

The Family Scrapbook

Deuteronomy 6:4-9Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

2 Timothy 3:14-17But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Matthew 7:11-12If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! ¹² "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

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If you've been here for worship services at First Pres several times, you probably noticed that the great big Bible that has been on the pulpit every Sunday morning is in a different location this morning. Sometimes we do something so often or for such a long period of time, that it seems like that's the only proper way to do it. After worship on Christmas Day, Cathy and I drove to Burnsville up in the Blue Ridge. Her sister had promised that we would have Christmas dinner together. There was no turkey, no stuffing, no sweet potatoes, no green bean casserole. But it was definitely Christmas dinner, nonetheless. Wendy had made her mother's sour cherry congealed salad. And we all knew that no Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner was worthy of the name unless that beloved traditional dish was on the table. We wouldn't dream of doing without that most essential element of a holiday dinner. It's that good – and the tradition is that strong.

There was a time when a woman wasn't properly dressed to go to church unless she wore a hat and gloves. And there was a lot of murmuring and catty remarks the first time a woman wore slacks to church. It was downright scandalous! Sometimes habits are given a lot of importance and they graduate to a higher level and are called tradition. Tradition is a weightier thing than habit. Tradition begins to take on the mantle of honor, of virtue, of correctness, and righteousness. So, when a woman first came to church without hat and gloves, and perish the thought, even wearing pants, questions were raised about her respectability, and perhaps even her virtue.

We Presbyterians are known for having fairly plain worship spaces. If the minister wears a robe, it's a plain black academic robe. Fancy brocade stoles with gold thread would seem ostentatious. The sanctuary has little decoration as a general rule. There's usually a cross, but seldom is there anything that would be considered ornate. There might be stained glass windows, but not usually. And you usually see a Bible in a prominent location. Where we put the Bible is an important issue for many people. Where should we put the Bible? What do you think?

When I was searching for a call, I talked with four different congregations in Kentucky. When Cathy and I arrived at one of them, the first thing the pastor nominating committee did was give us a tour of the facilities and we began in the sanctuary. The very first thing they said was, "We want you to notice that the Bible is right where it belongs. It's front and center, on the table beneath the cross, and open." It was obvious from the emphatic tone of voice, that this was the only proper location for the Bible. Anywhere else would be sacrilegious. I tried to nod wisely and not reveal that I was wondering why this was so.

Not too long after I came here, I heard stories about how a previous minister here had taken the Bible off of the pulpit. Mysteriously, every Sunday morning it reappeared on the pulpit. Unlike that congregation in Kentucky, here in Thomasville it was important to someone that the Bible be on the pulpit.

What is the symbolism, what is the unspoken message when we place a large Bible on the pulpit? On the Communion table? On a Lectern?

Is it really important that the Bible be displayed in the sanctuary? Do we get focused on the "right way" to display the Bible – but fail to put the Bible in a more important location – in our hands? The Bible is the most purchased book – and perhaps the least read. It sits on the coffee table, or on a shelf, but seldom gets worn out from use. Now, in some circles you see it often in people's hands. They carry it to and from church on Sunday morning. But even then, it may just be a way of accessorizing their outfit, just like the conservative dark tie, or the small gold cross necklace. Some Bibles get more mileage than use.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy makes some important points. In part, it says, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. "Keep God's message in your heart. Today we might say, "Internalize God's will. Think about it. Mull it over. Talk about it with your friends, and with your children. They won't think it's important if you never mention it. Consider God's will, God's dream and hopes for your life when you get up and plan your day, when you go to bed and reflect on how the day has gone. Consider it when you're hanging out around the house, when you're at work, when you're shopping, or traveling. Don't box God up and only glance in the box from 11:00 to 12:00 on Sunday morning. Keep God in your heart. Keep God in mind.

It seems to me that around Christmas time there's often a heart wrenching story about some family that loses everything in a house fire. This year there was the tragic story of the fire that destroyed a whole house and three children and two grandparents. We hear about families that lose everything in a fire - and our thoughts automatically turn to the question, "If I woke up and smelled smoke, what would I be sure to grab as I left the house? We ask the same question when we see news stories about floods. What would I be sure to grab and take with me? What is the most valuable thing in my life? What would you try to grab as you leave the house? . . . The rest of the family, of course. Pets. Most people say family photographs next.

I've been giving this some thought. I'd want to save pictures. I'd like to save precious recipes from my grandmother, an aunt, and a great aunt. There's a painting done by my great grandmother. There are my Dad's papers from World War II, a dried rose from my parents wedding. These are the sort of thing that you put in a family scrapbook. They're the memories of the family; the things that say who you are, where you come from, the struggles and the glory of your family. We call it a scrapbook, but it is so completely misnamed. Scraps? Hardly! We're talking about precious memories, the jewels in the family crown. As you turn the pages in the family scrapbook, you find clippings that tell of the public recognition of a grandparent, letters that tell of disasters and successes, heartbreak and love. That photo album, that scrapbook, is the most valuable book in your house. It can't be replaced. To some extent it defines you - and if you lose it, something inside you disappears, too.

Just recently, I heard someone say that the Bible is the family scrapbook. My instant reaction was that was a trite description of the Bible. But then I realized that it was a very accurate description and high praise for its value in our lives. We are God's children. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Those aren't empty words. They speak great truths about God's unshakable love for us, about how we ideally relate to God, and how we're called to relate to each other. We are the family of God.

The Bible is the family scrapbook of the family of God. The Bible isn't a continuous book like a novel or a biography or a history text. The Bible is bits and pieces of many things. Some sections are stories, narratives about ancient ancestors, stories told around evening campfires for hundreds of years before they were written down. We read about Abraham's astounding trust in God – and the cowardly way that he put his wife Sarah in danger. We read of a spoiled brat who so tormented his brothers that

they sold him to slave traders – and how he came to the rescue of the whole family clan during a great famine. We read of the wisdom and courage of King David – and how he stooped to adultery and murder to have Bathsheba as one of his wives.

But there's a lot more than stories in the scrapbook. There are great laws and picky rules. There are brave preachers who offend everyone with their ranting against the status quo and their challenges to the popular culture. We call them prophets. There's erotic love poetry. There's a whole book of wisdom reduced to sound bites. There's a hymn book filled with praise songs ---and songs where people demand that God do his job. We read that we have great--great-aunts who were prostitutes, beauty queens, and foreigners. We have great-great-uncles who worked years to marry the woman they loved and others who chased after every passing skirt. And through it all we learn of how our family relationship with God waxed and waned, and how our understanding of God changed through the centuries.

There are four accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus – and stories of the first few years of the church. The scrapbook has lots of letters that have been saved. Some are letters written to specific individuals, others written to specific groups of people. Other letters are written to the church at large. There's even one letter that is all about a fantastic dream, a vision.

The Bible is a family scrapbook of all kinds of odds and ends – laws and letters, poetry and dreams - that tell us about how the family has succeeded and failed, about how we've walked with God and run from him, and how year after year, generation after generation, century after century, God has always sought us out, pursued us when we've rejected and ignored him, blessed us when there was no way we deserved it, and loved us like a mother loves her children, even when they are un-loveable.

The Bible is a scrapbook of value beyond measure. It's unfortunate that we aren't more familiar with it. Next week we'll explore it further, consider its history, and think about what it means to be scripture. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
The family scrapbook is filled with inspiring stories.
It holds important letters, great wisdom, and beautiful poetry.
Don't put it on a pedestal. Put it in your hands!
Soak it up until it fills your mind, warms your heart, and directs your feet.