

**Sermon preached by The Rev Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, MD, Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 28, 2018.**

I want us this morning to consider the importance of Bible study. And I want to do so by labeling today as Bumper Sticker Sunday. I do so because our lessons this morning are full of phrases that would make good bumper stickers. Let's have some fun with this. You'll need your insert. There's only one guideline: not too short, and not too long.

The most obvious example is the first half of verse 10 of **Psalm 111**: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Note that this phrase is highlighted as the "refrain." My guess is that these words have already made their way to a bumper sticker. Maybe you have seen one. Maybe you have one on your car. A good choice. A wise choice.

But there are others. Let's look, section by section.

In today's Collect, I see two possibilities. The first is: "In our time, grant us your peace." And the other is: "One God, for ever and ever." Not bad as bumper stickers. Good reminders. Good attention getters.

The passage from Deuteronomy (**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**) has a powerful candidate: "I will raise up for them a prophet." People will get that. A less obvious candidate is: "From among our own people." People will have to ponder that one.

From **Psalm 111**, take your pick of verses. As is true for many psalms, this psalm is filled.

"I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart."

"Great are the deeds of the Lord."

"His righteousness endures for ever."

"The Lord is gracious and full of compassion."

"He is ever mindful of his covenant." Another one to ponder.

"The power of His works."

"All His commandments are sure."

"Holy and awesome is His Name."

"His praise endures for ever."

The passage from I Corinthians (**I Corinthians 8:1-13**) is more challenging, but not without some candidates:

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

“Anyone who loves God is known by Him.” The problem with this one is the suggestion that anyone who does not love God is not known by Him. And that’s not what we believe. God’s knowledge of us doesn’t depend on our love for Him.

“For us there is one God.” This will bother some people.

“Food will not bring us closer to God.” Depends on the food.

The passage from Mark’s Gospel (Mark 1:21-28) also has limited entries.

“They were astounded at his teaching.” Invites people to ask “Who is this teacher?” Which, in turn, invites us to share.

“He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” Again, this one makes people think.

So, did we come up with any candidates better than “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”? Probably not.

So, what can we learn from this little exercise?

First, the Bible is rich, is full, has plenty to offer. Stay with it for even a little while, and it can grab you for a lifetime. Not because of clever techniques. Moses and Paul and Mark weren’t employing techniques. They were responding from the heart to very powerful experiences, not unlike those experiences that you and I have from time to time and are probably the reason we are here.

Second, the English language words we encounter have gone through all sorts of changes. There was the transition from eye witness to shared belief to recorded words. There were questions as to where these words came from and whether they were authentic. There were translations from one language to another, and interpretations within each of these translations. At times there were efforts to twist these words, maybe even obliterate them. At times these words were praised and glorified. Other times they were condemned and banned. The fact that you

and I even have eye-witness accounts of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus is itself an enormous accomplishment, maybe even a miracle.

Third, bumper stickers can be effective and they can serve the common good. Oh yes, phrases can also, hurt, offend, mislead, and outright lie. But, if deeply-believed, well-crafted, and well-intended, Biblical phrases can help heal, they can praise effort, they can strengthen insight, they can remind us of what's good for us and for the world.

It is the reminder-potential in a bumper sticker that works for you and me as we study scripture. The Creator wants to reach us. And we want to reach the Creator. This mutual reaching, this mutual searching, is built into us. It is a given. It is in our DNA. And, thanks to God, there are people like Moses, Paul and Mark, who have shared their insights, and, through those insights, inspired others, including you and me, to come to insights of our own and share these insights with fellow seekers.

The only reason that the Bible you and I consult has lasted as long as it has and endured as many challenges as it has is because its content, its sweeping story, its beauty, its challenges, are from God Himself. What do all of the authors of the books of the Bible have in common? They have the same God. And it's not by accident. It is by design. We can't always see the design, but it's there, and it's working all the time. In its own way, this design is reaching out. It's alive. It's speaking to people in every language, in every culture, in every condition.

Here's another exercise. I'll bet that in most, if not all of your homes, there is a Bible, visible to anyone who enters the room. It might be on a bookshelf or an end table or a bedside table or even a lectern in a study. It might be big or small, heavily bound in leather or lightly bound in paper. Its pages might be dog-eared or show little wear. Whatever its appearance, it has a history, a story, a reason why it's on display. Whether it's consulted regularly or rarely doesn't matter. Whether it has monetary value doesn't matter. It's important to you. It's not in a box of books. It's out in the open, as a matter of choice. And anyone messing with this book should be prepared for push-back.

This possessive attitude is noted in the hymn we just sang. The lyrics of stanza three make a pretty good bumper sticker: "Our anchor and our stay." We know what that means. Others reading it for the first time will be curious. Maybe exactly as planned. Amen.

