

Pastor Roy's sermon from September 29, 2013

The Word of the Lord...Thanks be to God. Why do we read a Psalm, a Hebrew Bible, Epistle, and Gospel reading each Sunday? Why these particular passages? How did they come to be together?

In other churches there is one reading—the reading upon which the sermon will be based.

The collection of readings divided by the weeks of the year in a 3 year cycle is called the lectionary. Did you know that some of the earliest biblical manuscripts are lectionaries? They aren't arranged according to the books of the Bible but according to the weeks of the year in which they were to be read. The lectionary is an ancient Christian practice. The lectionary reminds us that Scripture is not simply a personal experience. Scripture is best understood and interpreted together, in community.

Here's another name. Canon. The 66 books of the Bible are what we call the canon, collection, of Scriptures. They were actually chosen in the synagogues and early church. They weren't handed down by some central authority but were chosen week after week by pastors and rabbis on the basis of their truthfulness and value for pastoral care. Over time, the pastors and elders of the churches gathered in councils to give their church wide blessing to certain books. 27 make up the New Testament. By the time this happened, there was very little disagreement about what the most important books were.

The same process happened in Judaism in the choosing of the 39 or so books—depending on how you divide them--which make up the Hebrew Bible. The tradition of which books were accepted as authoritative was a very human process, but we believe the Spirit was at work in that process as the Spirit is at work in our understanding these books today. The choosing of the lectionary which we use today was and is very similar to the tradition by which the Bible was assembled.

The passages which best encourage us in a healthy, faithful life in God's mercy are the passages in our lectionary. It's an example that the Spirit works in very human processes to guide us to hear the Word of God and apply it to our lives today.

The Scriptures haven't come to us in a simple process, and neither is understanding them today. How do we do it? Interpretation has always been a dialogue—back and forth, give and take--and there will always be minor disagreements about what they proclaim.

But don't be mistaken, the essence and meaning of our faith is solid. How we apply that essence is a faithful struggle in listening to the mind of the Spirit. There must always be room for disagreement in the church, or we have clearly lost our way and are no longer are seeking the mind of the Spirit. No one may lay claim to the mind of the Spirit to the discredit of others.

So each lectionary reading has value and will teach us the mind of the Spirit if we have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to us today. The Spirit draws us into the mercy of God, the life forming power at work in the universe today. The wisdom of the Spirit is never a weapon with which we can beat our enemies or prove ourselves right. The Spirit calls us to listen.

For example, we have the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Funny in the story that Lazarus, the poor man, has a name and the rich man does not. It's a sign of his folly. The rich man barely knows Lazarus exists. The rich man's weakness is blindness. He never sees or respects Lazarus. Daily, he could have made a big difference in Lazarus' life. But even after he dies, he still thinks of Lazarus as inferior to

himself and his brothers. The rich man is important to himself. He enjoys good food and comfortable clothing. He is satisfied. Since he lacks any real hunger of his own, he also fails to see that others around him might be hungry. He is a spiritual child. He's never grown up.

How does this relate to us today? We are all rich with resources compared to the majority of the inhabitants of this planet, now and in the past. With all of our wealth, are we even content? Studies have shown over and over—some very recently, that we are not, despite the abundance of our prosperity. Why not?

Our epistle reading today reminds us that contentment is not the result of securing goods for ourselves, but rather, in the writer's words, to do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. There we have it. "To do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. Nothing else will set us free to live, and love, and be satisfied.

Unless we learn to be generous with our time and energy—with all of our resources, we will never have enough. We will never be secure. We will never be free.

So, the tradition of our readings today calls us to be free as we sever the chords of bondage by giving generously in love, with mercy, by listening, by looking for those people around us who need us, even if they are people to whom we are not naturally attracted.

Who is already part of your life whom you can help by noticing and loving—not by good feelings—but by compassionate actions and mercy? --Things which we have first received from God. There is someone within your life already that needs your attention. Let us reach out freely in ways we are able, according to our gifts. If we do, we will be free indeed.

Amen.