

“And then there were twelve”
Sermon 9/16/12

-- **“And then there were twelve”** This past winter I attended a workshop at our Ohio Conference annual sessions led by Terry Shue, director of leadership development for Mennonite Church USA.

-- In that seminar Terry introduced what he titled “The 12 Scriptures project.”

-- *The Twelve Scriptures Project was developed in response to the action of the Mennonite Church USA’s Delegate Assembly at Pittsburgh in the summer of 2011. The delegates acted to adopt Christian Formation as one of seven church wide priorities.*

-- *and according to Mennonite Church USA’s Purposeful Plan, the priority of Christian Formation calls for the church “to increase our capacity as a community of faith to use the Scriptures as a faithful guide for daily living.”*

--Terry said in the seminar that he had been getting calls from congregations and conferences asking what they were going to do in response to this priority of Christian Formation and this challenge to increase our capacity to use the scriptures as a faithful guide for daily living.

-- People wanted to know when they could expect study materials.

--**And** so Terry said he organized an ad hoc “Bible Dream Team” of people with great passion for the Bible.

-- He brought together a team—and this team was diverse in age, gender and background—and they began to brainstorm ideas to help congregations use the Bible more significantly in their congregational life.

-- He said that as they brainstormed -- One idea rose to the top: and that idea was to inspire each congregation to engage in a process to identify the 12 most important Scripture texts or stories for their congregation.

--And not only to identify the 12 Scriptures but to answer the question for each one -- “Why that one?”

-- And so out of this brainstorm has come “The Twelve Scriptures Project”

-- We’ve had a lot going on in our congregation over this past year – and we’ve had our share of challenges.

-- But over the past several months – the more I’ve thought of this 12 scriptures project and what it might be like for us as a congregation to engage in this process of identifying together what we believe to be the 12 most important Scriptures for Zion Mennonite Church today – the more I’ve come to believe what a valuable and fruitful process this could be for us – not just as a congregation but as individuals.

-- And so This morning I simply want to introduce the idea and offer you – If you need a challenge – a challenge – and if you need encouragement I want to encourage you – as individuals or as households – you may start as individuals and then have discussion as a household.

-- But I’ve been thinking -- What if each individual or household here at Zion would take the time and energy necessary to identify the 12 Scriptures you believe to be most formative for Christian life today?

-- **Now a couple of things here:**

First – We will be working at further steps in the months to come – but I’d like to give a significant amount of time for individuals and households to take hold of this challenge and engage this question.

“What 12 Scriptures do you believe to be most formative for Christian life today?”

Second -- You may be asking “What do you mean ‘most formative for Christian Life today?’”

-- The delegates at the Pittsburgh Convention affirmed seven churchwide priorities -- and the first three of these priorities express the core of congregational life from an Anabaptist perspective.

-- The number one - and highest priority identified -- was **Christian Formation**

-- And Christian Formation was identified as -- the intentional work of fashioning and molding our lives after that of Jesus Christ.

-- I believe – and I think our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective would say that Christian Formation - is both an intentional work on our part – we are called to follow Jesus Christ and we must purposefully chose to do so.

– At the same time Christian Formation --is an act of grace – a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives – both as individuals and corporately as the local body of Christ.

--I want to read 3 Summary Statements, from the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective – There is a link to the whole summary statement of The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective on our church website under the “Who Are We” → “Who are the Mennonites” tab

-- And I want to read these statements as a means of clarifying what we mean when we talk about Christian Formation – I also want to

read them simply as a reminder that we have a Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective that might help give us some structure or focus for our answers to this question we are engaging.

→Article 17 - Discipleship

We believe that Jesus Christ calls us to discipleship, to take up our cross and follow him. Through the gift of God’s saving grace, we are empowered to be disciples of Jesus, filled with his Spirit, following his teachings and his path through suffering to new life. As we are faithful to his way, we become conformed to Christ and separated from the evil in the world.

→Article 18 - Life in the Spirit

We believe that to be a disciple of Jesus is to know life in the Spirit . As the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ takes shape in us, we grow in the image of Christ and in our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit is active in individual and in communal worship, leading us deeper into the experience of God.

-- And so when we engage this question of what 12 Scriptures do we believe to be most Formative for Christian life today?

-- We are really looking to identify the key scriptures that provide us with what we need – the understanding and perspective necessary – to faithfully follow Jesus – to truly become conformed to Christ and separated from the evil in the world – to honestly grow in the image of Christ and in our relationship with God.

-- Now the **second thing** I wanted to speak to is that – in light of our guiding question -- we might be tempted to simply limit our search to the 4 gospels – after all it is in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that we find the description of Jesus’ life and hear Jesus’ teachings.

--But this is where the third summary statement from the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective comes in:

→ Article 4 - Scripture

We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life. Led by the Holy Spirit in the church, we interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ.

-- And so there are 66 books that we could potentially draw from – now I'm no math wiz but -- obviously we won't be able to draw from all 66 – but I did want to highlight that we are not simply limited to the 4 gospels.

