

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Church Stories

Titus 1:12-13
Colossians 4:15-16

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Spoken word before service:

As church going people we are called to have the Bible inspire us and give us hope. But, how often have we cracked it open when things are hard? How often do we pass up stories in scripture for a Netflix show? Here is the reality in a media driven world, I too sometimes struggle with figuring out how to tie these stories into my life.

Today we are going to turn to the letters at the end of the Bible, some written by Paul and others attributed to him. We turn to them and if we are willing we are going to dig just beneath the first layer to find there are some characters just beneath the first layer of words that might inspire us to know that we can take the same risks they did to follow a God who loves us, and invites us into a story of full life.

As you listen to the opening introit, I invite you to open yourself to the idea that you might be a character in God's story.

Scripture:

Titus 1:12-13 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹²Someone who is one of their own prophets said, "People from Crete are always liars, wild animals, and lazy gluttons." ¹³This statement is true. Because of this, correct them firmly, so that they can be healthy in their faith.

Colossians 4:15-16 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁵ Say hello to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, along with Nympha and the church that meets in her house. ¹⁶ After this letter has been read to you publicly, make sure that the church in Laodicea reads it and that you read the one from Laodicea.

(Break at first service for response to the word.)

Over this entire summer we have been studying our scriptures, this book we called the Bible that we hold as one of the pivot points of our faith. At the beginning of the summer I reminded us that this Bible we have now was not put together until nearly 400 CE, the common era, a replace for AD. I also shared that John Wesley the founder of Methodism loved a line from 2 Timothy in his efforts to understand the scriptures.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁶ Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, ¹⁷ so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

Wesley knew that scripture was hobbled together by about 400 CE and that it was the responsibility of the communities he was a part of to help make the scriptures a living word. He did this by taking the scripture to where the people were.

We have studied in our scriptures the different kinds of stories this summer:

Origin stories that describe where we might come from, but that need context for where they were written during.

Deliverance stories where people made it out of slavery and into a new life giving reality, and where we miss the small ones with big messages.

War stories and what we do with bloody, genocidally challenges and how many of us will never get over them, except to understand that victors get to write the story because the vanquished cannot.

Wisdom stories that challenge to remember we don't always get to have all the answers.

Resistance stories that remind us that the end times of scripture sometimes refer to the times that have already happened, and were intended to give hope to those living through them.

Gospel stories that nudge us to remember God wants us in the story of the love Jesus described.

Fish stories which rarely are quite as factual as we think, but always contain truth big and small.

And this week, as we talk about Church stories and where our practice of faith comes from.

Our scripture today is an example of sacred text going to where the people were. Both Titus and Colossians are epistles, or in other words they are letters. In the case of both letters they are attributed to the apostle Paul. An early Christian leader who is responsible for spreading Christianity around the Mediterranean. However, we learn from study that scholars divide these letters into two categories and that not all the letters were actually written by Paul. Before we go seeing this as some scandal it is important to remember that these writings like the gospels and other texts were preserved to point to truths that Christian communities valued about the texts they had. There was no complete Bible with epistles yet, but instead you might have the Torah, the prophets, and maybe a gospel in your community. If you had a letter attributed to Paul you held it close because of Paul's direct experience with the risen Christ.

Rachel Held Evans authored the book we used for this series, called *Inspired* and even though we are wrapping up the series I would invite our congregation to get a copy and read it. Rachel says this about the two kinds of letters"

Scholars generally divide ancient letters into two categories: “real letters” (correspondence intended for a specific and limited audience, like a soldier writing home), and “non-real letters” (literary works in epistolary form intended for the general public, like the published letters of the ancient philosopher Seneca). But the Epistles of the New Testament combine elements of both, and as a result, contain instructions both general—“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5)—and specific—“Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia” (Romans 16:5).¹

Further we need to understand as Pastor Adam Hamilton explains, “When you read one of Paul’s letters, or any other New Testament letter, you are reading someone else’s mail. Christians often forget this. They read Paul’s letters as though he wrote just for them. This works fine most of the time; Paul’s instructions, his theological reflections and his practical concerns are amazingly timeless. But they become most meaningful, and we are least likely to misapply their teaching, when we seek to understand why he may have written this or that to a given church.”²

