

Getting It Right

Last Sunday we focused on music and singing, important parts of our lives and our worship. This week we turn to the Bible, another major component of worship and faith. Our worship is rooted in and shaped by Scripture. Our Scriptures help us understand who we are as people created and called by God. Scripture tells the story of God's people in times past. That story continues in the life of God's people even now. This is why we read the Bible together each Sunday and my sermons usually include a discussion of a particular biblical text.

Having said all that, I won't be focusing on a particular scripture passage this morning. Instead, I'll be sharing my journey with scripture as part of my faith story. Even though you may have heard much of this before, I hope hearing my journey encourages you to consider your own stories and share them with each other.

Although I wasn't born with a Bible in my hand, I know that my faith journey began the day I was born when my parents held me in their arms and prayed for guidance in raising me to become a follower of Christ. The lives of my ancestors on both sides of the family were centered around the Christian faith, the Bible, and the Mennonite Church along with family life and farming.

As a child, my mother felt a call to be a missionary nurse in a foreign country. It was a difficult decision for her to become a farmer's wife. Even though their lives were rooted in the soil of central Illinois, my parents lived a life of mission. They spent the first two years of their marriage in Puerto Rico. When they returned to the family farm, they decided not to attend the large Hopedale Mennonite Church where my father grew up and multiple rows of the church mailboxes were labeled with the Litwiller name. Instead, they chose to drive 25 miles away to Midway Mennonite, a small mission church started by a Sunday school class from Dad's home congregation.

As a young child I attended Midway twice on Sunday plus Wednesday evenings. At Midway I met people dealing with unemployment, single parenting, alcoholism, poverty, and divorce – things I rarely, if ever, encountered in my home community. I learned that a person didn't need to be a cradle Mennonite to be a Christian. It would take me a while longer to discover that non-Mennonites were Christians too.

Daily family devotions were an important part of my childhood. After breakfast, we always read the Bible and prayed together. Saturday evening tasks included taking a bath, shining our shoes, and studying the Sunday school lesson. Both of my parents taught Sunday school classes during their entire time at Midway. Throughout the week, I often saw my mother at the desk in the bedroom reading her Bible.

God was very real to me in my childhood. It was always clear what was right and what was wrong. I understood the source of those instructions for living to be the Bible as interpreted by my parents and my pastor. Our pastor's full-time job was at the feed store. I don't think he had any education beyond high school. Although I don't recall much about his sermons, I remember the man with fondness. His love for God and concern for the congregation impacted me. He would usually end his prayers with "...ever keep us humble, ever keep us from sin, keep us faithful to the end..." As a child I liked hearing those words because I knew the prayer was almost over, but also because the repetition was comforting.

Along with family devotions, sermons, and Sunday school, my biblical instruction included two full weeks of Vacation Bible School each year. When I was in sixth grade, I participated in a membership class and was baptized at Midway Mennonite Church. It was a tradition at the nearby Hopedale Mennonite Church to be baptized when you were in 8th grade, so I was ahead of my age-mates. After joining the church, I began wearing a white head covering, a testimony to all that I had been baptized. After all, the Bible clearly stated that all women should have their heads covered in church. I never questioned why the covering needed to be a particular style of white netting.

After Midway discontinued evening services, our family attended there on Sunday mornings and Hopedale on Sunday evenings. I participated somewhat half-heartedly in a Bible memory program at Hopedale.

I earned a New Testament, but never got anywhere close to memorizing enough verses to attend Bible Memory Camp. Most of the Bible memorization I've done in my life has been through singing scripture songs.

As a high school student, I taught Vacation Bible school at Midway. I also participated in youth group activities and a Bible study. While in high school, I attended a lay witness weekend in my hometown. After hearing testimonies from ordinary adults and students, I made a deeper commitment to following Christ. For a while after this I carried my Bible to school every day.

In my Thursday night Bible study group, we would try to analyze the passages very carefully. We were convinced that if we studied the Bible diligently, we could figure out the exact answers to all of our questions. I remember thinking that even if I didn't figure everything out then, I certainly would understand everything when I was an adult. It was during high school that translations other than the *King James Version* became available to me. The *Revised Standard Version*, *New International Version*, *Good News Bible*, and the *Living Bible* were soon part of my library.

My faith changed and deepened during my four years at Goshen College. My major was math education with a minor in general science. The only Bible course I took was one required for all students. However, I spent a lot of time discussing faith questions with my friends. I realized I needed to decide if I really believed what I had heard from my parents and church about God and faith. I needed to make my faith my own.

