

Scripture: A door that's right for you

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Texts: Matthew 7:7-10, Psalm 19:7-10, NRSV & The Message

I wonder whether any of you made New Years resolutions this year. Maybe your resolution was to become physically fit by running three times a week. Maybe you went to the Boxing Day Blowout at Sportchek sale and bought new sweats and shoes for running. Or maybe your resolution was to become a better piano player, and you've bought some great new piano books.

Let's fast forward to December 31, 2016. Are you healthier? Are you a better piano player? It all depends... did you go outside and move your feet on the ground? Did you sit at the piano and move your fingers on the keyboard? Did you do that consistently? No matter how much you think about running or think about playing the piano, if you do not manage to get your body in motion, you will not fulfil your New Year's Resolution.

We are in church today talking about faith, so I am not talking today so much about resolutions, as about vows. Many people here are baptized; you vowed to commit your life to Christ. How well will you live out that vow in 2016?

Here is where the similarity between vows and resolutions comes in. No matter how much you think and dream about being physically fit, or how many clothes you buy to exercise in, unless you actually do some physical activity, you will not become physically fit! And no matter how much you want to become a good piano player and think about the concerts you will give and dream about the beautiful music you will play, unless you actually put your hands on the keyboard and practice, you will not become a better piano player. And no matter how much you think, "Wouldn't it be great to deepen my faith this year, to draw closer to God," unless there is some activity on your part, nothing will change. Just as being physically fit and playing the piano are not simply a state of mind, so too being a Christian is not just about thinking nice thoughts about God. It's a way of living in this practical concrete world of ours, it's a way of moving our bodies.

Because our decision to become a Christian involves our whole life, and not just one skill, there are many, many fronts where we can work on this relationship with God. We draw closer to God through prayer. We draw closer to God through the way we treat others. We draw closer to God through the way we spend our money. We draw closer to God through the way we spend our time. Today I want to talk about one way to draw closer to God, one spiritual practice. I like to think about it as a door. A door that opens to God's presence. It's a door that is always there, ready to be opened. That door is the Bible.

I wonder if there is a book that carries as much guilt as this one. Maybe when you think about the Bible, you get the same sinking feeling that you get when you think about last year's New Year's resolutions that you did not keep. When I talk about Bible reading, inside you may be thinking, "I don't read my Bible, I am such a failure at that!" Maybe you think about the regular devotions you should be having and how you should be reading your Bible from cover to cover. Maybe you're thinking, "Reading my Bible is one of those things that I never quite get around to doing... like running or practicing the piano."

Some of you enjoy reading your Bible and do it frequently. Some read the Bible as a chore, not because you like doing it. Some of you aren't even sure where your Bible is. There are as many relationships to the Bible as there are people in this room. I am here to tell you that the Bible is a door and believe it or not, that door is shaped exactly right for you. It's a door that you can walk through. It's a door that can lead to a deeper relationship with God.

Today I'm going to outline a bunch of different practical ways to use your Bible as a door, ways that work. I am going to start with the most basic. I know that you are all reading your Bible, and that encourages me tremendously. Everyone here in this room is reading the Bible today because you are in church, and this is where we read the Bible together. Walking through the door of the church is walking through the door of Scripture. We hear it read at several points in our service, and our sermons explore these Scripture passages, our Sunday school studies scripture. Regular church attendance is a disciplined way of reading the Bible. The Scripture passages we hear season our week, they set the tone for how we live.

Another type of door opens in church when we sing hymns, because many songs have scripture embedded in them. When we sing a song, we are singing scripture. In October when my mother was dying, I was sitting by her bed for long hours. I found myself humming a tune. Just a little tune that kept running through my head. When it came to the surface, and I tried to remember the words they came to me. It was a Taize song I was singing, a simple song with one line, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. The words of the man on the cross next to Jesus, who was dying with him. That song brought me into God's presence. When we sing, the door of scripture opens.

The earliest Christians gathered together to read scripture and sing scripture together. Doing things together is one of the major ways human beings achieve things. Of course that's true even with our New Year's resolutions. If you resolve to run with a partner or with a running group, you are far more likely to persevere. If you are teaching yourself to play piano, you may not get far. But if you study with other students and hear them play and you have a great teacher who you meet with every week who challenges you to play harder pieces, then you will likely become a better piano player. Being in community helps us with the discipline of approaching the door, knocking on the door, opening the door. That's why we come to church every week to do this. Thank you for meeting me at this door every week.

