**Sermon:** Proper 28A
**Title:** Sermon on the Collect
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What do you say to someone who does not believe and uses the Scripture as evidence for their atheism?

> *"It says God made the world in seven days, but it took 30 million years!"*
> *"It says Jesus turns water into wine. What is the chemical formula for that?"*

Or what do you do when people quote Scripture to you to prove things that you don't believe, or you don't think are in there?

> *"The Bible says investing in the stock market is a sin."*

Or just say, with unflinching authority, that something is in the Bible that just plain isn't?

> *"The Bible says love the sinner but hate the sin."* – Nope.

Very few of us feel so completely comfortable with Scripture that if someone tells us with absolute certainty that it says something that we don't recognize; very few of us can quote chapter and verse in response to something like that, and is confident enough to say:

> *"Actually, it says…"*

I have a **degree in** Bible, and I don't often do it.

And we are all socialized not to "go there." We've got *Midwest Nice* in our bones. Whether it comes to arguing about religion, politics, or what goes in a potato salad, **we know better.**

And yet…

It is wrong when people use words inspired by God to ***shame*** someone else. It is a tragedy when people use the Bible as a weapon.

Because it is the elegance and beauty of the Word that brings me closer to my Lord daily. And it is the humor and tragedy and unyielding truth of the Scripture that feeds my faith when it is flagging.

The collect that we read at the beginning of worship today is the one I often read every week before a Bible study. And it addresses this very problem: how does Scripture work in our faith?

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The Collect (pronounced CALL-lect) before the service is the prayer that the clergy prays on behalf of the gathered community. It gathers – collects – our thoughts and focuses us on the lessons of scripture we will hear that day.

This particular collect is derived from Romans 15:4 – *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope*.

You hear that in: *Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning*.

**Learning** scripture is not a history archive. Scripture is not a documentary. Scripture is not a weapon. It is meant to be used for our learning about God and God's love for us.

Those of us who read scripture with some regularity always find something new every time we read it. A word or phrase jumps out at us. It was always there, but this time it surprises us!

And that word or phrase changes our focus, directs us to a new thought or feeling. And so every time we read scripture, the first time or the hundredth, we learn from it.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to* ***hear them****, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,*

It is interesting to note that it says "hear them," first and foremost.

In the late nineties, Northwestern University did a series of studies where volunteers were given EEGs while being read a passage from *The Great Gatsby* in which Gatsby is throwing a series of brightly colored shirts onto the bed. The people who actually **saw** someone doing that and the people who **heard** the passage read aloud showed the same brain activity.

Hearing something can be as evocative of the experience as being there.

Next time you are in church, put down your bulletin and close your eyes and let the readings wash over you.

Remember that the Holy Scripture, especially the Old Testament and Gospel, are an oral tradition. They were told long before they were written or read. Experience them that way once in a while.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them,* ***read, mark****, learn, and inwardly digest them,*

Read and mark: of course, this actually means "mark" as in "remarkable." It invites us to stop and wonder at the words before us. Take your time in thinking about it. But it can also

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mean, you know, marking. I'm a fan of having at least one Bible in which I actually write things. Debbie Wagern, a brilliant artist from Kansas, has magnificent drawings in hers.

God, through these words, seeks to be in relationships with you. You have my permission to use your words, your images, your notes to seek to be in relationship with God in return. Mark and remark on the effect these stories and songs have on you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark,* ***learn,*** *and inwardly digest them.*

Learn: I don't think this means necessarily memorizing scripture, although that is never a bad idea. I think it means "learn the stories," some of them are marvelous: of how wee little David brings down Goliath; of Jael driving a tent post through her enemy's head; of Balaam's Donkey who turns around and talks smack to his master (*who are you to beat me three times?*).

Learn the stories. Because through the stories, we learn how God interacts with us. We learn what it looks like when God is at work, so that we can see it in our own lives.