I attended three different churches while in college. One exposed me to a charismatic style of worship especially during midweek prayer services. One was more traditional – fairly similar to my home church. The last one introduced me to the idea of weekly small groups in which we would study the Bible together, be accountable to each other, and support each other.

My first career was as a junior high and high school math and science teacher. During that time, I began exploring the relationship between science and faith. My faith stretched as I tried to reconcile what I thought I knew about God and the Bible with what I was learning from science. I quickly learned that the Bible is not a science textbook, and that science cannot explain all of life, especially when it comes to faith and spiritual experiences.

It was sometime during my first few years out of college that I stopped wearing a head covering at church. I had been warned that girls who attend Goshen College lose their coverings. I hadn't lost mine during college, but I transitioned from a white net to a black lace one. Even the women in my mother's generation stopped wearing their coverings during the next decade or so. For something that was so important and deemed to be biblically based, I'm amazed at how the transition happened with a minimum of outrage and controversy – at least that I can remember.

It was during my time as a teacher that several events in the family rocked my faith. My cousin Sherrill attended a church with some extreme teachings. They believed that if you had enough faith, God would answer all your prayers, heal all your diseases, and provide for all your needs. Everyone in the congregation studied the Bible diligently, many even learning Greek and Hebrew to aid in their study. When the 1-year-old daughter of another cousin was diagnosed with leukemia, Sherrill told the parents not to use medicine, but to pray. She informed me that the toddler would not die, because she had prayed for her. After the little girl died, Sherrill took the blame for the death because she had not prayed the right way. And then, about a year later, Sherrill died from toxic shock syndrome, leaving behind four children under the age of 6.

My encounters with my cousin (as well as my studies about science) sparked many questions about faith—especially about prayer and biblical interpretation. I did not accept all of Sherrill's views because I could not believe in a God who would cause a small child to die just because someone didn't use the right words when praying. But I came to realize I did have a lot of faith in Sherrill's faith, and when she died, it affected me greatly. I continue to wrestle with questions about prayer and how God works or intervenes in the everyday world.

My second career began when I left my teaching job to attend graduate school in curriculum and instruction. During this time, I began working at Provident Bookstore, a Mennonite owned store. I finished the master's degree but ended up working at the bookstore full-time for the next 18 years. In the store I related to customers from many different denominations, faith commitment levels, ethnic groups, education levels, and

family situations. Over the years my faith was stretched and strengthened as employees and their families faced physical illness, sudden death, divorce, and mental illness.

While working at Provident I assisted many customers in choosing a Bible to purchase. The wide variety of Bible versions and styles available led to quite a few discussions. Some customers wanted a Bible in the original language – the King James Version – and argued that no other translation was God given. For other customers, the most important question was which color and size of Bible would look best on their coffee table. I got to be pretty good at selling Bibles. Sometimes I was uncomfortable with the publishers' quest to package and repackage the Bible with the goal to increase sales. It's tricky to combine mission and commerce. Personally, I struggled with questions about the origin and authority of the Bible, the accuracy of translations, and the wide range of interpretations of Bible passages.

During my 18 years at the bookstore plus my four years in seminary, I was a member of the Mennonite Church of Normal in Illinois. I served on many committees, taught Sunday school, helped with VBS, played piano, participated in care groups, led worship, and preached. Mennonite Church of Normal was a good place for me to learn and to grow. It was the place where I finally realized that my notion of figuring everything out when I became an adult was a myth. There's always more to learn about the Bible, faith, and life.

Soon after I began leading worship at Normal, members of the congregation began encouraging me to consider attending seminary. This suggestion affirmed my gifts. I was intrigued by the idea, but I couldn't figure out what I would study there. It had been clear to me since my childhood that the Bible precluded women from being pastors. Although I was no longer convinced that this was the case, I still was fairly certain that I could not be a pastor.

One summer, I spent my three weeks of vacation at AMBS, a Mennonite seminary, taking the beginning Greek course. Before the class began, I was quite excited about reading the New Testament in the original Greek so I could finally find out exactly what the Bible said and be confident of the right way to interpret it. Of course, I quickly learned this was not to be the case. Words in any language can have multiple meanings that vary depending on context, time era, and geographic location of use. Every Bible translation involves some element of interpretation.

I absolutely loved the Greek class. This experience piqued my interest in Biblical languages. I fully expected to begin studying full-time in the next year or so. But unexpectedly, I was offered the position of manager of the bookstore. I didn't go to seminary until six years later when the store closed.

During my time at the bookstore, I participated in Bible Study Fellowship, usually referred to as BSF, for eight years. BSF describes itself as an in-depth, interdenominational Bible study that helps people know God and equips them to effectively serve the church throughout the world. Our BSF group consisted of almost 500 women who met together weekly from September through May.

