

The Uses of Scripture at Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church

Taken from *The Use of Scripture at St. John's Lutheran Church and Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church*

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In order to enhance my understanding of the ways that Scripture functions within specific communities of faith, I chose to visit two separate congregations, so that through a process of contrast and comparison, I could deepen my understanding of each one. I began by exploring St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield, MN, and concluded by exploring Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church, in Minneapolis, MN.

(Several pages here about Shannon's visit to St. John's Lutheran Church were removed).

During the second part of the semester, I began to explore the use of Scripture in another faith community, Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church, in Minneapolis. Lake Nokomis, as I will hereafter refer to it, has some similarities to St. John's, the most notable of which is its mainline Protestant tradition. The two congregations have several differences as well, the most obvious of which include Lake Nokomis' denominational affiliation in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., its setting in a neighborhood quarter of a large city, and finally, its smaller size both in terms of its physical building, as well as its membership of ninety persons. Lake Nokomis first opened its doors in 1923, and now employs one full time pastor, Rev. Kara Root, and one quarter time pastor, Rev. Lisa Larges.

The Lake Nokomis community explicitly claims three primary theological commitments. On the P.C.U.S.A. website they share, "Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church is a congregation that emphasizes worship, hospitality and Sabbath as central to our relationship with God."¹ I saw these three priorities clearly exhibited in artwork around the Church, and I also recognized the presence of these theological convictions through words, actions of members and church staff. I also saw a strong commitment to the inclusion of children and youth in all aspects of church life, as well as a focus on intergenerational ministry. The worship space includes small tables and chairs, cushions and activities for children, as well as an informative pew insert about how to welcome children in worship. Like so many handouts and articles related to Lake Nokomis' theological convictions, this pew insert explicitly cited a passage of Scripture, Matthew 18:3 in this case, as its motivation for the full inclusion of children in all aspects of worship.²

¹ "Find a Congregation," accessed May 10, 2017, <https://www.pcusa.org/congregations/3840/>.

² "3 and [Jesus] said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*.

During the time that I spent at Lake Nokomis, I was able to see the ways that this Church's theological convictions grew from deep Scriptural roots. I attended two worship services, both during Lent, on Saturday March 11th, and Sunday April 2nd, and a prayer service on Friday May 12th. Lake Nokomis has a unique schedule, worshipping in a traditional format on the first and third weekends of the month on Sunday mornings, and on the second and third weekends in a more contemplative Saturday evening service. In months in which there is a fifth weekend, members undertake a community outreach project.

Sabbath is a central theme in the Lake Nokomis community. This Scriptural concept shapes the community's unique worship schedule, and much of its programming. Members and staff are encouraged to take time to rest, even from routine Sunday worship, in order to find renewal and draw nearer to God. Events such as "24-Hour Deep Breath" allow members an opportunity to experience and study the concept of Sabbath.

Rev. Root discerned a call to make this concept central in the life of the Lake Nokomis community, and she is clear about the fact that the roots for this emphasis are Scriptural. Information about Sabbath on the Lake Nokomis website references Matthew 11: 28-30,³ and another website link leads to an article by Rev. Root in which she explores Deuteronomy 5:12-15,⁴ and Exodus 20:8-11 as the bases from which this invitation for rest derives.⁵ This understanding of Sabbath, championed by Rev. Root, is reminiscent of Terrence Fretheim's understanding in "Law in the Service of Life," in which he describes, "...the law is given for the sake of the best life possible; the law stands in the service of a stable, flourishing, and life-enhancing community."⁶

³ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' ." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*.

⁴ "¹² Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*.

⁵ "⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*.

⁶ Terrence Fretheim, "Law in the Service of Life: A Dynamic Understanding of Law in Deuteronomy," in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 190.

In addition to Sabbath, Lake Nokomis also clearly exhibits their theological priority of hospitality, both through welcoming practices aimed toward the greater Minneapolis community, and by extending hospitality to their own members. During my visits, the community was actively engaged in caring for a member with a terminal illness. Reminding the community to continue its work in supporting this gentleman, Rev. Root referenced Romans 14:8 in a recent newsletter article about the congregation's mandate to care for this member.⁷

By visiting Lake Nokomis, as well as studying the Church's website, newsletters, and various publications and videos by Rev. Root, I was able to gain an understanding of the particular ways that Lake Nokomis uses and interacts with scripture. Whereas the community at St. John's practices a hermeneutic of wrestling with the Scriptures, the community at Lake Nokomis practices a three-part hermeneutic of pondering, listening, and acting. This approach is reminiscent of the praxis-oriented model of liberation theology, whereby "a "praxis situation" is one in which theory and practice are *not* separable. Each continually influences, and is influenced by, the other; as the mutual interchange goes on, they are not only constantly transforming one another, but are transforming the overall situation as well."⁸

In a similar fashion, Lake Nokomis' approach to Scripture is also dynamic. Scripture in this community, once pondered, provides motivation and purpose to undertake action within the church's own walls, and in ministry to the wider world. These actions, in turn, influence the ways that the community re-engages with Scripture. Just as the Bible is read *by* this community, so too are the Bible, and by extension God, reading this community. Through the actions of the Holy Spirit, which accompanies them in their ongoing approach to Scripture, the community discerns how it ought to be engaged in the world, and then takes step to engage transformatively.