For people in the Protestant/Mennonite tradition, reading our Bible is something that we believe should be done at home as well as at church. Before we talk about how we read our Bibles at home, I want to look at why it is we can do that.

For many centuries the door of scripture was only available at church; the only people who had access to bibles were priests and monks and other well educated people. Bibles had to be written out by hand, and very few people were literate. And Bibles were always written in Latin. When you went to church, the priest would read the Bible in Latin to you, but then he would explain it's meaning in the language you actually spoke. So that's where the sermon started. It was a way of explaining the text because people couldn't understand what they had just heard.

Many of you have heard of the Protestant Reformation, which started in the 1500's with Martin Luther, when he nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenburg Door. But reform didn't start with him. Two hundred years before Martin Luther there were people who wanted to reform the church. One such man was

John Wycliffe. He was born in England in 1320 and he became a priest, and a professor at Oxford. John Wycliffe took his faith very seriously, he was very devout. And he believed the church needed to change.

One of the things Wycliffe wanted to do was to open the door of scripture wide for everyone to hear it for themselves. It didn't make sense to Wycliffe that he had to read the Bible in Latin every week to people who didn't understand Latin. Priests had become doorkeepers, who kept people away from scripture. The Church had the basic belief that "Scripture is hard to understand, everyday people need priests to explain it to them." Wycliffe believed people should have access to the door of scripture.

Wycliffe found people who agreed with him, and together they translated the Bible into English. You can read his translation on-line, but it's a bit hard to understand because English in the 1300s was a bit different than English today. It's like reading Chaucer, Wycliffe was a contemporary of Chaucer. And of course there was no printing press yet, so every copy had to be written out by hand.

Wycliffe did not ask permission to make this translation, he knew that he would not be allowed. And once the translation was done, there was no way he was actually allowed to use his translation in church. So he gave copies of his handwritten bible to his followers who could read English and sent them out two-by-two to read it to people in the fields and towns wherever they went.

This was the first time this had ever happened for over a thousand years. Common people were hearing the Bible for the first time in their own language. It was like a door opened and Jesus was speaking right to them!

Translating the Bible into English wasn't the only thing Wycliffe was doing. He had all sorts of reforms, he wanted to limit the power of the pope, and he thought that the church should not own property, that priests should live in poverty. The church hierarchy was getting very hot and bothered about Wycliffe and his continual call to reform. They tried to declare him a heretic and have him tried in court. But he was very popular among the people as a holy man. And politically he had done exactly the right thing; the princes and political powers really supported him, because they figured that if Wycliffe got his way, then all the riches of the church would go to the government, and that sounded like a great idea to them. So they supported Wycliffe and would not allow him to be tried as a heretic.

The church was so busy arguing with Wycliffe that they didn't realize how far or how quickly his translation of the Bible was spreading. Wycliffe hadn't sent out priests to read the Bible, he just sent out anyone who could read English. So these people hadn't been trained in theology, they were just ordinary people. The church felt they were just idiots going around mumbling nonsense, so for a long time they disregarded these people, they called them Lollards, which meant mumblers. They just went around mumbling nonsense, or so the church thought, as opposed to really teaching theology like the priests did in church. But when the Lollards came to town with handwritten books or even just a gospel in their pockets, and read it to the people, they felt the door of scripture opening.

Wycliffe died in 1384 at the age of 64, of a stroke as he was conducting a service between Christmas and New Years. The Lollards kept going and going. The church and eventually the English government tried to suppress them, stamp them out. There were severe persecutions, but everywhere you turned there were more Lollards springing up reading this English bible to the people. Many Lollards died as martyrs. Since persecution in England was so severe many Lollards fled to Europe, where they planted seeds of reform that would bear fruit a hundred years later.

Church officials were very frustrated that the door to Scripture had been opened to the common people, and no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't nail it shut. They were so mad at Wycliffe that twenty years after he died, they had him posthumously declared a heretic and they dug up his body and burnt it. Just to show the popularity of this translation, there are still 150 copies in existence, even though they were handwritten, it was an offence punishable by death to own one, and many, many copies were burnt.

One of the first things Martin Luther did in the 1500s when he started reforming the church, was to translate the Bible into German. And he had a printing press, so it was a lot harder to shut that translation down. There would have been no Anabaptists if it wasn't for Luther translating the Bible into German, doing precisely what Wycliffe had done 150 years earlier. Wycliffe is sometimes called the Morning Star of the Reformation.

