

### 3 Epiphany – C

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

The text for today's sermon is from a lot of different parts of the Bible.

I don't know whether or not you saw this on Facebook or whether or not it's been on television or in the newspaper, but the Barna group has just come out with its annual ranking of the most and least Bible-minded cities in the country. Of the one hundred cities across the country that it researched, the tri-city area of Albany, Schenectady and Troy came out the least Bible-minded area of the country. The absolute last.

Now you may be wondering: what is the Barna group? Why should we pay attention to their statistics? Well, for one thing, they're a reputable organization. Their info-gathering methods are solid and thorough. And for thirty years it has been widely considered to be a leading research organization focused on the intersection of faith and culture.

So when I read that our area is the least Bible-minded in the country, I sit up and take note. And I ask, "How does Barna define what it means to be Bible-minded?" So, here's their criteria, as taken from their website: The report ranks the most and least "Bible-minded" cities by looking at how people in those cities view the Bible. The study is based on 42,855 interviews conducted nationwide and the analysis of Bible trends was commissioned by American Bible Society. Individuals who report reading the Bible in a typical week *and* who strongly assert the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches are considered to be Bible-minded. This definition captures action and attitude—those who both engage and esteem the Christian scriptures. The rankings thus reflect an overall openness or resistance to the Bible in the country's largest markets.

Easily the lowest Bible-minded scores came from Providence, RI (9%) and Albany, NY (10%).

Now, that might make you feel depressed and despairing. It might make you feel that our churches are certainly doing something wrong if we are not creating Bible-minded citizens in our community. But hold on! Don't feel bad! I want to go back and unpack those sentences I just read to you and explain how I respond to what the Barna group is asking of its participants. Then you can tell me whether or not you think that I, your pastor, am Bible-minded.

So there are two main measures in the Barna study, right? Those who report reading their Bible in a typical week, that's one. The other measure is whether or not they believe the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches.

Okay, let's start with frequency of Bible reading. I read the Bible in one way or another, every single day. And I think you know me well enough after a year—and most of you have known me a lot longer than that—that you can see I really, really love the Bible. But why? Why do I read the Bible? I read the Bible because I love stories. And the Bible has some very, very

good ones. Some of them are uplifting—think about Jesus raising Lazarus, healing the little girl, healing the centurion’s servant, making the lame to walk and the blind to see. Some Bible stories are comical and/or confusing, such as Jonah trying to escape God’s work for him (I love that story!) or the puzzling story of the fiery furnace or the story of poor Samson. Some stories are very touching—think of Ruth and Naomi and their devotion to one another. Some are unsettling—Lot’s wife being turned to salt, Lot offering his virgin daughters to the townsmen in order to prevent his houseguest from being attacked. And some stories are simply horrible and violent: the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, Yael mashing Sisera’s skull with a tent peg, the rape and dismemberment of the Levite’s concubine. All these found in the book of Judges.

But I don’t just read the Bible because I like stories. I like poetry, too, and it just doesn’t get much better than parts of Isaiah and the Psalms and parts of Job. And I read the Bible because, though I am no scholar of ancient history, I like to know a little bit about it and the Bible can be helpful there, as well.

I read the Bible because it’s my job. I read the Bible because it’s my joy.

I read the Bible because I love Jesus. I love what Jesus did. I love what he said. I love his values, his valor, his salvific act on the cross, his coming again to be with his disciples. I love Jesus for his announcing the coming of the Holy Spirit.

I read the Bible because I love the Holy Spirit. I trust the Holy Spirit. And when I don’t know how to pray or what to say, I am comforted in my marrow by these words from Romans 8, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes\* with sighs too deep for words.”

I think we can all agree that I pass the “individuals who read the Bible in a typical week” portion of the Barna test. But what about the other measure? Do I believe the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches?

