

Eat This Book  
Revelation 10:1-11

I am so excited about today. I've been looking forward to it all summer, and now finally it's here. In a few minutes we'll be giving Bibles to Bobbie, Grace, Linus, and Julie. It's a big deal. It's a big deal for them and their families, and it's a big deal for us as a church. Every time we give a Bible to a young person, we are making a statement; we're saying that we think what is printed between the covers of this book is important. Important enough to have a special time of presentation within our worship service.

We give Bibles because we want our children to have a connection to their spiritual ancestors. We want them to know their roots; where they've come from. They didn't just grow up like Topsy; they're a part of a tradition that stretches back hundreds and hundreds of years. We are all part of a faith story that has been told over and over and over again. We affirm as United Methodists the importance of tradition, not only what we today think about the message of scripture, but what untold generations have thought, is important to us. Our Book of Discipline states, "Christianity does not leap from New Testament times to the present as though nothing were to be learned from that great cloud of witnesses in between. For centuries Christians have sought to interpret the truth of the gospel for their time." The passing on and receiving of the gospel is one element of our Christian history, and the practices and understandings of each age is a legacy that we have inherited. The importance of passing on our heritage is what we heard Ken read about from Psalm 78, "things that we have heard and known that our forebears have told us, we will not hide them from our children but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord." So we give Bibles because we want our children to learn about and to sense their own connection to that history of faith that has been attentively, caringly handed down through the ages.

We give Bibles to our children because we want them to have a reliable, trustworthy source for the development of their values and ethical sense. We want them to have a purpose and a direction in their lives that isn't motivated by the latest fad or fancy. We want them to have sound direction and trustworthy counsel to act as a counterbalance to the many temptations that the world offers. We want them to know before it's too late, that the greatest job in the world, the biggest house, the largest bank account, the fanciest car are not much help when a friend betrays them, a loved one dies, or the doctor brings in a diagnosis of cancer or some other health challenge.

We give Bibles because we want our children to have a source of inspiration and comfort for those difficult times. We want them to know the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment, the Beatitudes, and the Lord's Prayer because we know from our own life experience that the day will come when they will need the strength they offer. I remember reading shortly after the Vietnam War, that soldiers who'd fared best as prisoners of war were often the ones who remembered scripture, who could say these comforting passages to themselves, or who could sing familiar hymns when they were alone in the darkness. I am glad that I can say "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose," or to affirm that nothing "will be able separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus;" or remember, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces

character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

We rightly want all of these things for our children – connection, and counsel, and comfort. But is that enough? Is that all the Bible is good for? Is it only a collection of old "family" stories, a cook book of recipes for hard times, a list of moral and ethical rules to live by? Is that why we value it so highly?

The theologian Karl Barth once said that read rightly, we don't go to the Bible "in order to find out how to get God into our lives, to get God to participate in our lives." Instead, we read this book to be drawn into its reality, to be pulled into participation with God on [God's] terms.<sup>1</sup> In several places in scripture, Ezekiel and Jeremiah in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament, the authors are invited to eat the scroll that is offered to them. In today's reading, John has an amazing, eye-popping vision of an angel, "taking the cosmos as his pulpit," with one foot planted in the ocean and the other planted on the land, holding the scroll of scripture in his hand and preaching the word of God. And John was so impressed, that he started to try to write everything down that he was hearing read to him, but a voice from heaven tells him not to write down what he's heard from the book, but to take the book and eat it. To take the rolling thunder of the angelic voice as the holy words reverberated all around world and simply put them on paper would have been to take all the wind out of them, to flatten them, make them soundless again on the page. The angel had gotten them off the printed page and now John was going to put them back again. "No, says the heavenly voice—I want those words out there, creating sound waves, entering ears, entering lives. I want those words preached, sung, taught, prayed – *lived*."<sup>2</sup> The voice tells John to take the book from the angel, and as he takes it, he is told "Eat this book" And he did; he put down his notebook and pencil and he ate the book.

Now this is a powerful image. Instead of using the book – keeping it at arms length jotting down a phrase or two and sifting through it to see what it can do for us, a process that leaves us in control, we are invited to ingest the book, to assimilate the book into the tissues of our lives, and thereby risk losing control and of becoming something entirely different from what we were before.

If it is true in a physical sense that we are what we eat, then in a spiritual sense readers become what they read. Eugene Peterson puts it this way, "If Holy Scripture is to be something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized."<sup>3</sup> As fruits and vegetables give us their nutrients to strengthen our nerves and muscles, just so God's word is intended to do something in us, to give us health and wholeness, holiness and wisdom, hope and joy.

As Christians we are called to feed on scripture. It nurtures us as food nurtures our body. We aren't called simply to study scripture or learn it, or use it; we are called to assimilate it; to take it into our lives "in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love,"<sup>4</sup>-- cups of water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, justice for the oppressed; freedom for the imprisoned.

So, what it boils down to is this. Do we read the Bible to use it for our own purposes, or do we read the Bible in order to receive and be used by God's purposes? Truth be told, not everyone who thinks the Bible is a great book that everyone ought to own and even read now and again when the occasion arises, -- not everyone -- wants to get involved with God because "it means letting Another have a say in everything we are saying and doing."<sup>5</sup> It means ending the dodges we devise to avoid the risk of transformation; it means squelching our desire to set ourselves up as gods; it means doing the hokey pokey with God and putting our whole selves in, not just an arm or a leg, but our whole selves—our muscles and bones, our hearts and souls, our

ears and eyes, our imaginations and our prayers, “so that they become interior to our lives,” an integral, living part of who we are and how we are in the world and enacted in prayer, obedience, and love.<sup>6</sup>

But isn't that really why we want our children to read the Bible? Not just for history and tradition; not just for wise words of counsel; not just for sweet words of comfort – no – we want them to read the Bible to get involved with God, to be formed, and shaped by God's Word, to allow God to have an influence in everything that they say and do. We want the Bible to enter their souls just as food enters their stomachs, and to spread throughout their being to become holiness and love and wisdom.<sup>7</sup> We want them to eat this book.

May it be so for these four who receive their Bibles from us today. Amen.

Rev. Lisa Caine  
Oconee St. UMC  
Athens, GA

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: Conversations in Spiritual Reading*, Grand Rapids, MI: William Erdmans Publishing Co., 2006, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.