

# “Teaching Torah”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 13, 2009*

Rev. John Wahl

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Psalms 19:1-10, 14

Among the requirements for becoming a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church – in addition to a seminary degree and a variety of work-study and pastoral care experiences – are a series of five tests called the Ordination Exams. Four of these exams are written essays in the fields of worship and sacraments, church polity, theological competence and exegesis – which involves the interpretation and communication of teachings within the scriptures. During my final year in seminary – with the help of good teachers and gracious exam graders – I was able to pass all four of these exams on my first try.

The fifth test required for ordination to ministry is called the Bible Content Exam. It is made up of 100 multiple choice questions intended to show that candidates have a thorough understanding and memory of the Bible. A score of eighty or above means you pass, anything below means that you must take it again the next year. As anyone who has taken the Bible Content Exam will tell you, the best way to prepare is to study exams which were administered in previous years, which are readily accessible, because the same questions appear on the exam every few years.

When it came time for me to prepare for the Bible Content Exam, though, I decided that instead of looking back at the exams from previous years, I would simply read the Bible; which I did: cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation. Not surprisingly – to everyone except myself – I failed.

This was not the first time that I had failed a test – I was hardly the most conscientious student – but it was the first time that failing had ever prevented me from moving forward: either to the next grade or level of advancement: four years of high school, four years of college, three years of seminary in concurrence with three years of preparation to be ordained. But, I had failed and the rules dictated that I would now have to wait a year before trying again.

I was angry with myself, because I had been advised about the best way to pass the test, and had chosen to ignore that advice. In addition, I was mad at whoever had made these rules, and mad at God. If I had indeed been called by God into the ministry, called to work in the church and with God’s people, then why would God put this roadblock in the way?

This week, a number of you have agreed to join with me in beginning a daily discipline of bible reading: one chapter of the bible each day, read consecutively, beginning this past Thursday with the first Psalm. If you did not start this practice on Thursday but instead begin today by reading Psalm 4, or tomorrow with Psalm 5, that is okay. Hopefully, after a while of engaging in this daily discipline, it may become a habit for you to read from scripture each day. And hopefully, when you read that chapter, you may discover that God is speaking in some special way to you through that particular reading – and you may find in it some word of comfort for your particular situation, or a way that it challenges you in a personal way. You may find that questions arise about that particular reading and you might reach out to someone else in the congregation to discuss the text. I hope and pray that all of those things might be true for you.

But, there will probably be other days when you fail; when you forget to read or even if you do remember, your heart and mind are – for some reason – not open to what God might be saying to you through the scriptures. If you are like me, you have tried some discipline of daily reading or prayer or meditation before, only to give up on it two days or two weeks or two months down the road. That is a failure that I have experienced not just once, but dozens of times over the course of the past several decades. Sometimes I still blame myself, but sometimes I am just too busy or distracted to keep it up.

Today's Psalm tells us that the word of God – the Law – is to be more desired than fine gold and sweeter than honey. But, as one commentator reminds us, neither gold nor honey are particularly easy things to acquire. They do not come easily; you have to pursue them.<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew for this word of God – the Law of God – is *torah*. And yet, throughout the Old Testament, *torah* is not so much a thing – like gold or honey – but a relationship. *Torah* is the teaching that comes about through the interaction between teacher and learner. Concurrently, teacher and learner are both teaching and learning. *Torah* is not just a set of obligations and stipulations and laws that are to be obeyed. Instead, it is a dynamic understanding that – through the course of teaching and learning – is transformed into something new; something to be pursued and desired to an even greater extent. God has not given the Law as a burden, but as a gift. It is a gift of order and goodness and glory – the Psalmist teaches us – “and our own lives participate in that glory and goodness, especially when we find our place and rhythm within the order that God provides.”<sup>2</sup>

During the time after I left my position working on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC and before I enrolled in seminary, I spent a few months doing a short-term mission project at

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Boling in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

<sup>2</sup> Kate Huey, “Beautiful Law” from *Weekly Seeds*, March 15, 2009

Wasatch Academy in Mt. Pleasant, Utah. This was a school where kids went to get away from temptations and trying home environments so they concentrate on learning and take advantage of a second or third opportunity at making it on their own. This time as a mission volunteer gave me my first taste at being a teacher – teaching classes and tutoring and coaching soccer and leading a student theater group and counseling students at a Presbyterian boarding school. Inexperienced though I was, the school allowed me to learn by teaching and to discern how God might be calling me into ministry.

One of the students at that school was Max – a senior – who I had the privilege to teach in class and tutor outside of class and coach on the soccer field and direct in a theatre production and provide counsel to regarding his future plans and his relationship with God. As valedictorian, during graduation exercises that spring, Max sang Eric Clapton’s “Tears from Heaven” which – in turn - moved everyone in attendance that day to tears.

About a week after graduation, having moved back home from Utah, I got a call from one of the teachers who informed me that Max had been killed in a car crash back at his home in California. His friend – one of the friends he had been sent to Utah to get away from – was driving drunk with Max in the car. I felt horrible for Max’s family and for the other kids at school and for the senseless end of a life that had held so much promise. I was mad at God and I was mad at myself; since Max had died, hadn’t we both in some ways failed?

Torah means teaching. Not the kind of teaching that we typically call “book knowledge” but a relationship between teacher and learner which can, as Thomas McGrath writes: “bring order to the otherwise chaotic moral universe of human existence.” Torah means teaching by and through our life experiences. Maybe you have been taught through the experiences of illness and loss. Or maybe you have been taught by parenting your kids or working with animals or studying science or involvement in a community or the sharing of stories or the reading of scripture; probably some combination of many of these things.

Torah has been teaching me that what we first think of as failures are really not that. When I failed the Bible Content Exam, it was God’s way of giving me the time I needed to really prepare to be in ministry. I also came to realize that I had not failed in working with Max, but that we had both grown immeasurably in our faith through our brief time teaching one another. And the same is true of what we call failed businesses and failed marriages – these are not failures on our part or on God’s part, but opportunities to better understand the Law of God – and the grace of God – which truly does revive the soul and enlighten the eyes and allow our hearts to rejoice.

My hope and prayer is that on this Rally Day, you might allow yourself to enter into some new relationship of Torah; an engagement in a class or a spiritual practice or a group that

affords you the opportunity to explore how God's Law is righteous and clear and pure. Some of you will be teaching our young people in Sunday School, and learning from them as well. Others can take the initiative to study scripture on your own, but you will not be doing it alone, for there is teaching and learning to be shared with others in this community. It may not be easy – time pressures and other commitments may seem to stand in the way but – like fine gold and sweet honey – the Law of God can and must be taught and learned in this place for the glory of God and for the building up of God's people.

We are the people of God and we have a story to tell that the world desperately needs to hear: that God loves us and sent his son, Jesus Christ to us, so that we might have life and have it in abundance. Thanks be to God. AMEN.