The BSF system involves four elements; daily questions to encourage personal Bible study, discussion groups for sharing of personal answers to questions, a lecture by the class Teaching Leader covering the past week's scripture with applications for daily living, and a set of notes reinforcing lessons from the previous week plus a new set of questions for the week ahead. I appreciated the structure BSF provided me as well as the opportunity to discuss the Bible with women from church denominations and theological backgrounds different than mine. I was surprised at the number of women who said they had never studied the Bible in any organized way before even though they had been part of a church all their lives. This was certainly not the case for me. I was frustrated when women would respond to a question by saying "I don't know what they want me to say" and also when a discussion leader or the written materials would state that there was only one correct answer to a question or one correct interpretation of a particular passage. But still, this experience enriched my journey with the Bible.

There was one important "aha" moment for me at the end of our study of Romans. I think my heart actually leapt when I read these words in the personal greetings at the end of the letter: *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of*

*myself as well.*¹ Here Paul praises a woman who is a deacon, a leader in the church and possibly even a single woman! That meant God could use me – maybe even as a pastor, and Paul might approve.

It was in 2005, after the store closed and I began seminary, that my 16-year-old niece, Esther died in a car accident. It was a blessing that my parents and I were in Pennsylvania a week before Esther died. It was a source of wonder that a double rainbow appeared in the sky above the accident site at the time the accident occurred – and that a double rainbow had appeared in the sky over Dese, Ethiopia around the time when my brother and my sister-in-law brought Esther home from the orphanage. But there were no satisfactory biblical answers to questions about God’s timing and protection when the crash occurred. I’m thankful that the love of God’s community here on earth helped me to experience joy and hope in the midst of grief and pain.

Certainly, my four years in seminary were quite significant in my journey with scripture. My professors guided me in learning biblical languages, translation, interpretation, culture, and history. They also assisted me in using the Bible devotionally and in preaching. I entered seminary thinking I was there to study Biblical languages perhaps in preparation for some kind of teaching and left with a call to be the pastor of Salina Mennonite Church.

Undoubtedly, my 14 (and a half) years as a pastor are hugely important in how I view and use the Bible. Sometimes it feels like a luxury to be paid to read and study the Bible and wrestle with how it relates to life today. My travels in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Egypt have highlighted both the uniqueness of the Bible and its similarity to many other ancient texts. I have been deeply affected by how the Bible has impacted your experiences of life and faith.

It’s difficult to articulate exactly what scripture means for me today. I view the Bible as a vital and crucial part of the living Word of God. God’s Word is also revealed through prayer, the working of the Spirit, life experience, group discernment, and more than two thousand years of church tradition. I’m dismayed when the Bible is regarded as instructions set in stone with only one possible interpretation for all of time to be used as a club with which to beat people into submission. I’m dismayed by attempts of some Christians to encode their particular interpretation of biblical principles into laws governing the lives of all people. I’m also dismayed when the Bible is disregarded as obsolete and irrelevant to life in the 21st century.

As you’ve heard me say many times, when reading the Bible for study and sermon preparation I try to understand the context in which it was written, how it would have sounded to its first hearers, and what purpose it was used for in the lives of God’s people. I attempt to look at the Bible as a whole, noting the trajectory of God’s unfolding story of salvation and reconciliation. I then try to discern what God is saying to God’s people today and particularly to those of us meeting as Salina Mennonite Church.

About 30 years ago, it became difficult for me to continually read male-dominated language, so I began using the *New Revised Standard Version* as my primary translation. I also appreciate the familiarity of the *New International Version*, the simplicity of the *Contemporary English Version*, the hominess of *The Message*, the poetry of the *King James Version*, and the conversationality of *The Voice*. You’ve probably noticed that the *Common English Bible* has often been my choice during the last few years.

One of my foundational texts for life and ministry is from Deuteronomy. *Israel, listen! Our God is the LORD! Only the LORD! Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up. Tie them on your hand as a sign. They should be on your forehead as a symbol. Write them on your house’s doorframes and on your city’s gates.*²

I’ve always loved this statement of theology and commandment—and the instructions to incorporate the living Word of God into every area of life and teach it to future generations. I view this as my task as a Christian and as a pastor.

If I were asked to summarize my experience with scripture in one sentence, I suppose I would say I have journeyed from “getting it right” to “allowing it to unfold and guide.” Thanks be to God.

¹ Romans 16:1-2, *New Revised Standard Version*

² Deuteronomy 6:4-9, *Common English Bible*