It is why we read the passage from Titus today. There are some scriptures with this beautiful universal truths, 1 Corinthians 13 that we hear at weddings, “grace, hope and love abide and the greatest of these is_____.” Many people know that one. However, our scripture from Titus, most don’t know that, “People from Crete are always liars, wild animals, and lazy gluttons.” Just doesn’t ring the same as the one from Corinthians. Wonder why we haven’t heard that Titus passage at weddings.

¹ Evans, Rachel Held. Inspired (p. 201). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

² Evans, Rachel Held. Inspired (p. 201). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

The thing about this personal mail is that some religious folks have decided that scripture is perfect and needs no interpretation. If this is true then we all should avoid Crete, and if you liked the sitcom friends back in the 90's you should probably go to confession because rumor has it that Jennifer Aniston's father was a Cretan.

The second passage for today from Colossians, let me share it once more:

Colossians 4:15-16 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁵ Say hello to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, along with Nympha and the church that meets in her house. ¹⁶ After this letter has been read to you publicly, make sure that the church in Laodicea reads it and that you read the one from Laodicea.

Again personal mail, but I share this to raise some challenges in Christian thinking. In the passage we learn about Nympha. She is a leader in the early church. Collossae and Laodocia are cities not far from Ephesus in Greece in what is modern day Turkey. Nympha is the character I want us to imagine for a second. She is wealthy enough to have a home and be literate to read the letter to her gathering. They gather in her home because as early Christians they gather where they can and in the place someone offers them. Imagine if you will it was if you knew Nympha and someone said, let's get to Nympha's house a new letter from Paul is there. Perhaps these early Christ followers who only had the symbol of the fish in a few places, no crosses, gathered sang some familiar songs, read what scripture they had and then heard Paul's letter read. Before it was sent along to the next church to be read.

It was an intimate setting of people hoping to hear good news of what God was still doing in their lives and the world.

Our church, Shiloh, was not a dissimilar gathering when it started too. It was a group of whoever might show up at St. John's Lutheran

Ministries just up the road. We gathered in a large hall there and from time to time hymns were interrupted by the occasional resident opening the wrong door. The founding pastor of Shiloh referred to us as the “church without walls.” Because it was the people that made the gathering, it was people gathering with hope that God might change their lives and others might join with them in hearing the message and changing the community. The founding pastor was also proud that people of all different political and social views, ex-Catholics and unchurched people found their way to our church.

It is people coming together to imagine what God might be doing that Nympha’s house provided, it is what Shiloh and other churches attempt to create. I think it important to note that if we take Paul and attributed Paul works too literally then we would find a passage about how women should be silent in church. I think it is important to note again the personal nature of these letters and to learn that Paul was battling with a set of codes called the Pax Romana, about how roman rule begins in the home. He tried to support these codes if it meant more people would join the movement and learn the love of Christ. It did not contain immortal understandings of women’s role in the church, but instead we need to know that Paul called woman to preach and lead when it could break free of the Pax Romana.

These communities, just like our modern communities had to engage in a discussion about what the values of following Christ were about. They had to learn from one another and funny that right next to Paul’s misguided statement about women’s silence it says, “Be subject to one another.” Paul began to establish a new order even as he sometimes poorly navigated the worldly value systems of Rome.

John Wesley who founded Methodism, struggled with navigating the value systems of his time too to help people hear the gospel. Wesley went to the fields to preach. Now when we hear this we might think of

it as a common field full of corn or hay. No, as some of our leaders learned in a welcoming seminar we were at the last two days, the field was probably the equivalent of an 18th century Facebook. When people were not working there were shopping in the field, which had vendors, gatherings of folks. And from time to time what would be the equivalent of the political comment on Facebook too. Someone would jump on a their soapbox and start spouting some ideology of the day. They were met with jeers and or applause, tomatoes or nods of approval.

