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## Have You Never Read?

*Matthew 21:33-45*

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery at Duke Chapel on October 5, 2014

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“I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears...Somehow I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes...I had much to say to you, my God... For I felt that I was still the captive of my sins, and in my misery I kept crying, ‘How long shall I go on saying, ‘tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl, I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain, “Take it and read, take it and read.’ ... I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall...I seized [the book containing Paul’s Epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries ... Rather arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ...I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.

I marked the place with my finger ... and closed the book...You converted me to yourself...”

These words are from what is considered to be the first autobiography in the Western world, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which he recounts his conversion to Christianity. The Bible tells us that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing the word of God,” but for Augustine faith comes by reading, reading the word of God.

Take it and read. Reading can be a life-giving portal to another world, a whole new world. Dr. Seuss was right, “The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.” You may end up in Narnia or New York right in your living room. Professors get paid to read. People read for pleasure, joining reading groups and book clubs. People read to be in community even if it is just with the author. As C.S. Lewis once said, “We read to know we are not alone.” A book can be a faithful well-worn companion. There is no university without books. A common question at Duke is, “What are you reading these days?” One writer notes that he’s frequently asked if he were shipwrecked and could have only one book with him, what would it be? The answer he always gives is “How to Build a Boat” (Stephen Wright). Books can be very useful friends.

These days reading companions and habits are in transition. Kindles, Nooks, and iPads have paved the way for e-books. The nature of libraries in a digital age is changing where some even question the future of hardback or paperback books on shelves. But some of us still like to feel and fold the binding of a book. We like to hold it and caress it, highlight it with a yellow or pink highlighter—those favorite phrases or words or paragraphs that jarred us with joy. We like to write free associative ideas, stories, and memories in the margins to create a literary quilt of intertextuality. And don’t forget about the delicious smell of old, leather-bound books. We can even touch their skin and imagine their age and their autobiography, unlike e-books that seem to never grow old and appear sterile, forever without wrinkles.

On top of that, in this digital, Internet, sound byte, YouTube video clip society, our culture seems more attuned to a quick scanning of a text while e-surfing rather than engaging in a close reading. One takes up and reads while on the run (but hopefully not while driving). And the Bible may even be approached solely as a quick fix or quick answer for an immediate situation—to name it and claim it and then drop it to move on to the next activity. One image, one word, one phrase, a spiritual pill to pop in my soul for the day ahead but not necessarily something to digest deeply as a revelatory door to God.

A cursory reading of today's parable from Matthew may cause us to react with a wide and even loud spiritual yawn in our favorite pew or rocking chair. It's a typical story told by Jesus to push the buttons of the religious and political powers of his day. Nothing extraordinary. Nothing unexpected. On the surface, as the church has read for centuries, this parable is an allegory. The landowner is God. The vineyard is Israel. The tenants are Jewish leaders. The servants are prophets and the son whom was thrown out of the vineyard and killed, is Jesus. Straightforward at first sight, right? But we may see and not really see. Hear and not really hear. In other words, we may not be paying attention and even miss church bulletin typos like the one that said, "The senior choir invites any member of the congregation who enjoys sinning to join the choir."

There may even be allusions in what we read but we can miss them and by doing so we may miss a deeper meaning. English professors tell us that you can't fully understand *Moby Dick*, *Paradise Lost*, *East of Eden*, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, if you don't recognize the biblical allusions in those books. If you miss the connections, the tenor of literary truth will ring more hollow. You may miss something if you rush and read, but if we slow down and possess what French philosopher and mystic Simon Weil calls the "faculty of attention" directed toward God, we may see and receive something unexpected.

It is said that Michelangelo, the great Italian sculptor, painter, and poet, who painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and designed the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, once stood before a great block of marble that had been rejected by builders and cast aside. As he stood there with eyes staring straight at the marble, a friend approached and asked what he was looking at. And he said, "An angel." He saw what the mallet, the chisel, and skill could do with that rejected stone. Michelangelo said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." He saw the unexpected and produced one of his masterpieces.

Michelangelo was like Sojourner Truth who once said, "I don't read such small stuff as letters. I read men and nations." Michelangelo read stones. Reading is paying attention. He saw below the surface to a deeper level. Have you ever read a stone (I didn't ask if you ever had a stone)? Stones have stories to tell like the Petoskey Stones from the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. They're fossilized colony corals and they can tell of their long history and what it's like to spend the day on beaches, in ditches or gravel pits, and how people study them and use them to have throwing contests in the water. They can tell you about their excitement when the Michigan legislature made them the state stone. Have you ever read a stone?

On the surface when Jesus says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," it may seem like no big deal. But if we're paying attention, if we read closely, that one image opens up an entire biblical universe. Stones. The Ten Commandments were written on tablets of stone (Exod 34). Joshua uses twelve stones as a memorial for the children of Israel to remember how they crossed the Jordan River on dry ground (Joshua 4). David fought Goliath with five smooth stones (1 Sam 17). Samuel took a stone and called it Ebenezer (1 Sam 7). The people of God are sometimes described as having a "heart of stone" (Ezek 36). The Psalmist boldly declares that "you will not dash your foot against a stone" (Ps 91). Just like in today's parable, the

first Christian martyr, Stephen, is stoned to death in the book of Acts. Stones can be threats and sources of danger even when Jesus declares, “the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls”(Cf. Is 8:14; Dan 2:34-55, 44-45).