Well, I read my Bible frequently enough, thoroughly enough and seriously enough to answer honestly, well, heck, that depends. For example, here are some principles in Leviticus I don’t think are accurate: the people are told not to eat fat (“All fat is the Lord’s” is the actual line from Leviticus 3), wear a garment made with two different fabrics or sow their fields with two different kinds of seeds. That makes buttering your toast, getting dressed or having a garden kind of tricky. Leviticus cautions against drinking alcohol in the tent of meeting because you might die. Yet we have the wine of communion in our sanctuary every Sunday. There is also a commandment against having unkempt hair, but that may only apply to priests. And anyway, I do try to shampoo regularly.

But Leviticus also teaches that one should not sleep with family members or marry your wife’s sister while your wife is still alive or curse the deaf or abuse the blind or pervert justice or mistreat foreigners. I’m down with all of those principles. I think they’re accurate.

And it isn’t just Leviticus, you know. The household codes we find in five of the New Testament books are not principles I endorse as accurate. I don’t expect that a man should expect absolute submission from his wife and children. I don’t think we should keep slaves, yet this is what the household codes advise. I don’t think it matters if I braid my hair or wear gold jewelry or pearls, even though 1 Peter and 1 Timothy forbid it. I don’t think women need to learn in silence with full submission, as 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians state. And I notice that not too many women in the sanctuary today are wearing head coverings, even though in 1

Corinthians we are told that if we pray without a head covering, we are disgracing ourselves and that it is the same thing as having our heads shaved.

But I do find the principle sound and saving that Jesus gives in in John at the last supper: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

And I find this principle sound and saving that we get in the book of Hebrews, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

And these words of Jesus I esteem as highly accurate:

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

*34 ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*

In fact, I esteem highly just about everything Jesus says in the sermon on the mount. And I love it when the writer of Colossians says this:

*As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.*

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Let’s turn our attention just for a minute to the act of reading scripture that comprises our stories today from Nehemiah and Luke. In Nehemiah, the Hebrew people have returned from the Babylonian exile to Jerusalem and are rebuilding it. This ritual reading of the Torah which has been brought back with them from exile is a joyous time. And the text tells us that all the people gathered together. The text tells us that both men and women listened with understanding. And the text tells us that after the Torah was read the people were told to go out and eat fat and drink wine and send portions of the feast to those for whom nothing has been prepared. For the reading of scripture has been a joyous event, providing understanding of God’s word and generosity of spirit and hospitality to those who lack.

Today, observant Jews mark the last day of the eight-day festival of Sukkot with the celebration known as *Simchat Torah* which means rejoicing in the Torah. The five books of the Torah, which had been read in worship every week, have now been completed. But as an act of faithfulness--and as a way to prove Satan wrong who, in Jewish lore, complained that the people once having finished reading the Torah, would forget about it and not read it again—the people take the Torah scroll and dance with it. They “give the Torah legs” and dance with it

because the word of God is a living thing. And they begin to read the Torah from the start of Genesis verse 1, chapter 1 once more. On Simchat Torah," goes the chassidic saying, "we rejoice in the Torah, and the Torah rejoices in us; the Torah, too, wants to dance, so we become the Torah's dancing feet."

I love that image! The people become the dancing feet of the word of God!

And now, finally, we turn to the gospel of Luke, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, which is the gathering place for all observant Jews. He is handed a scroll, a portion of the *haftarah*, specifically a reading from one of the prophets or the *Nevi-im*. And look at what happens! After Jesus reads the passage he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The *haftarah* has been given the legs of Jesus! The word of God has been made flesh and is dwelling among us!

I believe we are still being called to give legs to the word of God. That's our job. It's not to become Bible-minded by reading a snippet here or there sometime during the week and then just deciding that all the principles in the Bible are ones that we believe are accurate. That's just sloppy and unreflective reading. Instead, our job is to study and probe and prod and pry at scripture so that we can give the word of God legs that it might dwell among us, full of grace and truth.

Our call is not to be Bible-minded, it's to be Bible partners, dancing with the word of God that it may provide us with the abundant life we are called to share with others.

The Psalmist tells us:

*How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.*

And the writer of Colossians advises us: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord.*

So let us let the word of God have legs and let us heed the exhortation of Nehemiah after hearing the Torah read to the people:

*'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep....Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'*

Thanks be to God. Amen.