

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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Hebrews 4:12 – 16

To Know All is to Forgive All

We all know the dangers of a sharp blade – even children learn at a young age how dangerous knives are. We also know that even more dangerous than a sharp blade is a dull knife blade.

The dull knife won't cut as deeply, but it will rip and tear what it's cutting, making the healing take a lot longer. A sharp knife cuts far deeper than a dull knife; and because the cut is so precise the healing is faster.

People in the ancient world knew this as well, and so the image of the Word of God as sharper than a two edged sword would have spoken volumes to them. In fact it probably would have meant more to the Jews and early Christians than it does to us.

But not only because of the image of the sharp sword, but also because of their understanding of the Word of God. And we need to share a first century understanding of the Word to find the good news in these verses.

When the people who wrote the Bible talk about the Word of God – they're not referring to the Bible as we know it (obviously, since they were writing it...). The texts that they would have had were basically the Old Testament – the books of Jewish law and the writings of the prophets.

But it was even more than that. You see for the Jews, once a word was spoken it had an independent existence. A word was more than a word – it was a power, a force which went forth and did things.

That's how they could describe the world as being SPOKEN in to being. God didn't MAKE or even CREATE the world, he SAID, "Let there be light, earth... etc..."

Word – is not just a word but an event, a happening, an action. Like in the marriage ceremony, when the couple says "I do" or "I will" and speak their vows, they're not just saying something – they're DOING something.

In this way the Word of God is alive and active. And if this is so then, when we read it, when we hear it and take it in (literally in) then it will do something in us.

And according to Hebrews today, it can go so deeply in us that it can have the effect of surgery – separating joints from muscle even. The word of God puts your soul on the operating table.

It can open us up, penetrate deep within us and expose who we really are at the core of our being. Now this is not a particularly comforting image. We don't really want others to know our deepest thoughts and ponderings. We do our best to put our best face on. None of us would want

our ears to suddenly turn into loud speakers and start broadcasting our every thought and desire to everyone around us! But Hebrews tells us that the Word of God does indeed open us up and even more – judges the thoughts and desires of our hearts.

And the good news is that it is the Word doing this - doing some thing that no one else can or SHOULD do! We are laid bare, yes – but before God.

Do you remember back in the late 80's and early 90's I think – there was a t-shirt craze of “co-ed naked sports”? Well, I remember seeing a unique shirt at the time which said, “Get on your knees and pray naked.”

I think that shirt took as its inspiration this Bible verse. And while we want to move pretty quickly off the visual – the point is right on.

What if we were to allow ourselves to be, consciously in our hearts and minds, that vulnerable before God? Because, you know, we already are. God does know our every fear and feeling. He knows our intentions and motives. He hears the underlying monologue going on in our minds that we'd never speak out loud.

When we go under the knife of God's Word, nothing in us can hide from Him. And this is good news!

Because the one doing the surgery is the one who is doing the healing.

Hear again the second half of our lesson:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (v. 14-16)

The tension and anxiety of being laid bare is quickly relieved – because of Jesus Christ.

The word of God is not a mysterious, overwhelming power that operates outside of what God does in Christ. Where God speaks, Christ is present. The same Jesus Christ who entered fully into our human condition.

Remember that Jesus was also laid bare and vulnerable, and not just before God, but before the world – in his birth in the manger and in his death on the cross.

And because of this, we can be assured that the God who places us under judgment is the very God who loves us and sympathizes with us in every respect, because He suffered and knows our pain.

Knowing that the powerful son is at the same time the Son who knows our lot gives us new courage. However vulnerable we may be before the eyes of God, we can approach the heavenly throne boldly, knowing we come to a throne of grace where Jesus offers help to those who are tested.

On the one hand, God sees and know the innermost chambers of our human hearts. That places an unparalleled demand on our lives. We must render an account of our response to the divine

word. On the other hand, obligation is not the end of the story because God moves with compassion to meet our human weakness and need. That compassion proves God is the trustworthy savior of our lives. (H.H. Farmer)

The Word of God – the Bible – Old and New Testaments – offer much more than information about God. They give us the living Christ and invite us into relationship with him.

John Calvin used this analogy: the Scriptures are like spectacles for weak, failing eyes. Without the Word of God, we see only a world driven by human ambition and failure. God's plans and purposes are blurry and hardly detectable. But if we put on the Scriptures and really look through them, allowing them to refocus our vision, God's saving work in Christ becomes crystal clear. We no longer see a world abandoned to its own devices, but see, rather God's transforming love, which brings good out of evil and hope out of despair.

As the Exalted One, Jesus is part of the transcendent glory of God.
But because he also knows our human lot, he can connect us to God's presence and grace.

If we're going to open our selves up – to allow surgery on our souls – it is best done by the one who sits on the throne of grace don't you think?

Confession of sin without confession of faith in the Son of God brings only guilt. If we're guilty – and we are; we're all guilty of something – then the only place to go for true forgiveness is the throne of grace.

When Billy Graham was driving through a small southern town, he was stopped by a policeman and charged with speeding. Graham admitted his quilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court.

The judge asked, "Guilty, or not guilty?" When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied, "That'll be ten dollars -- a dollar for every mile you went over the limit." Suddenly the judge recognized the famous minister. "You have violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid-- but I am going to pay it for you." He took a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then even took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner! "That," said Billy Graham, "is how God treats repentant sinners!"

And, I would add, is how God treats every one of us!
Amen!