And as for memorizing, well, maybe. There are words of scripture that are so beautiful that we desire to memorize them. A certain passage or phrase may stand out to you, and you may find that you hold it verbatim, or almost verbatim, in your heart. Often, it is in the King James Version that most poetic versions that we remember them.

> *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*
>
> *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*
>
> *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

When we have memorized a little bit of scripture, then if someone quotes it to us and they are wrong, then, in that moment we can say: "No, it says, 'for I am meek and lowly in heart.'" And feel just a little bit confident.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and* **inwardly digest** *them*

Here is the big one: inwardly digest them. Jeremiah puts it like this: *For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

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When we say that we are followers of Jesus, we mean FOLLOWERS; no spectators, not admirers. We are called to incarnate the Incarnate Lord.

This is what happens when we inwardly digest something. We take it into us, we let it into our ears, into our noses, into our eyes, into our mouths. We masticate it, we chew it up, we work it. We taste it, we smell it, we swallow it and then it breaks down and becomes part of us. It is in our cells; it is in our blood. "You are what you eat." Inwardly digest the Holy Scripture, let the Word of God become part of you.

Now, as it is with anything you "inwardly digest," it will work differently on each of us because each of us is different. Each of us is made perfectly in the image of God. Each of us is a unique and perfect masterpiece. Bearing the thumbprint of the Master in our souls.

And because each of us is different, when we hear the Word of God, it has a slightly different effect on each of us.

> What do you need to hear?
> What is pressing on your heart?
> What do you wonder?
> Do you even know how to ask?

Often just opening Scripture at a certain place and reading can lead us to a little clarity. Often thinking back on the stories of scripture and comparing them to our own lives helps us understand and deal with our own lives.

**This is the way the Holy Scripture works. It is God reaching through this text with words specifically for you. And God knows you, knows what you need to hear and knows how to say it so you can hear it.**

**Scripture is a love note that God has left for you. Scripture is a word of encouragement. It is a wise word of advice. It is a sense of relief, of forgiveness, of perspective, pressed between the pages of an ancient book.**

**The Bible is a collection of stories and poems and prayers and songs inspired by God to communicate with YOU.**

But the only way that works is if you read it, remark on it, learn it, inwardly digest it, and let yourself by changed by it.

The only way to keep other people from controlling what is said about the Bible, the only way to keep people from using Scripture as a weapon against you, is to be as familiar with that weapon as they are.

When someone tells you that the Bibles says: *"This too shall pass,"* or *"Cleanliness is next to godliness,"* or *"God will not give you more than you can handle…"* You can say: "Yeah? Where? Because I've read it and…um, no."

I know, I know; you've been told a million times that you ought to read the Bible. And you pick it up and its dry and boring or intimidating and obscure. And best-case scenario, it helps with your insomnia. But there are a few pro tips I can offer you to help you along:

1) Pick a good translation. I read the Common English Bible which is an academically responsible translation but has fewer "thee-s" and "thou-s" than the KJV. The Message, while not a translation, is a responsible version and very easy to read. If you want a suggestion, ask me, I can find you, often give you, a good version for reading.
2) Don't begin with Genesis or the Gospels from the beginning. Start with something small and fun. Read Jonah. Read Ruth or Job. Read a chapter of Proverbs at a time. Or just read the Christmas story in each gospel. Or the last supper…
3) Bite off a little bit at time. Just read until something jumps out at you and you want to stop and think. Don't tell yourself you'll read all of Luke by Christmas. Read until a word or phrase captures your attention and stop and "inwardly digest" for a while.
4) Read with someone else. Find a buddy and read together. Go slowly. You don't have to have anything prepared. Read, talk, read. That's the entire plan.

I said earlier that Scripture is a love note that is left to you by God. If God left you an envelope, just left it out on your kitchen counter, with your name on it, and it was from God, just for you… Would you leave it unopened? Wouldn't you want to know what was in it? At least give it a try?

Because you know what's in there?

A glimpse,
A glimmer,
A whisper of hope,
Of love,
Of existence that we yearn for every day of our lives.

All we have to do is open the envelope and read the letter from God.

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*.