

UNCHAINED WORD

2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 14, 2001

~~IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.~~

Remember, several years ago, watching Timothy McVeigh led away to prison?

~~Remember how he shuffled with his feet chained to prevent escape? We've seen these chains many time on the news and in the movies, gangsters handcuffed to law enforcement officers.~~

~~Some of us have seen chain gangs at work cleaning debris from roads. The ancient world also used chains to imprison people. In Rome, the apostle Paul was placed under house arrest for several years. Chained to a Roman soldier Paul dictated a letter to his friend Timothy, a young minister living in Asia Minor. Listen to the passion in his voice. "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead - that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained." They could chain Paul but the word of God is not chained.~~

~~God is not chained.~~

First, Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God. The Living Word is the most powerful force in the universe. He can't be chained to the past. He can't be imprisoned in the church. He can't be locked up in narrow orthodoxy. He can't be shut up in a book. The Word of God is living. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. The opening verses of the Gospel of John proclaim, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were created by him." John goes on to proclaim, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Gospels tell us that Jesus healed by merely uttering words. The Living Word of God is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Locked doors can't imprison him. Locked hearts can't keep him out. Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God, can't be chained.

~~Word of God is living. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. The opening verses of the Gospel of John proclaim, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were created by him." John goes on to proclaim, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Gospels tell us that Jesus healed by merely uttering words. The Living Word of God is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Locked doors can't imprison him.~~

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If Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God, the Bible is the written Word. In medieval times every book had to be copied tediously by hand. Bibles were so valuable they were chained to reading benches in churches and monasteries. With the invention of the printing press, chains came off Bibles. Every home could afford a Bible. The unchained Bible became the most important, and sometimes, the only book in the homes of Christians.

If I were shipwrecked on a deserted island and could have only one book, I'd choose the Bible. I've read many wonderful books. I have a stack of books I want to read. But I keep coming back to the Bible. God speaks to us primarily - not audibly or in mystical experiences - but through the words of prophets and apostles in the Bible. The first thing I do every morning is read a portion of the Bible. It's part of my daily rhythm and I commend the discipline to you.

The purpose of the Bible, the Written Word of God, is to lead us to salvation through Jesus Christ. The Bible wasn't written to tell us how God created the world but that the world was created by the Word of God. The Bible was written to point us to Jesus Christ. The only Bible the earliest Christians had was the Old Testament. They found Jesus Christ in every book of the Old Testament. In Genesis Jesus is the Seed of the Woman who will crush the serpent's head. In Exodus he's the Passover Lamb. In Leviticus he's the atoning sacrifice. Every book of the Bible points us to Jesus Christ. So the unchained Word is, secondly, the Written Word of God found in the Bible.

And thirdly, the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. The preached Word of God is stuttered and mumbled out of the mouths of sinful, fallible human beings who often confuse their own ideas and opinions with the Word of God. Nevertheless, the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Presbyterian Ministers are ordained as Ministers of the Word. One of our most important tasks, in the words of Paul, is to rightly explain the word of truth.

Great pains are taken in Presbyterian seminaries to encourage Biblical preaching. Student preachers are sometimes *tortured* by their professors for unbiblical preaching. I stood trembling before Dr. MacLeod after preaching my first student sermon. "That was a wonderful story, Mr. Atkinson," Dr. MacLeod intoned in his Scottish accent. "Very cute and entertaining." Long silence. His face took on a foreboding countenance. "But what did it have to do with the Scripture?" He held up my manuscript by the corner like he was holding the tail of a dead rat and let the sheets fall to the floor. I'm grateful Dr. MacLeod instilled in me a love for Biblical preaching - a desire to rightly explain the word of truth.

I work hard to rightly explain the word. I plan sermons a month ahead. I think and pray about my sermon throughout the week. I jot down ideas as I listen to people and read. I spend all day Friday trying to work without interruption on my sermon. Sometimes when it doesn't come together I'm up late Saturday night. I come to the pulpit every Sunday, like Barry Bonds coming to the plate, hoping to hit a home run. Sometimes I strike out and feel bad. Then I think of Mike Schmidt who struck out three times as often as he hit a home run. Sometimes I get a hit - not as often as I'd like but then I think of Ted Williams, baseball's greatest hitter, who averaged only four hits out of ten times at bat. I rarely hit a home run, but rarely do I come to the pulpit without a lot of batting practice. I do my best, in the words of Paul, to present myself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

One thing I want to avoid in preaching is wrangling over words which Saint Paul said, "only ruins those who are listening." The Greek word for *wrangling* is *λογομαχειν*, meaning "warring with words". I've heard preachers who sound like they want to fight with someone. I don't want to fight. Did a great fish actually swallow the prophet Jonah or is the story a parable?

I'm not going to fight over it. Did God create the world in seven literal days or did he use the process of evolution? I have my ideas but I'm not going to fight over it. I want to avoid putting people down. I want to avoid criticizing the church when I don't agree with it. I want to avoid using the pulpit as a soap box to express my anger and frustration. I want to avoid wrangling over words. That doesn't mean sermons will never be controversial. Paul was constantly preaching controversial sermons. But what I want, above all, is to point people to salvation in Christ Jesus.

I'm confident that the written and preached word of God will lead people to the Living Word, Jesus Christ. I believe through him our world can be saved from war and evil, and our families can be saved from conflict and self-destructive sin. I believe that if I can just get people to read the Bible and attend regularly to the preaching of the Word we will all experience a change for the better. Will you give priority to reading the Bible daily? A modern translation of the Bible is so much easier to understand. Start with the Gospels. Gospel means "good news."

You can read an entire Gospel in less time than it takes to read the newspaper and unlike the papers, the Gospels contain good news. Read thoughtfully and prayerfully. Will you also give priority to the preached Word of God? Make Sunday worship a priority? The Word of God is not always easy to understand or interpret and apply. But over time, with practice, the Bible and preaching can become a great delight. I want the whole world to hear the Word of God. Take the chains off your dust covered Bible! Open and read! Remove the invisible chains that lock out people from the church and let them come to study and hear the Word of God so that our lives might be transformed and our community and world renewed.

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.