But when you read more deeply and pay attention, you will recognize that in 1 Peter you can be built up as living stones into a spiritual temple (1 Peter 2). And these stones rest on “a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation”(Isa 28) in Jesus Christ. And at the end of his life, which is where we are headed in Matthew, someone rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb where Jesus laid (Mk 15). If we hurry, we may act like we’re stoned and never read in a way that lets the stone tell the whole story of its life and then we may risk missing the presence of Michelangelo angels. What are we missing when we don’t pay attention? It’s possible to see someone or something we love and still not pay attention to them or it. The way we read the world perhaps has been ruined.

Jesus’s own question, “Have you never read?” is an indictment against our reading habits. It’s a probing about whether we are actually paying attention to what is going on around us. This is not about whether you are a walking bibliophile or not and about the quantity of read books; it is about the quality of your spiritual insight and intuition. Are you paying attention? Have you never read? Reading is knowledge, power, and freedom, which is why there was resistance to teaching the enslaved in this country how to read; however, this isn’t really about a literate culture over against an illiterate one to shame the latter because some of the wisest and most discerning people I know can’t read letters but read people so well. They pay attention and know how to *really* read closely. Have you never read?

Does our reading lead to revelation about God, the world, and us? Maybe we just see stones when in fact they point to so much more. Maybe we just read about “a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower” and think that it’s a nice agricultural story for an agrarian society, but if we read closely and more deeply we may recognize that it alludes to the world of Isaiah chapter 5 with similar imagery, a world with a haunting question in the background—“when I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” If we pay attention, that Old Testament blues question is a theme right here in the New Testament vineyard.

Jesus presents an old theme with a new variation but it still resounds with the same blues notes of unmet expectations. The landowner doesn’t have his expectations met because he experiences the unexpected with the bad behavior of his tenants. He did everything by the book yet in the biblical backdrop is the same haunting query—“when I expected to yield grapes why did it yield wild grapes?” Have you never read? If not, you may not hear this note but it is there in the subtext of the biblical text; though we may not see nor hear something because we’re not paying attention doesn’t make it any less present or real. The landowner thinks that the tenants will respect his son but they kill him. I can’t help but hear Isaiah’s haunting question on his lips. The landowners who controlled the rural regions of the Roman Empire had the social and legal power to enforce rules; they even had hired assassins to deal with troublesome tenants like these but the landowner doesn’t retaliate. All of this is unexpected, even how Jesus responds.

He does respond with the common practice of expounding a scripture by citing other scriptures, scripture interpreting scripture, the Word of God using the word of God to interpret the word of God. “Have you never read in the scriptures: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?” Of course, we’ve read but maybe we’ve only conditioned ourselves to see what is there on the surface and haven’t paid attention to what is underneath.

Under these circumstances, especially if the parable is about the murdered son who is Jesus, this is a strange response from the one headed to the Golgotha gallows. He's worried about reading at a time like this and showing off his scripture memorization from Sunday school class? Maybe he's calling us to pay attention, not only to himself as the cornerstone or capstone, but to how he responds. What he quotes is Psalm 118, a Hallel psalm, a liturgy of thanksgiving in the temple to give thanks to God for festival worship. If we read closely, what he does is lift up a form of praise as political practice and protest because praise says 'up to God and down to the other gods.' This is unexpected from Jesus, this subtle linguistic form of the middle finger in the face of the powers that be. Praise in his mouth, a halle-lujah, on his way to death, rejects his rejection.

Not only has Jesus been telling the disciples that the rulers would kill him (16:21; 17:23; 20:18), the Hallel psalms were sung before and after the Passover meal (Mt 21:9; 26:30; Mk 14:26), thus his articulation of this psalm foreshadows the upcoming Passover, his death. If we never read, we may never catch the irony of the Hallel in Jesus' hell. If we never read, we may think it ludicrous for a Messiah to die. But when we approach the Bible or the communion table and pay attention, we may not only hear 'take it and read,' we may hear 'take and eat' because the word of God is also the Bread of Life. Where others see only stones, if we pay attention we may also see angels and even Jesus.

In the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, there was a Haitian man trapped under a slab of concrete from a collapsed building. He lay on his side as the weight of this piece of concrete rested on top of him, crushing him. All of this was caught on camera. What's crazy is that a CNN news reporter was right there ready to get high ratings. The reporter conducts an interview with this man as he lay on his side underneath a slab of cement and this is what she asked—"What are you telling yourself?" Well, what do you think he's telling himself as a cement block rests on top of his body, squeezing the life out of him? "I forgot to put out the garbage today or respond to that email? Or, I really would like a dirty chai latte from Starbucks?" "What are you telling yourself?!" This man should have said "I'm asking myself why a news reporter is interviewing me right now!"

But in response to the reporter's question, "What are you telling yourself?" this man says, "Jesus, my life is in your hands." At first glance, we may just see a man dying and whose body is breaking under the weight of a building, but if we pay attention, we may not only see the tiny sprout of hope "growing up in cracked concrete"(J. Alfred Smith), we may see and hear Jesus under the brutal weight of the world. Have you never read, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit"?

I don't know what happened to that man but I know what happened to Jesus. But if you never read, if you never pay attention, you may never find your redemption and know how near it is. A conversion. An angel. Jesus. Just pay attention and keep reading. You'll soon come across another stone but this one will be rolled away.