This little historical survey explains why it is that we have the Bibles in our own hands, in our own language. Scripture is a door that is immediately accessible to us. We should never take that for granted...people died so that we could read the Bible in English in our own homes. And of course there are still places in the world where it is dangerous to read the Bible at home in their own language.

So we have this book, it's a door to our relationship with God. How do we walk through it? One way most people try, is the door of reading the Bible from cover to cover. We do that with more or less success. Most people I talk to who have tried this approach give up. We knock on that big book of Genesis and start plowing through. But the doors are too heavy, we get bogged down in Leviticus. More people stop reading their Bible because of Leviticus than any other book! I think reading systematically from cover to cover can be a good idea for a rational, systematic devoted person, who probably is further on in their faith. I don't think it's the best way for many people to enter Scripture. God does not ask us to knock on doors that don't fit us.

So what are the doors to the Bible that might fit your life? I'm going to outline a number of different doors and it's my hope that in 2016 you will choose a door that is right for you, a door that will lead you closer to God.

I know someone whose goal this year is to get to know one gospel really well. They plan to read one or two chapters of the Gospel of Luke each day. They'll stay with those chapters for a week. Maybe they'll read those same two chapters every day that week, maybe they will read them three or four times a week; whatever works. By the end of the week those chapters are percolating in your bones and then you move on to a few more chapters. By the end of the year, you feel intimately connected to one of the most beautiful life stories of Jesus. Knowing a gospel really well will help you to be a better disciple.

Some of you love to study the Bible and maybe you will have the goal this year of studying one book thoroughly. There are some good resources in our library and of course there are lots of resources on the Internet. What kind of writing is this? Who wrote it? What's the context? What does this word mean? Some people love the door of intensive study. Stay with one book, and explore it thoroughly.

But there are different doors. When I was growing up I watched my oma (my grandmother) read the Bible every day. My two sisters and I lived with my oma. She never took out her Bible. What she did was she had a calendar on the wall, and each day she ripped off a page, and it had a verse on it and a little reflection. She would read that while she was having breakfast. I watched my oma walking through this door every day. It was her little quiet time with God. We would eat our breakfast and watch my oma

having her quiet time. And you may wonder, why didn't she share that verse? She was reading in German, and we didn't understand German! That door wasn't quite right for us.

But my grandmother taught me a lot, I absorbed a lot as I chewed my corn flakes every morning. I sat there and watched her lips moving as she read, I saw her looking out the window as she thought about what she was reading. I sometimes saw her wipe a tear away from her eyes as she read. I wasn't walking through that door with her, but I knew there was a door. I knew that doors existed because I watched her every day.

Many of you like reading devotional books. I know that some of you use the periodical Rejoice put out by MennoMedia. Every day there is a verse and a little explanation or reflection. If you would like to use this just let me know and I will order a copy for you, you will get it in your mailbox once every three months. You can also order it on-line, so it is just a click away on your computer. As an adult I've seen or used many different types of devotional books...they are very popular and have been a door I've used at various times.

I think precisely because I used so many different devotional books, is why I enjoyed finding "Take our Moments and our Days", Anabaptist prayer book that came out a few years ago. It felt entirely different than what I'd been doing. What's different about this book is that it contains mostly just scripture and a few prayers. No one tries to explain it to you. The rationale behind the Anabaptist prayer book is that there are certain core scriptures, and if we permeate our lives with these words in the morning and evening, it's a gateway to God. We have these books in the library, have a look at them, maybe they are a door that's right for you.

Another door I've used doesn't involve reading at all. There's a website called "Pray-as-you-go". It's a little app I've downloaded to my phone. Sometimes in the morning, I just click on it, and there is a little 12 minute podcast, a little recorded program that I listen to while I lie in bed, made especially for each day. It starts with a few minutes of music, then they read a few verses of scripture, and give you a question or two to think about while they play some more music. Then they read the scripture again. That's it, it's very simple. But it's very powerful, and it's been a good door for me to scripture. The link is in your bulletin.

But maybe that's not a door that's going to fit you. Maybe you don't like the idea of reading a few verses, it just seems too piecemeal for you. Maybe you can't find time every day to do something like that. Maybe the door to Scripture for you will involve reading chunks of Scripture. Maybe once a week you will sit down and read one book of the Bible. The book of Acts, for example. It will take about an hour. Sort of the length of one episode of TV show. You'll let that story sweep over you.

