Hi,

Happy Monday. Here are today’s updates:

* My 3pm Monday Matthew class and my noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet this week on [my ministry Facebook Page: “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour)
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

We continue our look at Methodism and the UMC today and tomorrow. We Methodists understand well that Christians are to grow continually in their discipleship and faith.

***Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)***

**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

***Ephesians 4:11-16 (NRSV)***

**The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.**

*Growing up*

Who wants to be called a baby? When I was in elementary school, those were fighting words. But that is pretty much how Paul sees the Christians in Ephesus. He pulls the punch just a bit by saying “*we* must no longer be children, tossed to and fro” but the sharp point still hits home. To the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote “And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as a spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as *infants in Christ*. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh” (1 Cor.3:1-3). No punches pulled there.

Is Paul *trying* to be insulting? I don’t know whether Paul was going for a little shock value or not, but his point was well taken. These Christians were infants in the faith, Christian novices, fresh enlistees in the body of Christ. When we read Paul’s letters in the New Testament, we have to remember that they are largely letters written to small, emerging communities of faith that he himself had founded only a few years before. He is their “senior pastor,” writing to his churches to provide guidance, to settle disputes, to teach, to encourage, and to otherwise help these new colonies of God’s re-born people to grow toward Christian maturity.

Just try to imagine the journey that lay ahead of these Christians. There were no churches for them to grow up in. No parents or grandparents to turn to. No theological libraries or Bible classes. For that matter, no Bibles. Only this strange Good News about a God who gets himself crucified by the Romans. They were asked to give up their belief in the existence of many gods and embrace the Jewish claim that there was only one God. Their embrace of Christ often meant ostracism from their families and friends, for already there were nasty rumors about these followers of Christ, including gruesome whispers of their gathering to eat Jesus’ body and to drink his blood.

They had as much to “unlearn” as to learn, as they grew into ever-truer disciples of Christ. In this, we are like them, for nearly all of us carry around unquestioned but misleading assumptions about the Christian proclamation. We think we understand and then are surprised by how much we have to learn and “unlearn.”

John Wesley understood this. Though he never earned much respect as a systematic theologian, that was never his goal. Wesley pursued what he called “practical divinity,” by which he meant a practical theology. Eugene Peterson calls this “spiritual theology -- the attention we give to keeping what we believe about God (theology) in organic connection with the way we live with God (spirituality).” It is this “spiritual theology” that Paul speaks to in this week’s passages from Romans and Ephesians.

*Transformation*

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul transitions from Romans 1-11 to chapters 12-16. It is as if Paul has spent the first two-thirds of the letter climbing up the mountain and now, he begins down the other side, examining the Christian life in light of the work of Christ. In this, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus’ teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has *accomplished*. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. Our commitment to Christ demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our *thoughts*, *feelings*, and *actions* are conformed to the ways of God. It is the marriage of what we believe about God with how we live with God, the joining of biblical theology and holy living.

How does this transformation happen? How do we “grow up in every way . . . into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15)? It seems, well, impossible so much of the time. There is so much in me that needs transforming. How can I put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God’s Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone, we couldn’t get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don’t actually do much of it. No, only by God’s grace and the help of the Spirit can we ever hope to live a holy life.

*Getting to the truth*

This organic connection between what we know about God and how we live with God, depends on our making our way ever closer to the truth about God. But how do we do that? How do we arrive at a trustworthy core of beliefs about the God with whom we live?

The UMC Book of Discipline holds that “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified [to impart vitality] in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” These four: *Scripture*, *tradition* (what we’ve gotten from those who came before us), *experience*, and *reason* constitute what has been dubbed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. A mistake sometimes made is to think that Methodists see the four as equals, merely four complementary means of coming to know the truth about God. But that isn’t it at all. We affirm that Scripture is the primary criterion of what we believe, the measure against which all claims are judged. But we recognize that we learn about God also by listening to those who have come before us (tradition), by seeking to understand our own experience with God and others, and by learning to think well, using our mind as well as our heart.

We are United Methodists because we do not desire to be like children, tossed here and there by the latest Jesus fads. Instead, we pray that by “speaking the truth in love,” we will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” We seek the “renewing of our minds” so that we can “discern what is the will of God,” so that we can grow into “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” May we all embrace a calling to be spiritual theologians.

*A bit more -- Our heritage of respect for learning*

The people of God have always had a deep and abiding respect for learning. We usually think of God’s Old Testament law as an extended and burdensome list of detailed rules. However, “instruction” is a better way to think of God’s law, for the Law told the Israelites how they were to live in relationship with God – what a wondrous thing to be told! So, we shouldn’t be surprised when the Psalmist says, “I told you my plans, and you answered. Now teach me your principles. Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful miracles” (Psalm 119:26-27 NLT). The book of Proverbs is, in essence, the lived experience of the Jewish community of learning to walk in God’s ways. The Jews understood that they had to teach their children the story of Israel and its God. What does it mean to be Israel? Why do we live the way we live and do what we do?1 Given their heritage of devotion to God’s word and the importance of learning, it is not surprising that the study of Torah replaced the temple as the center of Jewish religious practices after the destruction of the temple in 70AD.

The apostles and early Christians were no less committed to learning and study. Timothy was told to “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ” (2 Tim 3:14-15). Peter urged that Christians “long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation” (1 Pet 2:2).

In John 8, Jesus tells believers, “If you truly continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (v.31-32). What does Jesus mean by “continue?” It might be translated “stay in” or “dwell.” Dallas Willard writes that continuing/dwelling in Jesus’ word means focusing on the good news of God’s kingdom and devoting ourselves to Jesus’ teaching through both private study and public instruction. This is not occasional dabbling in God’s word, but dwelling there, being thoughtfully serious, devoting regular time and effort, and asking God to open our heart and mind to his word.

At St. Andrew, we are striving to help all of us to become more knowledgeable and confident in our understanding and use of the Bible. This is crucial because, as our *Book of Discipline* states “United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine.” Though a well-educated Oxford man, John Wesley considered himself to be a “man of one book,” the Bible. We are called to be a people of that book. In its pages, we learn of God’s hopes for us and expectations of us. In its pages, we confront the living Lord and learn of his love for us. In its pages, we learn how to live the sort of life that God intended for us. Indeed, William Willimon reminds us that “a congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott