

There is a story told at Oxford in England about a visiting American and his family. One day the Rector of Exeter College observed a couple of American tourists — a father and his 12-year old son — wandering around, outside of visiting hours, in the Fellows' Garden (a place of special significance to those who attend, lecture, and know Oxford University's traditions). The father was taking pictures, and the boy was romping in the grass. Hating to yell at them — conduct unbecoming a Rector — but wishing to register his displeasure at their trespass, he stood at the window of his study, puffing furiously at his pipe, and glared down at them. The boy caught sight of the Rector; whereupon he sang out to his father, "Hey, Dad, look! These ruins are inhabited!"

Many people who open the Bible at random have an experience rather like the American father and son at Exeter College — it looks like a jumble of odd bits and pieces of writing, a rag-tag collection of poetry, history, folk tales, ethical instruction, and some strange stories about some even stranger people. Reading it can seem, at least to begin with, like wandering through old courtyards where somebody once lived, but it was a long, long time ago.

But I've found that just when you're tempted to put the whole thing down as interesting but not really relevant, there comes a sense of movement; you get a glimpse of life and spirit. There seems to be energy, as though someone's left a light on or music playing in the old building. It begins to feel alive. There is breath, even.

Our New Testament reading led early Christians to believe that the Scriptures were alive because God had “breathed” them in the first place. Now the word we hear in modern times is “inspired,” which comes from the Latin — but even in the original Romance tongue, that word means “in-breathed.” But before I get to that, let’s deal with how we hear the word *inspired* today.

First, people often speak of artists and poets, composers and musical performers, even athletes as being *inspired*. “It was an inspired performance,” we might say after a concert. What we often mean here is: “it had something out of the ordinary” or “it all seemed to come together and work in a new way.” Other times we mean that we felt *inspired* by it; it gave us a lift, a boost of spirits. It was in that sense, *inspiring*. The trouble with this meaning is that it doesn’t begin to get near what Paul and other Christian writers mean when they talk about Scripture being “inspired.” What those folk mean is exactly how the Greek transliterates it: *God-breathed*. They are saying that Scriptures have life because they have living breath in them.

Second reason *inspired* is an inadequate translation is when people talk about poets and other writers as being *inspired*, they sometimes mean that the writer’s mind went into neutral and some other force or spiritual source poured words in from somewhere else. Around here we hear people talk like that; as if Jeremiah or Paul or the Gospel writers functioned as God’s

typewriter or dictating machine. But, again, that's not what those characters meant in using the term. Just look at Jeremiah and Paul as two examples; each give plenty of evidence that their own personalities, backgrounds, vocations, struggles, and sheer individual circumstances deeply affected the way they saw and said and wrote things.

Third, there are other people who insist that the Bible was and is *inspired* presume that they know in advance what that word meant in terms of the Bible's own content. They presume that it means the Bible is going to support their particular type of theology. Again and again this has been proved wrong.

As for me, precisely because I believe the Bible (rather than anyone's system of theology) is indeed *inspired*; that is, *God-breathed*, I am set free from the prison of any human system, free to discover the larger world, the even greater framework of thought, that the Bible itself invites me to share.

So, what do we do with these texts, words that have been used and misused, interpreted and misinterpreted, discarded and found again?

Reading from our *Book of Order* brings this insight about the Scriptures:

The Scriptures bear witness to the Word of God, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, the Word who 'became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). Where the Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the living Word is present by the power of the Holy Spirit. (BOO, W-3.0301)

In reading about the issue of Scripture being inspired in other denominations, I found this reference from the 2007 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination. It is part of 12 principles of identity that the authors noted “are remarkably consistent with those of the 1909 international convention” when the denomination was recognized. The second principle is: *We hold the centrality of scripture, recognizing that each person has the freedom — and the responsibility — to study God’s Word within the community of the church.*¹

Seems to me that such a principle would encourage us to see for ourselves what the texts say, to celebrate the rich unity and diversity of the Bible, and to use it for all its worth in the many ways which the writer of *2 Timothy* encourages. As Paul alludes, let it use us, let the Spirit who caused it to be written, who spoke through different writers in various ways, ways that are as powerful today as in centuries past, to transform lives.

Looking back at verse 17 in this morning’s reading, we hear how the spirit speaking through Scripture can make us wise — can help us think in new patterns, see things we hadn’t seen before, understand ourselves and other people and God and the world... perhaps find ourselves transformed by God’s forgiving grace so that we become part of God’s new creation.

And, along with the Word read and proclaimed, so, too, is the Word enacted in the celebration of the Sacraments; Baptism and the Lord’s

¹ Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn, *Disciples: Reclaiming Our Identity, Reforming Our Practice*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009, p.5

Supper. For some people, worship isn't worship without the celebration of the second sacrament. For them, it's a habit, and not a bad habit at that. Even we Presbyterians have in our history the discipline of celebrating communion weekly. John Calvin, a theological forefather, was kicked out of Geneva partly for wanting to observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday. A condition of his return to that city was that he be allowed to do just that. Why was Calvin so adamant about reading Scripture and gathering around the Table each week? Because he read it in Scripture, saw it to be part of God's plan, understood it to be a necessary part of life together in community, in church, in the world.

There used to be a tradition in the old Southern stream of the Presbyterian Church of giving Bibles to 3rd Graders. I received my first Bible a bit later—I think I was in the 5th grade. But, when my own children got to the 3rd Grade, I gave them a Bible of their own. My daughter and youngest son still have theirs. When my daughter got hers, she asked why I was giving it to her. I replied that it was to help them learn its stories, to learn to revel in its poetry, to listen even to its difficult sayings so that God's Word, the living Word, can inhabit them, to make the Bible (and her) alive.

She is now passing on that tradition with her children.

Let us pray: Most loving God, You have indeed inspired words to be written, preserved, studied and lived. In Jesus the Christ, Your Son, Your Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. You breathed in life, eternal

life, life worth living in and for, as You call us to live as brothers and sisters in Christ. In the Bible we find Your words and Your Word, capital letter, that gives us hope, that fuels our faith, that inspires us to serve others in Your name. May we eagerly look for ways and times to seek You in Scripture so that we may be proficient, equipped for every good work. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.