

“Take it, and eat”

4th Sunday after the Epiphany – January 27/28, 2007

Sermon Background Study

Matthew 6:25,33 (NRSV)

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? . . .

³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (The Message)

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way.

Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.

Revelation 10:8-9 (NRSV)

⁸Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.”

⁹So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.”

We’ll find the life we’ve always wanted when we are of a single mind with an overarching purpose, focused on God and his kingdom.

Do you ever feel pulled in several directions at the same time? Your job wants you. Your family wants you. Your friends want you. God wants you. Do you ever feel that your life is layers of secrets, as you strive to maintain neat compartments, chopping your mind and attention into multiple slices?

The answer, of course, is that we all feel that way from time to time and, too often, much of the time. The conflicting demands on our priorities can be overwhelming, so much so that we end up with no priorities at all. Our loyalties are divided. Our hearts and minds are divided. We end up stressed out, anxious, ill, and generally miserable. So . . . what do we do?

One thing

In his wonderful book, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, John Ortberg¹ talks honestly about his own experience of a divided life and the difficulty of, as Jesus says, striving “first for the kingdom of God.” Even Jack Palance, in the movie *City Slickers*, understands that the secret to life is “one thing.” When Jesus admonishes Martha for getting upset that her sister, Mary, isn’t helping in the kitchen, Jesus reminds her that “there is need of only one thing” (Luke 10:38-42).

Reading With Heart & Mind

The purpose of the *Heart & Mind* Bible readings is to provide you with a reading plan that emphasizes reflective, transformational reading. We will be reading through portions of many books of the Bible, but at a slow pace, with no more than a single story or passage each day. In addition to Ortberg’s suggestions for transformational reading, here’s a few more tips:

- Read the story or passage twice during the day, once in the morning and once in the evening. This will help you to keep the story in your heart and mind throughout the day, living with it and letting it work within you.
- Keep some index cards with your Bible. Each day, write down the phrase or verse in the passage that is most meaningful to you. Keep this card with you and glance at it once in awhile during the day. For example, you could set it on your desktop so it catches your eye from time to time.
- Find a discussion partner, someone with whom you can talk over the stories several times during the week. This might be your spouse or a friend. Sharing your thoughts and hearing those of someone else is a key way of getting into the story or passage.

The daily passages are incorporated into the page three Bible readings that have always been part of these Sermon Background Studies. I’m also posting the passages at www.standrewacademy.org. Just click on *Reading with Heart and Mind* in the navigation buttons.

Several St. Andrew members have already told me that they are finding this reading plan even more helpful than last year’s *Thru the Bible* plan, when we were reading 3-5 chapters a day. If you would like to read *Thru the Bible* in a year, the reading plan is still available on the Academy’s website.

¹One of my favorite authors has long been Philip Yancey. When someone asks me for a book recommendation, I’ll often urge Yancey upon them. He is a very thoughtful and honest Christian. John Ortberg is fast rivaling Yancey. He too is very honest about his own experience with God. I hope that you’ll find the time to read *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, which is the basis for this sermon series.

Sometimes circumstances help us to focus on “one thing” and grasp its power. Kathryn Ransdell and I were talking about upcoming sermon series a few days ago. She told me that a recent snow day became an extraordinary and very holy day for her. She had been playing around with a few ideas for a Lenten sermon series around the Gospel of John, but freed from the usual daily distractions, she found that as she worked on the series she lost all of track of time. For hours she encountered God with great power. Blessedly, I’ve had similar experiences as I’ve written studies or prepared classes. I wish it happened more often than it does.

We can all lose track of time in a variety of experiences. But losing yourself in Scripture is hard to describe. It is holy and it is powerful. For in that time, your heart and mind is focused like a laser on God and the things of God. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if that sort of experience, whether born in Scripture or in worship or in service, that focus on the “one thing,” characterized our entire life, not just all too brief portions of it. Our priorities would be clearer and our loyalties undivided.

Finding focus

Getting rid of what James calls our “double-mindedness,” requires our transformation, the “renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). That is what this series about. Developing practices that will help to transform us. Ortberg writes, “An indispensable practice is to have our minds re-formed by immersing them in Scripture . . . So how do we read the Bible in a way that will purify our hearts and help us to

Which translation should I read?

There are many excellent English translations of the Bible. We at St. Andrew most often use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The translation team sought to be as close to the ancient Hebrew and Greek as reasonably possible. In their words, the translators sought to be “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” Consequently, the NRSV can be a little difficult to understand in spots.

Thus, I usually recommend using the NRSV primarily, but also using an easier-to-read translation in places. The NLT (New Living Translation) is a good choice. Our youth department uses it a lot. You might also enjoy reading from Eugene Peterson’s biblical paraphrase, *The Message*. I find that *The Message* sometimes has an immediacy and emotional effect that I don’t get from the NRSV or even the TNIV.

