

Third Sunday after Pentecost (B/RCL)
Mark 4.35-41
June 21, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan

On this Father's Day weekend, I'm giving thanks once again for my dad, Lee. I'm remembering outings with him when I was little: going in the car to visit tax clients, meeting him at the station when the Erie Lackawanna brought him home at the end of the day, shopping for groceries and keeping an eye out for sales together, and especially making our weekly visit to the Florham Park library. Every Saturday morning of the year, except for holidays, Dad drove me to the library so I could return the books I'd borrowed and pick out new ones: seven was the magic number. Every week I took out seven books with my very own library card. It was one of the highlights of my week! Dad waited patiently for me as I carefully made my new selections. I don't know if that weekly ritual **made** me a bookworm or if Dad and I made the pilgrimage so faithfully because I already was one.... All I know is that my dad fostered in me the love of books. Little wonder, then, that I grew up to be a lover not just of words, but also of the Word, with a capital W, the "Word of God, Word of life," that our lectors proclaim.

Lovers of the Word come in all kinds of shapes and colors. The introductory note in italics at the beginning of our Celebrate sheet/worship booklet, tells us that this weekend our Lutheran church remembers a translator of Scripture and evangelist named Onesimus Nesib. He was born in Ethiopia in the middle of the 19th century, shortly before the Civil War began our country. He was captured by slave traders as a teenager, and owned by 8 different masters before a compassionate man named Werner Munzinger bought his freedom and sent him to school at the Swedish Evangelical Mission in what is modern-day Eritrea. He was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1872, and sent to theological school in Sweden for another 5 years. When it was time to return to Ethiopia, his way was blocked, because he was considered a foreign missionary.

Onesimus Nesib made lemonade out of lemons by using the change in his travel plans, the delay of his homecoming for **years**, to translate the Bible into his native language. An interesting sideline to the story is that he'd been gone from Ethiopia for so long, he'd lost some of his fluency in his mother tongue. He sought out help, which came in the form of a young girl named Aster Ganno, who herself had been captured by slave traders and freed, not by Lutheran missionaries but by the Italian navy ☺. She hasn't gotten a lot of press for the assistance she gave Nesib, perhaps because she was a child, but **we** remember her today as well as him.

It shouldn't be surprising that once Onesimus finally reached his destination, over twenty years later in 1904, he preached to his people in their native tongue, as well as reading Scripture in their own language of Oromo. That made the other non-native clergy nervous, because they couldn't understand him. They launched a campaign against him, and he was ordered to be exiled. Fortunately that didn't happen; however, he **was** forbidden to preach for the next 10 years....

It's unfortunate but not unusual that those who have had a burning passion to bring the Word of God, Word of life to people in their own language, often got into deep trouble with the institutional church. I was reminded of this by a thank you note from a newly received member, expressing gratitude for the warm welcome a couple weeks ago, the tasty picnic and a very special present:

Thank you for the Bible. It is a most precious gift. When I went to Prague this past month, I visited the church where Jan Hus preached. One of the goals he had 100 years before Luther was to translate the Bible into the Czech language so people could read it for themselves. He was burned at the stake for this effort. It took another hundred years – and Martin Luther – to translate the Bible. How fortunate we are that we can each own a Bible and read it in our own language! We take it for granted, but it is truly a precious gift. Thank you.

Luther referred to the reformer who preceded him and helped to pave the way for reforms implemented during Luther's watch as "**St. John Hus.**" Both Luther and Hus were preceded by

somebody else referred to as the Morning Star of the Reformation: John Wycliffe, an early English reformer. He was condemned during **his** lifetime (the 1300's), for criticizing the corrupt behavior of the clergy, the worldly ways of the church itself, **and** for his insistence on translating the Bible into English. He died of something like a stroke in the middle of worship before the institutional church could get to him. 30 years later, though, the church was still wincing from his criticism, and during the Council of Constance ordered his books burned and his remains dug up, so they could be burnt too, and the ashes thrown into the river. 'Seems like stunning overkill to us, but it underscores the price paid for the Bibles we hold in our hands, written in **our** mother tongue, English.

This Father's Day weekend I'm giving thanks for my father Lee's nurture of the love of books in me, and I'm realizing this is a fitting time for all of us to give thanks for the Word of God, Word of life, that is our heavenly Father's gift to His children. Martin Luther wisely emphasized that we do not **worship** the Bible or any book. He did say, though, that Holy Scripture is the cradle that holds the Christ Child. It contains the Hebrew Scriptures that promise a Messiah, and the Christian Scriptures that celebrate the fulfillment of the promise in the Lord Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. This precious Bible also holds wisdom to consult, commandments to obey, stories to inspire, and a divine call to love the Lord our God with all our whole heart and soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

A big part of any vacation I take is open-ended reading time. I weigh carefully what books I take to enjoy during my Sabbath time away from work and day in/day out responsibilities. I've wondered: if I had to choose just one book to take with me for an extended stay somewhere, which one would it be? *To Kill a Mockingbird?* *Lord of the Rings?* *Les Miserables?* *The Secret Life of Bees?* But I've decided no, it would have to be the Bible. It's not so much that it's long; it's rather that it's rich. No matter what circumstance I'd find myself in, I would find comfort, strength, joy in the psalms. No matter how dark the day, I'd find

resurrection hope in the Gospels. No matter how tempted I might be, I'd find grace in St. Paul's letters. Word of God, Word of life. Thank you, long line of Bible translators, including John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Martin Luther, Onesimus Nesib, Aster Ganno, for putting the Word into the hands and hearts of the common people, for writing Scripture in our various mother tongues, sometimes inscribed in blood. Thank you, heavenly Father, for giving us the cradle that holds Your Son, and inviting us to feast eyes and soul in our divine library book, the Holy Scriptures. May we never take it for granted. May we read it often, fully expectant Your Holy Spirit will speak to us, even transform us, through it. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham