
Hear, Read, Mark, Learn, and Inwardly Digest
Seminary Chapel Homily
November 12, 2009



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Scripture Reading:

II Timothy 3:14-17

John 10:22-30

My grandson, William David, just two years old, made his debut film appearance this summer on Facebook. He charmed the world with his renditions of several well-known songs. His current greatest hit is "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

He's my grandson so I knew Will was smart and musically talented. But on seeing the video I was simply amazed at his capacity at this young age. You see, my grandson learned to sing several songs, each of them with a reasonably complex array of vocabulary, before he learned to speak a single meaningful word.

Will doesn't know what "twinkle" means; in fact he's probably never heard it other than in this song. The same is true for "wonder," "diamond," "above," "world," "bright." The video was recorded when Will had just turned two, when he was not yet speaking in any fashion other than to say sounds recognized by only his parents to mean "mommy" and "daddy." He memorized an entire tune and text before he spoke a single word. He sang before he spoke; he memorized and recited lines of poetry before he could utter a single word of his own.

My grandson, William David, is named for me, but he is first named for his great-grandfather. My father-in-law, the other William in our family, is well regarded by his grandchildren for his ability to recite from memory. To this day, at 83 years, he will spontaneously break out in Antony's funeral oration for Caesar, verse learned in a ninth grade Latin course:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. ...

Dad renders the complete oration, ending with these words:

. . . Bear with me;
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me.

As they were growing up our son and daughter also loved Dad's memorized rendition of "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'

The verse rolls on until Dad reaches the deadly conclusion:

. . . And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted - nevermore!

Both young Will and his great-grandfather William will be visiting with us for Christmas this year. I expect to be entertained with a full-fledged poetry slam.

You wonder, of course, where I'm going with this! How do my grandson and my father-in-law instruct us today in this seminary chapel? In this way: they exhibit a high regard for the lost pastoral art of memorization.

My favorite collect in the Book of Common Prayer is that designated for Proper 28, the Sunday closest to November 16. This collect will be said this coming Sunday in thousands of churches around the world

*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, forever and ever. Amen.*

This is the collect of the holy Scriptures, and in it we are told to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's Word.

To hear? Yes we know what this means.

The same with read, mark, and learn. We do much of this in seminary.

But inwardly digest? How do we do this?

By example of my grandson and his great-grandfather I suspect that we approach the responsibility to “inwardly digest” Scripture, in part, by memorizing Scripture. To memorize Scripture is to approach God’s Word in a manner akin to the Benedictine discipline of *lectio divina*. This discipline requires that we slow down in our reading; that we pause with each word – to hear, read, mark, learn each word – and in so doing to inwardly digest it, to stamp it deep within our memory.

Why does memorizing aid in digesting Scripture? In her recent book, *Caring for Words*, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre writes: “What we take into our memories and imaginations shapes us, alters the rhythms of breathing, speech, and heartbeat, affects in subtle and not-so-subtle ways the very life of the body.” Do you agree with me that this comes close to “inward digestion”?

She continues: “. . . part of our mission is to ‘eat well,’ that we may model good health we hope for in the community. That we savor and linger over words; that we taste with delight and take in slowly. That we read, share, and memorize Scripture.”

Memorization is the act of hearing, reading, marking, learning and then taking in, digesting, so that the words of Scripture are carried along by the very cells of our body. The memorized words of Scripture are manna for the journey. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and . . . no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

I admit, I don’t memorize much Scripture these days. But I also claim that I know a bit about what I’m missing.

When I was young our family lived in the country of Guatemala where my parents were missionaries. From first through eighth grade I attended a boarding school. There I learned to read, but I also learned to memorize Scripture.

The eight months of our school year were divided into quarters; eight weeks each. Each week of each quarter we were assigned verses to memorize. In first grade it was a matter of two or three verses for the week. By sixth grade we were memorizing entire chapters each week. By eighth grade the discipline had taken us to consecutive chapters and sometimes entire books of the Bible in a given quarter of the school year. In the subsequent quarter we would repeat the identical routine. We would memorize the same verses, the same chapters, the same books of the Bible from the first and third quarters again in the second and fourth quarters of the year but this time in a second language, in Spanish.

I lost this art many years ago, but I remember it well enough to know that today I do not inwardly digest God’s Word nearly as well as I did in those days. As a result, the manna for the journey some days runs short. Today I hear Scripture; I read, mark, and learn Scripture; but I’m not so practiced as I once was at inwardly digesting.

Two years ago I attended church one Sunday at the Salem Covenant Church in New Brighton, Minnesota. Each Sunday pastor Mark Pattie begins his sermon by stepping down from the pulpit and walking among those gathered to worship. From that sacred space in the midst of the body of Christ he recites the morning's Gospel lesson. He recites it, from memory. He is able to do this because on Tuesday morning of each week he begins his sermon preparation by memorizing the Gospel text. This allows him during the routine of the week – while mowing the lawn or racking leaves or shoveling snow, while pausing for the traffic light to turn green, while waiting in the dentist office, while shopping in the supermarket – all week long to chew the cud, to inwardly digest the words of the Gospel lesson. As a result, when he enters the pulpit on Sunday morning he has manna sufficient not only for his journey but for the week-long journey of all who worship with him.

When God's Word is memorized, when it becomes words taken in, digested, carried into our very cells, we embody God's Word and we are infused with the breath of life. "My sheep hear my voice . . . and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

Amen.