

Reformation Sunday
“Our Biblical Heritage”
Psalm 119:97-105; 2 Timothy 2:14-15
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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church; Pleasant Unity
United Presbyterian Church
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Throughout the 1980’s, Don Mattingly--one the finest first basemen ever to wear the Yankee pinstripes--often found himself compared to ANOTHER famous Yankee first baseman, the immortal Lou Gehrig, whereupon he confessed, "To be honest, I never heard of Gehrig until I came here. And honestly, at one time I thought Babe Ruth was a cartoon character. I really did. I mean, I wasn't born until 1961." Several years afterward, during an Expos-Atlanta Braves spring exhibition game, Montreal pitcher John Trautwein alerted fellow Expo pitcher Randy Johnson that Hammerin’ Hank Aaron was present in the park. When it became apparent that Johnson (who eventually became one of baseball’s premier pitchers and who now resides in the Hall of Fame HIMSELF) had no idea who the Hammer was, Trautwein informed him that Aaron was the all-time home run king in major league history. "Then why isn't he in the lineup today?" Johnson inquired. A couple of years after that, Pittsburgh shortstop Jay Bell had recently seen an episode of the 1950's program "Home Run Derby" which is often repeated on ESPN. Bell could not say enough about the prowess of a certain Yankee on the show who was driving balls out of the park again and again. "You mean Mickey Mantle?" a reporter asked Bell. "Yeah," replied Bell. "That was his name."

These revelations came from a Sports Illustrated article decrying the gross ignorance many ballplayers demonstrate towards the history of their craft. This is surprising since what has contributed to help make baseball "America's Pastime" is that it is a game of facts and statistics which from an early age, young boys (and even young girls) are taught to study and even memorize. That’s why the Yankee’s Aaron Judge and his home run chase this past summer became so significant. His 62 homers broke the record established by another Yankee- Roger Maris, who hit 61 in 1961, exactly 61 years ago. And so BASEBALL, not the gameshow *Jeopardy*, was the REAL inventor of trivia to most school kids- it was the ORIGINAL SAT test for most of us growing up.

As I kid, I would spend hours pouring over sports magazines and old baseball cards memorizing batting averages, ERAs, and lineups. In fact, one Christmas, the only thing I asked for from my parents was a copy of the *Baseball Encyclopedia* which had debuted that year. Totalling over 2,300 pages and weighing in at six-and-a-half pounds, it served as the most thorough and complete compendium of baseball information ever compiled, containing the names and information on over 10,000 prominent and obscure players dating all the way back to 1876. I went to bed every night pouring over the contents of that book, trying to familiarize myself with the various teams and players. That knowledge would eventually come in handy such as during my first pastorate when Marion Densmore--a member of the congregation--and I were discussing the strength of the Athletics. No, it WASN’T the then current Oakland A’s ballclub with a lineup featuring the home run duo Mark McGuire and Jose Canseco- often referred to as the “bash brothers.” Rather, we were exchanging thoughts on the 1931 PHILADELPHIA A's which boasted such luminaries as Al Simmons, Jimmy Foxx, Eddie

Collins, Mickey Cochrane and Lefty Grove- all of whom were considered baseball “gods” and among the first to be enshrined in the Hall of Fame.

One Sunday, Vivian Zook—another member of my congregation—asked me to accompany her to a special Mother’s Day dinner her son Steve and his family were hosting at a restaurant near Cook Forest. Over dinner, Steve and I started asking each other baseball trivia which both of us loved and excelled at. At one point, I asked him a question which for the life of me I couldn't remember the answer to. I said, “Steve, which member of the Pittsburgh Pirates pitched twelve perfect innings back in 1959 only to subsequently lose the game in the 13th when Joe Adcock of the Braves hit a disputed home run off of him?” Throughout the course of our dinner together, neither of us uttered a single word as we spent the entire time scratching our brains and searching for the correct answer. It wasn't until I got home that evening that I remembered it. I hurriedly telephoned Vivian and asked her to call her son with the answer, which was, of course, Harvey Haddix. She said, “David, Steve already beat you to the punch. He called less than twenty minutes ago asking me to call YOU with the VERY SAME answer.”

Of course, the real question is not a matter of trivia at all but WHY, "Why so little interest among ballplayers about who their diamond forbearers were and their distinguished accomplishments? How is it possible to perfect one's craft without a history of how it had been done in the past?" Pete Rose has often remarked that it was his knowledge of baseball history and the coveted place he could earn among its pantheon that incessantly drove him to play as intensely as he did, becoming the sport's all-time leader in hits. Of course, it was betting on his own games and then lying about it that now keeps him from entering those SAME hallowed halls he once aspired to.

Andy Van Slyke, a former Pirate's centerfielder and no slouch HIMSELF when it came to baseball and its tradition, had a practical explanation. He said, "I think today's players just don't think that what Shoeless Joe Jackson or Joe DiMaggio did is RELEVANT to their careers. Pride and arrogance and greed are so abundant at the big league level now. If it could directly benefit them somehow to know what Joe DiMaggio did, THEY'D know."