-- The **third** thing I wanted to say is this – we are all going to be coming at this question with varying degrees of familiarity and comfort levels with scripture – but each one of your perspectives is important to the whole.

--Because in time – I would love to compile the work of all of us and see what comes together.

-- One of the first steps that I am going to suggest is that you write down all of the scriptures verses that you have memorized over the years.

-- Now -- I know that there are some of us who are going to have more than 12 scriptures written down just after this first step alone and that is awesome -- and at the same time -- there will be some of us who will not have any verses to write down at all for this first step – I don't want this to be a source of discouragement.

-- This is precisely why we are wanting to engage this process and this is also why we are not starting this process in a public setting.

-- I know that there were those of you who – as kind and graceful as Jessica is – I know there were those of you who chose not to attend

her first Sunday School class on reading the Bible –which by the way I am very grateful for Jessica giftedness and willingness to lead that class – but I know there were some of you who stayed away from that first class because you knew she was going to give you a Bible knowledge quiz.

--And for some of us -- I know that this can be a source of great anxiety.

--But I want to encourage you – this is not a test – this is an opportunity to pick up your Bibles and engage scripture in a new and fresh way – in the safety of your own home.

--Depending on your level of familiarity and recent activity in scripture – you may want to start with simply reviewing the books of the Bible.

--A second step would be to ask yourself → Are there Bible Stories that I remember hearing as a child? Write them down and try and find them in your Bible.

-- An online bible like “Bible Gateway” or “Oremus Bible Browser” or a Bible software program with a search function is an excellent way to find passages you cannot remember where it is located.

-- I remember when I was working at a factory in northeast Ohio area.

--There were two young Amish men working there – and I asked the one young man something about what his favorite Bible story was as a child and he looked at me with a puzzled look on his face.

-- I said – “you know like –Noah and the Ark – or Jonah and the whale -- or Moses and the Red Sea – or David and Goliath or the wee little man Zaccheus.

-- And he said – “I’ve never heard of those stories” – and I realized that depending on your experience as a child – you may not have heard what for others are the traditional children’s Bible stories.

--What I want to say is that even if you remember hearing all of the stories as a child – you may not have taken the time to read them again as an adult – and there is so much more to these stories than one can comprehend as a child.

--One of the most memorable Bible stories for me as a child was the story of Jonah and the Big Fish – found in the book of Jonah.

-- But it wasn’t until I went back and read that story after I had grown up -- that I really recognized how powerful that story is.

--As a child I got all excited about the fish swallowing Jonah and spitting him out on the beach.

--But as an adult I was challenged by God’s desire to reconcile and redeem the residents of Nineveh -- and by Jonah’s lack of compassion for the people that God loved so much – that story can make me kind of uncomfortable sometimes when I take the time to reflect on how much like Jonah I can be.

-- I thought about bringing at least a partial list of the top 12 scriptures that I believe to be most formative for Christian life today?

-- I have been pondering this question for several months now but I haven’t yet reached a definitive list of 12.

--But I really do want you to engage this question for yourself and not wonder whether or not your preacher has some sort of secret standard list of 12 scriptures that he is going to judge your list by.

– I’m probably more excited about the idea of us all engaging this question individually and seeing what is on your list and hearing

why and seeing what I missed -- as I am for us to actually come up with the 12 that we can all agree upon – at some point down the road.

-- I just hope that you will take my challenge and encouragement to engage this question seriously.

--In two weeks on September 30th we are going to celebrate together the baptisms of 7 youth from our congregation.

--I asked them to engage this question during one of our Quest classes. I gave them a half hour – and they all came back saying they needed a lot more time.

--And I’ve asked each of them to identify one scripture to share with us that is especially meaningful to them and that they want to memorize and dwell on over the course of this first year following their baptism.

--These are the kinds of scriptures that we are looking for.

-- Every time we celebrate baptisms we are reminded of our own baptismal vows and are challenged to consider how we ourselves our living into that covenant with God and with the body of Christ here at Zion.

-- My hope is that you will set aside some time each week over the course of the next several months to consider this question -- **What 12 Scriptures do you believe to be most Formative for Christian life today?**

--There are so many voices speaking into our lives each day →In the news – political advertising – on television -- on the internet – we are bombarded with people who are spending millions of dollars to tell us what we should or should not believe.

-- And yet if we do believe that Scripture really is **the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life.** – then we need to be spending time engaging Scripture and allowing it to influence our beliefs and perspectives and way of life.

– And maybe even giving it more time or at least equal time - than we do - engaging all of the other sources of information and influence in our lives – now that would be a challenge.

--This won't be the last time you hear about this challenge and question – throughout the coming months I hope to be reminding you and offering a variety of resources for your work in preparation for the time when we will engage this question as the gathered body.

-- Prayer: That God's Holy Spirit might inspire us to engage Scripture in meaningful and fresh ways in the days and weeks to come.