute pictures,
and some interesting stories,
but it's not who *I am* anymore.
I don't need them to tell me who *I am*,
or how I *came to be* who I am.
Plus, I could go on the internet right now,
and find pictures that are cuter,
and stories that are more interesting.

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4, says,
“The Bible is the essential book of the church . . .
We commit ourselves to persist and delight
in reading, studying, and meditating on the Scriptures.
We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible
and of discerning what God is saying in *our* time
by examining all things in the light of Scripture.
Insights . . . we bring are to be tested in the faith community.”

See . . . the Bible is our book.
Reading it, interpreting it, is *our* job,
in which we all have an obligation to participate.
This is *not* a job we delegate to the professionals—
preachers, professors, theologians.
This is a job for all of us . . . *together*.
And this is *not* a job we can ignore,
if we want to call ourselves a church.

I've heard many sincere Christians take a pass,
on this job of wrestling with scripture.
Maybe they don't understand it enough to appreciate it.
Too esoteric, too ancient.
Maybe they read stuff in there they need to argue with,
and they aren't comfortable arguing.

Maybe they don't feel this ancient book actually *means* much anymore,
or that it holds any authority in today's complex world.
So the Bible gets pushed to the side,
as little more than a source of some inspirational stories,
quotable quotes,
and poetic language that sounds great in public liturgy.

If that's *all* it is to us, we disrespect scripture.
I repeat. We would not exist, as a community of God's people,
without this formational book.
We could *never* sustain our life together without it.
This is the central book of the living community of Christ.
This is the book of the church.

We heard two different stories from this book this morning.
And they were both stories about how the written scripture
became formational for the community,
and the individual *in* community.

In Nehemiah 8,
there was a ceremonial public reading
and public celebration of the book of the law.
This was *after* the people had mostly returned from exile in Babylon,
and rebuilt the walls of the destroyed city.
Nearly 50,000 people were there,
most of whom had lived in Babylon for many generations,
and had completely forgotten who they were as a people.

So the newly rediscovered book of the law, the Torah—
what we know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deut—
was brought out and given to all the people, as *their* book.
Now of course, when I say it was given to all the people,
I don't mean that Ezra passed out 50,000 leather-bound testaments,
and told the people, "Go home. Read. And obey."
I *also* don't mean that the people were given
a list of all the inspirational verses in their Bible,
with a chart telling them what verse to read
if they are discouraged,

or if they're afraid,
or if they lust,
or if they need to forgive someone . . .
like the chart in the back of one of the Bibles
I got when I was a kid.
I also don't mean that Ezra, their resident theologian,
just read it to them and told them what it meant.

No. Ezra, and twelve other people, six on his right, and six on his left,
read the text out aloud to the people . . . for six hours.
Then those 12, plus 14 more,
worked with the people in making sense out of what they heard.
All these helpers are listed by name in Nehemiah 8, v. 4 and v. 7.
26 unpronounceable names.
We skipped those verses out of pity for our reader, Trisha.

Exactly *how* these 26 interpreters did their work,
we don't really know,
but the result was so powerful,
that 50,000 people spontaneously fell on their faces . . . and wept.
The emotion of remembering and reconnecting
with something deep within them that they had lost,
was simply overpowering.

And in today's Gospel reading,
there was also a powerful moment
when the scripture was read aloud and interpreted,
in the midst of a local community.
This time it was Jesus reading, in his hometown synagogue.
He stood to read from Isaiah,
and then sat down, as was customary,
to give his commentary on the text.
It was a nine-word commentary,
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

But then he started to say *other* things,
started spelling out some implications of the scripture,
that pushed the edges of the community,

namely, that God might care just as much about the Gentiles . . .
well, that was more interpretation than they wanted to *hear*,
and they turned against Jesus.

But Jesus was dealing with scripture according to their tradition.
That is, he was reading it in the middle of the community.
And then, he engaged the community in exploring the meaning.
Like any good Jewish rabbi, stirring up a good argument,
as to what the sacred text means for us, *today*.

How different than the way a lot of us read it *these* days.
We read one inspirational verse a day,
like a daily vitamin pill,
subscribed to and sent to our email inbox,
for a daily spiritual energy boost.
Or I read and interpret it alone,
trying to reinforce what I already believe,
or to prove someone *else* wrong.

Earlier, I was making a case that the scripture
is powerful and formational for who we are today as a people.

It is a book of the people of God.
It is a book we must engage with—heart, soul, mind, and body.
Yes, even our *bodies* engage in the task of reading scripture.

There's a notion we've lost sight of,
in modern Protestant American Christianity—
that there is something physical involved
as we engage with scripture in community.

