



“Tasting the Bible”

Psalm 119:97-104 and 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

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When I think of sweet things, especially this time of year, my brain goes straight to candy corn, pumpkin beer, and doughnuts. If I had to make a list of all the sweet things I could think of, the Word of God wouldn't be the first thing to cross my mind. Yet our Psalmist talks about tasting God's word today, which is as sweet as honey. When talking about taste, one of the five senses we humans have, there's five different tastes that we can detect with our tongues: sweetness, sourness, saltiness, bitterness, and umami, which is a savory taste. Each taste signals our brains with important information vital to our survival. For example, bitterness is an alarm that something might be poison. Spit it out! Sweetness signals the presence of sugars, the foundation of the food chain and a source of energy. Bite into an apple and yum! Eat a whole box of Girl Scout cookies and you've taken my taste metaphor too far-but think of tasting the Word as a life-giving, energy filling action that equips us for what God is calling us to do.

For about a month now my husband Steve and I have picked up a box of produce through a CSA-community supported agriculture-brought into town a local farm. The box is bursting with seasonal fruits and veggies, almost more than we can eat. It's great! It's local, organic, all the good stuff. The hard part is figuring out what to do with it. I mean sure, we get apples and bell peppers and lettuce-I can figure that out. But there's been weeks where we get veggies that I don't even know the name for, much less know how it's going to taste. I had to Google “purple and white vegetable” to figure out I had a couple of turnips, and then of course search Pinterest for “turnip recipes.” And let me tell you the truth, every Pinterest recipe does not lead to success. Tasting the Word is something like finishing off my CSA box. There is some sweet success in using everything down to the last green bean to fuel my body for the week.

Now for all of you out there, who are just barely resisting the urge to taste a chunk of your pew Bible, restrain yourselves. It won't taste like honey. What we read from Psalm 119 today is only a small piece of the longest Psalm in the Bible. It's a beautiful poem, all about how much the psalmist LOVES God's word, the law. But when the Psalmist describes the word as sweeter than honey, they don't mean that the pages of this book, or the scroll they were reading from, were literally going to taste good. It can be the sweet experience of a child receiving their first bible.

A few weeks ago, our 3rd graders received Bibles as gifts from the church, and we got a little glimpse of how sweet the word of God could taste. During the children's sermon, Bibles were handed out and the 3rd graders who received them were absolutely glowing with excitement. From my seat up front, I could see them for the rest of the service paging through their new books intently, pointing things out to their parents, completely immersed. It was a sweet moment for these 3rd graders, the Word was as sweet as honey as they paged through their new Bibles for the first time.

But the longer we have that Bible, the less sweet it can seem. The third week in a row I got enough cabbage and greens in my CSA box to feed a family of 8, it lost its novelty of being new in my diet. Whether from disinterest, disenchantment or disbelief, we don't always have that new book glow about us when reading the Bible. If we read it much at all. Because let's be honest, there's some downright weird



stuff in there. Timothy writes that the Bible is “useful.” But on an average day in our lives, what use does it really hold?

2 Timothy 3:16, a verse from the passage today that read “All scripture is inspired by God,” is one of the most abused verses of scripture in the Bible. That’s because we take it and apply it to the rules, laws, or stories that we like best in scripture, pair it with this verse and throw it in people’s faces. One example of this is 1 Timothy 2:12, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” Put that with 2 Timothy 3:16 and Ta-da!! All scripture is inspired by God, so I better go sit down and be quiet. With a very bitter taste in my mouth.

Rachel Held Evans, a New York Times bestselling author known for writing about faith, doubt and life in the Bible Belt put an all or nothing use of scripture to the test in 2010 when she embarked on *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*. Similar to AJ Jacobs well known *Year of Living Biblically*, Rachel did her research and set out for a year to stop cutting her hair, call her husband master, remain silent in church, and camp outside when she’s on her period, among other things all by instruction of the Bible. She reflects at the end of the year that if you want to go to the Bible looking for something, you’ll find it. She writes, “If you are looking for verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to liberate and honor women, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to wage war, you will find them. If you are looking for reasons to promote peace, you will find them. If you are looking for an outdated and irrelevant ancient text, you will find it. If you are looking for truth, believe me, you will find it.”

So yes. The reality is that every verse of scripture isn’t dripping with honey. But I’m grateful we have stories of suffering and victory, songs of lament and joy, advice that works, and some that just doesn’t. This full palette of flavor gives us an opportunity to have a real relationship with the God who inspired it all.

Since I started receiving a CSA box, my relationship with food has changed. I don’t just go to the store to buy the food I know I can prepare and like. I plan my meals around the food I have received, and figure out how to deal with the unusual flavors that have entered my kitchen. And after a few weeks of tart turnips, bitter radishes and sweet delicata squash, these flavors have become the norm in my diet. All those greens? About half went into this savory butternut squash lasagna this week.