Well what is true concerning baseball, its history and tradition, is no less true of our culture as a whole. It is no secret that the public education system in this nation is in deep trouble, that more kids have far more information at their command with television and computers and the radio than ever before, and yet there has never been a greater degree of ignorance and indifference towards it. Without giving you the depressing figures to substantiate this claim, let me offer you just one startling anecdote. Benjamin Stein, writing in the journal "Public Opinion," once offered this assessment which is typical of many young people today:

"I spend a lot of time with teen-agers, and frequently conduct focus groups to learn about their attitudes. Recently, a 19-year-old junior at the University of Southern California sat with me while I watched “Guadalcanal Diary” on TV. She was genuinely shocked to learn that the United States had fought a war against the Japanese. ("Who won?" she asked.) In fact I have not yet found a single student who could tell me the years when the Civil War, World War I and World War II were fought. Not one could name all the Presidents since World II. Only one could even place the correct decade in which Dwight Eisenhower was President. Of the teen-agers with whom I work, only two could approximately identify Thomas Jefferson. Only a few could articulate in any way at all why life in a free country is different from life in a non-free country. In a state of such astonishing ignorance, young Americans may well not be prepared for

even the most basic national responsibility- understanding what the society is about and why it must be preserved."

But illiteracy is not just limited to ballplayers and students- it is ESPECIALLY rampant among our churches. Christians, rather than "reforming" our culture have instead become "conformed" to it and now reflect the same basic ignorance demonstrated in OTHER areas of our society. Some years ago, I read about one Gallup poll which revealed that daily Bible reading was reported by only 11% of the more than 1500 Christians polled. That's down slightly from a peak of 15% only a couple of years before, and SINCE then, the percentages have only grown WORSE. What this reveals is that although we all tend REVERE the Bible, we simply don't READ it!

I don't mean to be critical but I am persuaded that for a GREAT MANY of us, we come to church on Sunday mornings to get our weekly diet of both worship and the Word, and we think that that one hour of devotion is all we need to sustain us. Our rationale seems to be that after all, isn't this what we pay a preacher for- to pray for us, to do all the necessary research for us and then preach to us the fruit of his labors so that WE don't have to pray and study and wrestle with the text OURSELVES. The truth of the matter is that Paul's exhortation to "STUDY and show ourselves APPROVED, a WORKMAN that needeth not be ASHAMED, but RIGHTLY DIVIDING the WORD OF TRUTH," is not merely a handsome suggestion but a COMMAND. It's an ADMONITION he directed, not just at Timothy but at ANYONE who would call him or herself a serious disciple of Jesus Christ.

Certainly Jesus and his disciples lived in the scriptures, bolstering their faith and convictions. It guided them in their daily living and gave them courage in the face of tremendous persecution. Following the outpouring of God's Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, it says that Jesus' followers could be found continuing steadfastly "in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers," disciplines necessary for power in their spiritual life.

To the ancient Israelites, nothing was MORE important than moral education. Their philosophy was summed up in that well-known text from Proverbs, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." It was the father's first duty to teach his children God's commandments and all the wonders that God had done for his people. They were to explain the meaning of the great feasts to their children and show them how each of the customs had a holy significance. This, their children were commanded to hand down to their own children that God's laws and Israel's customs would continue in perpetuity. For those able to attend school, they were taught primarily the Torah, the holy Law of God. It was said that "a child ought to be fattened with the Torah as an ox is fattened in the stall." Language, grammar, history and geography were all studied in the scriptures. "It is in the Bible," says Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, "that the finest knowledge is to be found, and the source of happiness."

The truth of the matter is that spiritual maturity and biblical and theological illiteracy among Christians are at alarming levels in our country. Seventy years ago, Bishop Theodore Wedel wrote a book about the religion of the laity entitled *The Christianity of Main Street* in which he observed that the "Christianity of Main Street" in America is in danger of becoming a vague faith in ethical principles and values that have no Biblical or theological rootage, an illiterate Christianity living under the illusion that such illiteracy does not matter very much. The very word "theology" has become largely suspect; we tend to regard it as the province of "the

theologians" and as strictly "off limits" for most laypeople such as ourselves. The result is that the SECULARIZED Christianity of Main Street is essentially a HUMANISTIC faith, a system of ETHICAL IDEALS lacking any real relation to the Christian doctrines from which they originally arose.

The sociologist Will Herberg seemed to substantiate this claim a couple of years later with his popular book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. In it, he declared that America's high ethical idealism--its "common faith"--had become divorced from its historical rootage in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Thus, the conviction has become prevalent among laypersons that religion is no more than an ethical opinion, that religion and ethics are virtually identical. The essential thing is morality, and religion is a useful means towards achieving this end.