Well Wesley realized the only way to get the gospel to the people, was to go out of the nicely formed churches and go the fields they were in. He said this:

What marvel the devil does not love field preaching? Neither do I. I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal if I do not trample all these under foot in order to save one more soul?

If Wesley hadn't stepped the church beyond the walls, it would have missed an entire generation of people hungry to join in the story of what God's love might do in their lives.

And just like the letters of Paul the sermons and correspondence from Wesley to today need to be put in context.

As I was preparing for this message I stumbled across sermon from my home Church delivered in April of 1999. It was for a Confirmation Sunday, a Sunday when young people have finished classes and choose to join the church. In it I spied a name, "Tyler." I thought for a minute that must be my confirmation Sunday, so I read the entire sermon excitedly.

In it I found a harrowing tale. That on the Sunday when young people were joining the church was at the beginning of our history of public

mass shootings in our country. It was 5 days after the awful violence at Columbine High School just outside of Denver. What a wakeup call of the history and a reminder that we as people of faith have so much work to do. We have to find a way to pound our modern day swords into plowshares or this 20 year history will be the legacy for another generation of young people.

Then I looked for more context and realized the date was too late for my confirmation it was another Tyler who was getting confirmed, but we both would only know a world where this kind of violence was allowed to become common.

That home church of mine, travels with me as I do my ministry. That community sustains me as does each community I serve. If you come in my office ever you will see a cross on my wall. It is made from the timbers of the church that sermon was delivered in. A few years later we tore it down. Good thing too, if we still stood in that building the walls would have fallen down as they were pulling away from the building. However, it is a reminder that like that same preacher said 20 years ago, there are people unchurched 30% or more of our community who have never known a common place or home to get to know a God of love. Sometimes the very floor we stand on must be sacrificed for the sake of the gospel.

I want to end by sharing a parable:

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A Letter with a Difference

There was once a mother who had two daughters. She loved her daughters dearly, but from their earliest years, the two girls would quarrel and fight with each other. As they grew older, their enmity hardened, and they became totally

estranged from each other. As adults, they would have no contact with each other. They grew completely apart.

As you can imagine, this caused the mother great pain. She agonized about how she might possibly bring them back together again. And then she had an idea. She got out her pen, and she wrote a letter to them both. In this letter, she told them, over and over again, how very much she loved them both, and how she longed for them to love each other in the way that she loved each of them. She told them how much it grieved her that they were separated. And she gave them news of herself, and some guidance on how they might live happier and more loving lives themselves.

When the letter was ready, she wrote out one copy for each daughter, but these copies were special. Each copy contained only every second sentence of the original letter. So the copy for one daughter had only the even sentences, and the other daughter's copy contained only the odd sentences. Neither copy made sense on its own. Neither contained the fullness of the mother's message.

When the two daughters received their letters, they were puzzled, until it dawned on them what had happened. Then they faced a dilemma. If they really wanted to know what their loving mother had written, they would have to put their two letters together and read them as one. And that meant that they would have to approach one another again in mutual love and respect.

For a long time, the mother waited in vain for an answer to her letter. There were questions, from both the daughters. There were complicated efforts on both their parts to make sense of the half-letter each of them possessed. There were recriminations. Each daughter thought she knew her mother better than her sister ever

could. Each daughter believed that her mother loved her more than she could possibly love her other daughter.

Then one day, when the mother had almost given up hope, there was a knock at the door. There they stood, together. 'We've come home,' they said in unison. 'We've finally put our letters together, and we've come to say how much we love you, Mum.' And she flung her arms round them both, tears of joy streaming across her cheeks, and welcomed them back home.

Retelling of a traditional story³

Friends, how are we called to read the sacred texts for our day? How will you take time this week learning about characters who may be reminding us of our story today? And how will the people of Shiloh be bearers of the good news that God is not done with sharing a saving love in this world?

Go in peace my friends.
Amen

Slides:

Wesley Quote
Map Collassae

³ Silf, Margaret. One Hundred Wisdom Stories (pp. 153-154). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.