Finding scripture useful doesn’t mean there’s one verse we can hang our hats on and one that tears down everything we thought we believed. We can’t ignore the turnips and only eat apples. Living out the call of scripture, tasting the Word, asks us to see a bigger picture where our faith, our knowledge and our experience come together to send us forward into action.

It turns out despite that one verse, 2nd Timothy isn’t all bad. If you go back to the beginning of this letter, you find the context of what’s going on. The writer knows that Timothy’s been having a hard time. As the letter opens he writes, “I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you.” He’s writing to Timothy in a moment when perhaps his faith has been shaken, and says, Timothy, you’ve got this. The author trusts Timothy to do the work of ministry he is called to do because Timothy’s foundation is firm. “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.” Timothy has tasted the Word, and it is sweet. He’s tasted it in the scriptures he’s read, and he knows these stories of faith could only be from God. This sweetness propels Timothy forward into the fullness of his ministry as a leader of the church.



It's normal to want to skip all the Bible stuff and get to the part where we DO ministry. We hear the words of this letter saying, "I urge you: proclaim the message, be persistent, convince, rebuke, encourage with patience, teach..." Got it. Let's get out there, sign up for the mission trip, bring in canned goods, and encourage our children to be kind. These are all great things to do, and are often high on the list of why people come to church. We want to do the right things so we can be good people. But how long will we last volunteering to teach Sunday school, serving as an elder, pledging 10% and showing up on Sunday morning to worship if we have no foundation in the stories and faith behind what we're doing? And even if you are a regular reader of the Bible, will there ever be a time when the Holy Spirit won't have an opportunity to say something new? We can't stop eating and expect to survive. If you are going to continue in a life of faith, it's got to be grounded in the Word. It is the Holy Spirit's movement in the Word of God that gives us life and energy to carry on another day.

We can each find the life-giving word of God in this living text. Whether you opened the Bible for the first time in September, carry a worn out copy with you everywhere you go, or have a copy that's been collecting dust, this Word is for you to taste and build your life upon. And you don't have to quit your job and stop cutting your hair to do it.

Rachel in her year long quest said that if we're looking for something in scripture, we're going to find it. So she lays out what she's looking for in her year of Biblical Womanhood. Simply, a good story. She gets her story, but finds something else. "I think [in the deeper recesses of my heart and mind] I was looking for permission-permission to lead, permission to speak, permission to find my identity in something other than my roles, permission to be myself, permission to be a woman...I believe that my calling, as a Christian, is the same as that of any other follower of Jesus. My calling is to love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. Jesus himself said that the rest of Scripture can be rendered down into these two commands. If love was Jesus' definition of "biblical," then perhaps it should be mine."

So where do we start looking?

Not just in your favorite verses of sweet scripture. Not just the salty scripture that wins your argument. If I only ate the food I was familiar with in my produce box, I'd be throwing out a lot of perfectly good stuff. But in the energizing message of the Word as a whole-in the rich and dangerous history of the Old Testament, in the miraculous stories of the Gospel, the written testimony of the leaders of the early church, and the hope for what is coming next, there is an incredible variety of flavors for us to experience.

While reading the Bible from cover to cover is a worthy pursuit, maybe we won't be meditating on scripture all day long right away, but for 5 or 10 minutes when you sit down at your desk. That's my habit right now. I use the Presbyterian Daily Prayer App to provide me with short scripture readings and prayers each morning, because I hardly know where to start when I sit down with that big book! The app draws from the Revised Common Lectionary, which offers daily psalms, Old Testament, and New Testament readings. There's often scripture that I'm not excited to read, and I'll be honest, the letters to Timothy with all their talk of silencing women and suffering for the Gospel aren't my favorite. But because they came up in today's Sunday lectionary, I got to wrestle with what the Spirit might be saying



through scripture I would probably go to first. As you practice this discipline, it turns out that there's sometimes something that jumps out and speaks up in your day. In today's reading that something would be this: "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you [and I'm summarizing here] "keep on keeping on!" Could there be anything more relevant to the ways we are responding to this year's presidential election? I needed to hear this for myself as I consider the ways I respond to people in my life whether Democrat, Republican or otherwise, who only have ears for what already agrees with them. Then I go on with my day, but I've got a little assurance of God's presence, even in election season and a little more resolve that I've got to keep moving forward. These things start to stick with you, and then you have a much deeper well to draw from, more energy to propel you forward, to carry out your life as a Christian.

This may not be the practice meant for you, and this won't be the first time you've heard an admonition to read your Bible, but as your resident Christian Educator I've got to say it: seriously y'all-check this book out! Whether it's through an app, in Sunday school, with a book club, or a daily e-mail subscription, find something that works for you. Ask me if you need help with this! Because we've got work to do. God has called us, just as God called Timothy, just as God called that honey tasting Psalmist, and God has given us this life-giving word, "so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." Amen.