In many ways, that seemed to reflect my OWN experience as a young Christian. While growing up in the Presbyterian Church, I thought that a Christian was somebody who obeyed a reasonable facsimile of the Ten Commandments, and because I had never killed, committed adultery, or stolen anything worth over \$100 in value- I thought I was a pretty GOOD Christian. Even after I went through a spiritual conversion in the summer of 1973, for the longest time afterward I believed that at its core Christianity was little more than a code or an ethical system and that if we were basically good, went to church, and loved God, we could then earn enough credits to get into heaven. In other words, it was WORKS and not faith that Christianity was all about, or so I THOUGHT. It was only after I began to take my faith SERIOUSLY and STUDY it that I realized that while Christianity may possess a morality, it is NOT primarily a moral code but rather it begins and ends with a personal relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ, God's Son. I discovered how studying God's Word and talking to him and trusting him daily with our life was the ONLY way to KNOW and EXPERIENCE and GROW in the love of God.

I want to close my sermon with an anecdote about a funny thought experiment my seminary roommate and I once conducted. One day we sat down and tried to devise the "perfect" religion. By "perfect," I mean a religion which was "all things to all persons" to the extent that it said absolutely nothing to everyone. We wanted it to be a religion that would offend NO ONE, a religion so vapid that it made absolutely no demands of any kind. In fact, we wanted to create a religion so vacuous and abstract that it could be worshiped and affirmed without them knowing what it was they were even WORSHIPING.

Of course, it was all tongue in cheek- it started out as a joke as we amused ourselves attempting to formulate some sort of creed that would sum up the essence of our newly-founded religion. And it didn't take us long either. It went like this: "Our God is nice and lives in a friendly world." That was it- short and sweet, the sum and substance of our new religion. We had successfully formulated a creed designed to please conservative and liberal, chauvinist and feminist, Republican or Democrat, alike. It was as bland and neutral an article of faith as one could make about ANYTHING as it failed to convey anything real or meaningful AT ALL, sort of like identifying America with "mom and apple pie." We were convinced we had a sure winner on our hands.

But then, what had begun in fun took on a more serious vein the more we thought about this new religion of ours- that in truth it wasn't REALLY novel at all. You see, the average Christian, when questioned about his or her OWN beliefs, can in all probability add little more commentary to the content of his or her faith than what WE had produced in our "tongue-in-

cheek" creed. The bottom line is that for many people "God is good" (a notch just slightly above "God is nice") and that if we TOO are good, that is, obey to the best of our abilities his commandments, then God will reward us; God will bless us and take us home with him to heaven. If this is so, then I think we have to honestly admit that as pastors and lay leaders, we've NOT done a very good job of educating our congregations and even OURSELVES about our faith. The bottomline is that the gospel or "good news" has come to mean anything that sounds GOOD to people, whether it is the latest psychological fad to sweep the churches such as "positive thinking" or the "God wants to bless you" theology or the "instant salvation" offered by just reciting the four spiritual laws.

Yes, biblical and theological illiteracy IS rampant throughout our churches and we find ourselves sorely impoverished as a result. As I see it, the only way to COUNTER this trend is by developing a deep and abiding love for God's Word, and THIS can happen only when we understand how the scriptures act as God's "love letter" addressed, not just to ministers and scholars and professional theologians, but ALSO to YOU and ME, in fact to ANYONE who would call him or herself a Christian, a Child of God. It becomes the means by which God reveals to us just how patient and long-suffering he has been with us, his creation; how through the ages, God refused to give up on the world even when we consistently rebelled against him time and time again; how he loved us even when we put to death his only-begotten Son whom he had sent into the world for the sole purpose of SAVING it. When we come to appreciate how much each of us is uniquely special in God's eyes and that we are personally loved by him, and when we see how much he desires to be a vital and integral part of our daily life, only THEN might we be able to confess like the psalmist that "our delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law doth we meditate both day and night."

My friends, the goal of the Christian life IS NOT AND NEVER HAS BEEN MORALITY. Rather, God's goal for our life is MATURITY- it is growth and development and expansion in every area of which the spiritual is a central part. And the way we BEGIN to mature is NOT by conspicuously placing our unused Bibles on the living room coffee table when the minister comes to visit, but by making it an actual part of our LIVES, by keeping it close at hand because its promises and truths are as important to us as the air we breathe and the food we eat- it's not called "the Bread of Life" for NOTHING. It is to spend a few minutes each day meditating upon it, whether before bed or upon rising in the morning and then allowing its truths and lessons to fill our hearts AS WELL AS our heads. And in this way, the scriptures may INDEED serve as "a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path." Then we TOO may discover that rather than a dead and dusty tome we likely keep buried in the bottom drawer of our night stand, it will forever remain the greatest "love story" you or I shall EVER hear. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the WRITTEN Word- for the revelation of your acts in history which you have entrusted to us to guide us and encourage us and to make us all one in you. We also thank you for the LIVING Word, Jesus Christ himself, and whose life and legacy is contained therein. May they BOTH remain central to our faith and lives and purposes, and may we learn to value its timeless truths as much as we love and adore YOU. In our Lord's name we pray. Amen.