Bear in mind, however, that to get an “easier” translation, the translators have to get further and further from the original Hebrew and Greek. Eugene Peterson is a knowledgeable scholar, but paraphrasing ancient languages into English presents big challenges.

So, I’d go with the NRSV and supplement your reading elsewhere. If you are *Reading with Heart and Mind*, you might take my advice and read the passage twice each day. Once using the NRSV and once using *The Message*. You can pick up inexpensive paperback copies of these translations at many bookstores.

live as Jesus would in our place?” Scripture, illumined by the Holy Spirit, helps us to clear away all the debris from our minds and hearts, so that we can focus on Jesus’ “one thing.”

The striking image from today’s Revelation passage helps us to grasp that we must take Scripture inside us. We are to chew over it and consume it, so that it can nourish our growth.

Three times in the Bible an angel hands a scroll to a prophet and tells him to eat it. The prophets are not just to read or hear God’s Word, or just understand it, or even just apply it. These people are to eat Scripture, to take it inside themselves so it gets into every part of their person and being.

All this became clearer for Eugene Peterson² when he saw his dog working over a bone, slowly chewing and growling. Not long after, he was reading Isaiah 31:4, where a lion “growls” over his prey. It was one of those *aha!* moments. The Hebrew word translated “growl” is usually translated “meditate” in the Old Testament. So there’s the question for us: How often do we take the time to “growl” over Scripture? To chew on it, to take it inside ourselves, to eat it, so that we are transformed, not merely informed.

“Take it, and eat”

How do we “growl” over Scripture? How do we read for transformation, not just information? Ortberg offers some suggestions:

1. “Ask God to meet you in Scripture”
2. “Read the Bible in a repentant spirit”
3. “Meditate on a fairly brief passage or narrative”
4. “Take one thought or verse with you through the day”
5. “Allow this thought to become part of your memory”

Make this a daily practice. The *Heart & Mind* Scripture readings should help. There are no shortcuts to the life you’ve always wanted, but there is great joy in the journey.

²This story is from Peterson’s excellent book on the art of spiritual reading, *Eat This Book*. Copies are in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Reading With Heart & Mind

January 28 – February 3

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Philippians 1:3-11 What does Paul pray for here? What are his reasons for thanks? How does this prayer compare to your own or to our congregational prayers?</p>	<p>Monday Philippians 1:12-18a What is Paul's proclamation? How does he view his own imprisonment?</p>
<p>Tuesday Philippians 1:18b-26 How does Paul feel about this life and the next? Why do you think he speaks of a desire to depart (die) and be with Christ? Why does he stay?</p>	<p>Wednesday Philippians 1:27-30 How does this passage speak to our public behavior? What do these new Christians have to fear from their opponents?</p>
<p>Thursday Philippians 2:1-4 This is about the community of believers being unified in everything. Why is this important? How unified is St. Andrew? How could we be more unified?</p>	<p>Friday Philippians 2:5-11 What does this passage say to you about Jesus? What is most surprising? Most difficult? How do get "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus?" What does Paul mean by "same mind"?</p>
<p>Saturday Philippians 2:12-18 What does Paul mean by "work out your own salvation"? Aren't we saved by grace? Why must the Philippians "hold fast the word of life" for Paul to "boast on the day of Christ"?</p>	

Sermon Notes

January Book Recommendation

***The Life You've Always Wanted*, by John Ortberg**

“What does the true spiritual life look like? What keeps you from living such a life? What can you do to pursue it? If you’re tired of the status quo – if you suspect there is more to Christianity than you’ve experienced – John Ortberg points to a road of transformation and spiritual vigor that anyone can take.” I highly recommend this book. It is one of those rare books that is easy to read and richly rewarding. The sermon series is a good start, but there is much more here.

Scott’s class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you’ll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten Fellowship Groups meeting now. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I chuckled when I read Ortberg’s reference to *City Slickers*. I can picture Jack Palance perched high on his horse telling Billy Crystal that the secret to life is “one thing.” Naturally, Billy wants to know what that one thing actually is. He never gets an answer. At the time I thought Jack was just being mysterious. But now I wonder if he was wiser than I thought. What is the value of having “one thing,” regardless of what it is? Do we all have different “one things”? Should all Christians share the same “one thing”? If you have “one thing” now, how would you articulate it to others?

Do you agree that we must be deeply saturated in Scripture to lead a transformed life? Even if you think it is possible to be transformed without Scripture, why does the Christian community value it so highly? I have a book on my shelf about the spiritual disciplines. The only discipline given two chapters by the author is what he calls “Bible Intake” ~ Bible meditation (similar to Ortberg) and Bible study. What is the role of each in your life? How can you make a place for both? How might Bible study complement Bible meditation?

Have you ever tried memorizing Scripture? Could you recall any now? Bible memorization is not much practiced by the Methodists I’ve known. What part might it play in our spiritual growth? How could you begin a disciplined program of memorization? How could it help you find the life you’ve always wanted?