I remember I took a philosophy course in college, and I read a big book by Augustine. I was very troubled by the fact that I just wasn't understanding what I was reading, and I commented on this to my professor. I still remember what he said. "Carol, this is one of the greatest books that has ever been written. You can't expect to understand it all the first time you read it. It's okay to just understand a portion of what you've read." It's the same for Scripture. You glean what you can.

Maybe all this sounds too ambitious. The door is too big and heavy. There is still a door that's right for you. Maybe you want to choose a chapter of the Bible to take with you into 2016. It might not be something you look at every day or every week. But it's your chapter. It's your go-to chapter. I

remember one year I took Ephesians 4 with me. In the course of a year, I turned to it many times and it was so rich, it always had something to teach me.

Another year for me, it wasn't even a whole chapter. One year when our family was going through a health crisis all I took with me was eight verses from Psalm 34. I memorized them. That year I don't think I had energy to read the Bible, but those verses stood by me, I would say them in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep, I would think them in my head when we were sitting nervously in doctor's offices waiting for test results. I don't think I exhausted those verses, I don't think I truly understand it yet. It's just a small humble door, but it's a valuable door that has led me to God.

Maybe that door doesn't feel like the right one for you. You don't think you can memorize eight verses. The Lord's Prayer is something you probably already know. The Lord's Prayer is four verses from the Bible that have been a reliable and important door that people have used for centuries. Maybe you can say the Lord's Prayer every day, or even a couple of times a week.

That doesn't feel like it fits? Maybe what you need instead is just a motto...one simple verse that you put on your wall. People used to do this more often, it's harder now to find a plaque or picture with a verse on it...but you can just take an index card or a piece of paper and write a verse on it, and stick it on your fridge, or in your bedroom. A verse you see and read as you get out of bed, a verse you see and read as you get into bed. One verse is a tiny micro door, but even one verse can be an amazing door.

These are just a few of the doors that you can use to draw closer to God. There are lots more, maybe you want to tell me about a door you have used, we'll be talking about this in our sermon discussion time today. I hope you can join us. There is a door that's right for you that can take you into a closer relationship with God in 2016. God has given us the door of scripture, and people have died so that we can access it at home, on our own. We stand at the door, we are seeking, we are knocking, we are asking for our faith to be deepened.

What's it like to stand at that door? It's like this. When our kids were little, we lived in Ontario and Eugene's family lived in Manitoba. One year on his mother's birthday we decided to surprise her. We flew to Manitoba, and then drove to her little town. And there we stood at the door. I think of the feeling we had as we got ready to knock on the door. We knew that our simple presence was going to make her so, so happy. We were filled with joy travelling there, walking down that sidewalk, lifting our hands....we were filled with the anticipation of our meeting. We knew the smiles and open arms and hugs that were about to surround us.

When we stand at the door of scripture, we are invited to have that feeling. Because God is waiting for us. Our prayer as we stand at the door of scripture is: "God, I love you, I long for your presence." It doesn't matter if we read 5,000 verses or we read one verse. God will help us find a door that is right for us. This year, I challenge you to think about the door that's right for you and walk through it. Remember the vows that you have taken, and do something about them. The good news is that Jesus himself is the door. Every time we approach God, every time we stand in front of a door, Jesus, the Perfect Gentleman, is there, opening the door for us.

Let us pray: Thank you God for the gift of scripture and for the way it is a door to your presence. Thank you for all of the people who so faithfully translated it and copied it and printed it, thank you that we have access to scripture now anytime we want. Help us this year to keep our vows of faithfulness to you. Draw us closer to you as we read scripture together in church. And help each person in this congregation

find a door to scripture that's right for them, that fits them perfectly. A door that leads to you, where we can knock and where you will open. We ask all this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Psalms 19:7-10, NRSV & The Message

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;

**The revelation of GOD is whole
and pulls our lives together.**

the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;

**The signposts of GOD are clear
and point out the right road.**

the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;

**The life-maps of GOD are right,
showing the way to joy.**

the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;

**The directions of GOD are plain
and easy on the eyes.**

the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring for ever;

**GOD's reputation is twenty-four-carat gold,
with a lifetime guarantee.**

the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.

**The decisions of GOD are accurate
down to the nth degree.**

More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;

**God's Word is better than a diamond,
better than a diamond set between emeralds.**

sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

**You'll like it better than strawberries in spring,
better than red, ripe strawberries.**