

Sermon Note: Texts That Shape Us

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

We're nearing the end of our series, *Knowing Who We Are*, drawn from the book of the same name by Rev. Dr. Lacey Warner. So far we have explored the grace God pours into us, the connexion we belong to, the small groups of early Methodists, and the neighbors God sends us to serve. This week we turn to the texts that inform and shape us.

Wesley called himself a person of one book, writing, "At any price, give me the book of God!" He studied scripture with commentaries, original languages, and translations, and he did so alongside others. We Methodists are informed by Wesley's "Quadrilateral," reading *scripture* and considering it through the lens of *tradition*, *reason*, and *experience*. In our readings this week, we examine how sacred text can bring us relief, wisdom, and understanding.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84iTxBv1o>

In this clip from *Freedom Writers* (2007), Ms. Gruwell's students raise a toast to change, and then one student asks to read aloud from his diary...

Why This Video?

Ms. Gruwell hands out books and sparkling cider and asks for a toast to change, telling the class that the person each of them was before this moment is finished. These toasts are about survival. One student expected to be pregnant at 16 and out of school like her mother, and says it "ain't gonna happen." Another was kicked out of the house for getting jumped into gang life, and confesses hope for life after graduation. Then one student asks to read from his diary. Some of his classmates do not recognize him, and nobody knows his name, even though he's been in the class since freshman year. He reads about his mother pleading on the phone to avoid eviction, the sheriff at the door, and wondering why a homeless kid should bother with school. He ends with a new school schedule sending him back to Ms. Gruwell's class: "I am home."

Video Discussion Questions

1. The students raise their glasses and declare that the person each of them used to be is finished. What do you think happens when we say a promise like that out loud, in front of other people?
2. Ms. Gruwell hands out sparkling cider and gives the moment a little ceremony. Is this important to her class? Why or why not?
3. Several students speak about violence, loss, and families under strain. What do you think makes it possible for people to speak honestly and vulnerably like this?
4. One student has been in class since freshman year, and his classmates don't even know his name. Why do you think it happened in this case, and how do you think this happens more broadly?
5. The student reads from his diary. Have you ever felt more comfortable reading something you've written instead of speaking directly? What does the written page change in these circumstances?

6. He describes the day his family was evicted, and then describes his classroom as his home. What do you think he's trying to say? Have you ever felt something like this?
7. The class responds by getting up and embracing him. What does this action communicate? Do you think it's important?
8. Think of a time a group of people heard you in a way you hadn't felt heard before. What was different from before? What changed afterward?

Nehemiah 8:1-10 (CEB)

¹When the seventh month came and the people of Israel were settled in their towns, all the people gathered together in the area in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Instruction scroll from Moses, according to which the Lord had instructed Israel.

²So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Instruction before the assembly. This assembly was made up of both men and women and anyone who could understand what they heard. ³Facing the area in front of the Water Gate, he read it aloud, from early morning until the middle of the day. He read it in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand, and everyone listened attentively to the Instruction scroll.

⁴Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for this purpose. And standing beside him were Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his righthand side; while Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam stood on his lefthand side.

⁵Standing above all of the people, Ezra the scribe opened the scroll in the sight of all of the people. And as he opened it, all of the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all of the people answered, "Amen! Amen!" while raising their hands. Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁷The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah—helped the people to understand the Instruction while the people remained in their places. ⁸They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard.

⁹Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all of the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Don't mourn or weep." They said this because all the people wept when they heard the words of the Instruction.

¹⁰"Go, eat rich food, and drink something sweet," he said to them, "and send portions of this to any who have nothing ready! This day is holy to our Lord. Don't be sad, because the joy from the Lord is your strength!"

Psalms 119:97-104 (NRSVue)

⁹⁷Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

⁹⁸Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,

for it is always with me.

⁹⁹I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.

¹⁰⁰I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.

¹⁰¹I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.

¹⁰²I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.

¹⁰³How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

¹⁰⁴Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

Scripture Study Questions

1. The people ask Ezra to bring out the scroll. Why do you think they asked for this scroll? When Ezra read from it, what do you think the people were looking for?
2. Ezra reads from early morning until the middle of the day, and everyone listens attentively the whole time (v3). Have you ever read or listened to scripture for that long? What would it take for us to listen to scripture that way?
3. The Levites help the people understand while the people remain in their places, "explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard" (v8). Has anyone done this for you? What did they do that helped?
4. Verse 9 says, "...the people wept when they heard the words of the Instruction." Why do you think they wept?
5. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites tell the people the day is holy and to stop weeping. What do you think turns the people from grief into joy? Is it the food and sweet drink, or is it something else?
6. The instruction also includes portions sent "to any who have nothing ready" (v10). Why do you think this portion of text finishes with feeding people?
7. The psalmist says God's words are "sweeter than honey to my mouth" (v103). Have you ever associated scripture with a taste in your mouth? If so, what passage has tasted like that to you?
8. The psalmist claims more understanding than the psalmist's own teachers and "the aged" as a result of keeping God's precepts (v99-100). What does regular practice teach that study alone doesn't?

Additional (Optional) Questions

1. United Methodists keep a set of doctrinal standards: the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, Wesley's Sermons, his *Explanatory Notes*, and the General Rules. Have you ever heard of these? What would you want to know about them?
2. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral says that scripture comes first, and that tradition, reason, and experience help us to understand it. When have tradition, experience, or reason changed how you read a passage?
3. Wesley wanted to be a person of one book, and he read that book with commentaries, original languages, and translations. Do you think it's important to read scripture alongside commentaries? What about different translations (like NRSVue or CEB or KJV, etc.)? Have you ever seen books with the original Hebrew or Greek? Do any of these help you understand scripture? Why or why not?

4. Our "We Believe" series explored the Apostles' Creed one phrase at a time (if you missed it, or want to go back through it, the sermons are on our website at lajollaunitedmethodist.org/sermon-series/we-believe). You can also find the creed online or in our United Methodist Hymnal on page 881. Which phrase of the creed would you most want explained? Why?
5. When did sacred text last change your mind about something? Was anyone with you when it happened?

Weekly Action

Some time this week, read Nehemiah 8:1-10 out loud, then read Psalm 119:97-104. Pay attention to what's different when the words are spoken instead of read silently. After reading these, read your favorite story or verse!

Then find one person to read with, a spouse, a neighbor, a friend on the phone, a small group member. Ask each other: what do you think these scriptures mean? Discuss these together prayerfully.

Nehemiah told the people to send portions to anyone who had nothing ready. Share something with someone who needs it this week, and tell a loved one or a trusted spiritual partner what you did and what the experience was like.

Prayer

Holy God, you breathe life into scripture and into the people who read it. Thank you for the Bible, and for the creeds and commentaries that help us in our search for understanding. Gather us in faithful community with others when we open this sacred text, and give us patience to explain it to one another. Teach us to read for the sake of our salvation, and send us out to love and serve. Through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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