This Lake Nokomis approach is a deeply interactive process in which concrete action derives from a process of deep reflection. Their approach is noteworthy because it involves a more literal interpretation of Scripture than I have witnessed in most mainline denominational communities. The sleepy Christian idleness that concerned Bonhoeffer, and the stubborn disengagement from Scriptural calls to justice that troubled Martin Luther King, Jr., are superseded in the Lake Nokomis community by a desire to faithfully act upon the mandates that they find in Scripture, such as keeping the Sabbath, welcoming the stranger, comforting those who mourn, and welcoming children.

⁷ "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*.

⁸ Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutierrez, An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 65.

I saw several examples of Lake Nokomis' three-part approach to Scripture. During Lent, the entire community delved deeply into a single Scripture passage, Psalm 46.⁹ This psalm was displayed prominently on three paper banners in the front of the sanctuary, and was used in preaching, examined in church school, and meditated upon. During my Saturday night visit, I listened to a brief homily reflecting on the psalm, then participated in various contemplative stations. I sat with others in *lectio divina*, and we shared how the passage spoke to us in our own contexts. I also meditated on the passage by lighting candles, and placing them upon a large floor map, where I prayed the psalm for people in other parts of the world. Using the psalm in these ways reminded me of Eugene Peterson's words that, "A life of prayer forces us to deal with the reality of the world and of our own lives at a depth and with an honesty that is quite unheard of by the prayerless."¹⁰

My family members, who accompanied me to this service, participated in other activities, including devotional art and labyrinth walking. The effect of these activities was to lift the Scripture from the page, and to experience the psalm anew through ritual, meditation, prayer, and preaching. I was moved by the feeling of God's presence in that space, as I watching and participated as the community breathed life into this sacred text.

When I returned for Sunday worship, the same words of Scripture were used in entirely new ways. A group of children, who had been studying the communal Lenten scripture in church school, recited the text for us. This exercise was part of a larger program that encouraged adult members of the community to share Scripture with children, in a practice that reminded me of Deuteronomy 6:4-9.¹¹ I also recognized this approach to engaging children with Scripture when I read about a request for congregants to submit their favorite Scripture passages, so that the

⁹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*.

¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 220.

¹¹ "4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.^[a] 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem^[b] on your forehead, 9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*.

third-graders receiving Bibles would have the community's favorite passages already highlighted.

I saw God speaking through the Lake Nokomis community in many unexpected ways. Whereas some communities continue to practice liturgy and devotion in predictable ways that over time, may result in disconnection and disinterest from members, particularly youth, the Lake Nokomis community actively balances new approaches to worship and Christian practice, with strong Presbyterian traditions of word and sacrament. Lake Nokomis was particularly unique in the unexpected ways that God broke in. Again and again, I witnessed God working within this community, being invited in through the community's three-part practice of dwelling on Scripture, listening, and then inviting God to act boldly within and through them.

I believe that God's presence was manifest in this community in part because of their strong desire to learn the story of God well, and to undertake specific actions based upon what compelled them in that story. In a video, Rev. Root describes ways that she brought Scripture to life, in collaboration in the Luther Seminary Biblical Preaching Project.¹² She began a chronological study of the Bible, spending six weeks in Genesis, and then moved through the narrative lectionary. Using various tools, including narrative, theater, and art. Rev. Root sought new ways to tell the stories of Scripture, and to encourage congregants to imagine their own chapters in that story. This approach reveals the Lake Nokomis community's desire to bring Scripture to life, and to engage the congregation in an embodied experience that connects ancient texts to their modern lives.

In closing, both St. John's and Lake Nokomis maintain a central role for Scripture in the life of their communities, although the particular hermeneutics, expressions and practices related to that Scripture vary.

(Closing paragraph about St. John's removed).

There is a strong sense in the Lake Nokomis community of a communal ownership of, and responsibility to act upon mandates found in Scripture. More than simply reading the words, the text is used to inspire and compel loving action, such as teaching, community engagement, and the transmission of tradition from one generation to the next. As Rev. Root explains, there ought to be an interaction between Scripture and humanity, whereby, "We are witnesses to the God who is witnessed through this book."¹³ Therefore, the Lake Nokomis model of engagement with Scripture demonstrates a community that heeds a call to *become* part of

¹² Luther Seminary Biblical Preaching Project, "Outcomes: Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church," accessed May 10, 2017, <https://www.luthersem.edu/vcp/outcomes/lakenokomis.aspx>.

¹³ Rev. Kara Root, "To Watch Together for God," accessed May 11, 2017, <http://kara-root.blogspot.com/2017/05/to-watch-together-for-god.html>.

Scripture, participating in the story of the Book through its acts of worship, hospitality, care of children and youth, and Sabbath.

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