We don't *need* to physically engage with scripture at *all*—
as long as we assume scripture is primarily
a matter of the individual pursuit of knowledge
and the individual internal life of the spirit.
For *that*, all we need is a desk or private prayer closet,
any place where we can, in stillness and quietness,
absorb the words into our mind or spirit.

Read them.
And think on them.
And pray on them.

We don't really much *need* our bodies for that.
Just our minds and hearts.

But once we accept that this is *primarily* the book of God's people.
Then we immediately must deal with the physicality,
the sociality, of the embodied community of people
whose book it is.
And how this real, physical community of people in relationship,
absorbs and interacts with the book.

Now, I'm not at *all* dismissing
the place for individual reading and meditation and private prayer
with the Bible open in front of us.
That is *also* significant as a way to engage the scripture
and wrestle with its message.
I do that as much as I can, in quietness, every morning.

But . . . the place where the Bible *really* finds its home,
is at the center of the people physically gathered,
waiting to be formed by our communal encounter with God,
and God's word to us.

We learn something of great value, I believe,
if we pay attention to these stories of the people of God
interacting communally, viscerally, with scripture.
If we notice their collective physical posture,
and movement, and gestures.
They are not coincidental.

Take a look again at Nehemiah 8.
The people were gathered in the square, facing the Water Gate.
And the book was physically brought into the square,
and Ezra took it, facing the square, in front of the Gate.
V. 5 (quote) "And he opened the book in the sight of all the people,
for he was standing above all the people;
and when he opened it, all the people stood up."

And they read it aloud for six hours.

You noticed, I guess, that *we* stood this morning
when this text was read.
We stood upright.
A physical posture of attentiveness. A sign of respect.
Though not for six hours.

Then Ezra blessed the Lord.
And the people said, “Amen. Amen.”
And lifted up their hands.
Then bowed their heads.
Then they worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

This was pure physical engagement, which had meaning in *itself*.
They were physically demonstrating their response to the text.
This encounter with scripture was not a mind game.
It was the act of an embodied people of God,
standing, sitting, bending,
in acts of reverence,
attentiveness,
repentance,
and praise.

But when they finished reading, they weren't done.
More physical movement, and engagement.
More body exercises.
At least that's what *I* gather from this.
We aren't told exactly how all this took place.
But there were 26 different helpers and interpreters
who were brought in to help with the task of
“giving the sense” so the people could understand.
So I doubt it all happened from the platform.
I imagine these 26 helpers fanned out among the people,
maybe in smaller groups,
and worked at the task of interpretation and discernment.
Listening, responding.
Taking questions. Maybe even making adjustments,
based on the questions and comments of the people.

But *however* it happened,
it clearly was *not* a private reading for private edification.
It was the work of the whole people,
a people moved by the Spirit of God,
to seek the word and will of God *together*.

And . . . there was physical engagement and physical posture involved
in Jesus' reading of Isaiah in the synagogue.
And it followed the customary pattern at that time.
Jesus stood to read from the scroll.
Then he sat to give his commentary on it.
Standing was the posture of respect for the sacred text.
Sitting was the posture for teaching,
as *all* the rabbis did.

Standing up.
Sitting down.
Bending low.
All communal physical engagements with the reading of a text.
It makes sense because, and *only* because,
this book belongs primarily to the people,
and is centered in their life together—
of life of shared, embodied practices.

You *see*, my point here is not that we make sure
we get our physical movements *right*.
It doesn't *really* matter in the end,
that we always stand at the right time,
or sit at the right time.
There are many valid ways to engage the scripture.

But if we neglect the communal encounter with scripture,
as we are physically gathered—
whether in a sanctuary,
or a Sunday School circle,
or around the table in someone's home—
if we neglect the communal wrestling *together*
to get the sense of the reading,
to reflect together on what it meant, and what it means,

if we neglect the work of reading, interpreting,
and applying as a community . . .
then we are neglecting the most formational activity
we as God's people have at our disposal.

This book is a great gift to us from God.

Mediated, of course, through God's people through the ages.

But it is a priceless treasure.

It's okay to keep a copy for sentimental reasons,
even if it *doesn't* get read.

Nothing wrong with having a Bible behind glass,
or on a coffee table,
or in a shrine,
or even locked up in a safe.

They can simply stand as a symbols
of what's important and precious and valuable to us.

But it's *so much more* than that.

It is the common, shared book of the common people.

It needs to be accessible and used, by all.

It needs to be interacted with, as a living text,
without which, we couldn't live.

It's a precious gift from God for our life together.

And we should thank God regularly for this gift.

Let's thank God now, in song,
by singing together from STJ 27

God of the Bible, God in the Gospel,
hope seen in Jesus, hope yet to come,
you are our center, daylight or darkness,
freedom or prison, you are our home.

—*Phil Kniss, January 15, 2012*