

“Book Sense”
August 18 2024

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14
II Timothy 4:9-13

We had some friends from Connecticut visit recently on their way to the Iowa State Fair. We showed them around downtown Iowa City and the Literary Walk. That experience, along with some other issues, led me to think about books, and about the state of books in this state—important topics for us here in the City of Literature and for us here in the Congregational Church.

When reading, studying, or preaching from the letters in the New Testament, we usually pay little attention to the material at the end, in which Paul, especially, sends personal messages to the congregation and to individual members—often giving thanks for an act of kindness or offering some words of encouragement, and sometimes chastising specific people for their behavior. We ignore these concluding words because they seem to be so time and person specific, unlike the enduring theological and ethical topics found in the main body of the letters.

The authorship of First and Second Timothy has long been debated. Some think these letters were written by Paul himself while he was imprisoned in Rome, awaiting his execution. Others regard them as been written by a close associate of Paul sometime after his death—a common practice in ancient times.

Whoever the author, there at the end of II Timothy is a lovely, very human moment. We heard some it this morning. The author laments his loneliness and sense of desertion. And then this: “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.”

Not, as I suggested, timeless theology.

It is touching, however, because anyone of us might have written something like this—or received such a message. That cloak—you know the one. I’m pretty sure I left it with Carpus. (And, of course, we don’t know who Carpus is. He’s mentioned only here, but two thousand years later, we’re talking about him.) But that cloak—could you get it from Carpus and bring it to me—the prison can be so cold and damp.

Oh—and also, bring the books. (We, of course don’t know which ones.) Bring the books and especially the parchments.

Amid hardship and persecution, struggling to get nascent congregations onto a sure footing, feeling alone and forsaken, the author of this letter asks for books, of all things—and above all the parchments! In that request we can hear something of the great value placed on the written word at a time when most people couldn’t even read.

At a later time, Muslims would call Jews and Christians, among others, “People of the Book,”—those who have been guided by a revelation in scripture. In time, Jewish people reappropriated this title as a term of self-identification: they are people of the Torah, or the entire Hebrew Bible. And our Congregational forebears, the Puritans, also regarded themselves as a “People of the Book.”

As liberal Christians, we approach “The Book”—that is the Bible—in a thoughtful, studied way, recognizing the right of individual conscience, affirming that each one of us is guided by the Spirit of God in our often different understandings of scripture. And our understanding is never final. We believe, as John Robinson expressed it to the passengers of the Mayflower before they left for the New World: “God has yet more truth and light to break forth from the Word.”

This approach to the Bible carries over to how we understand and use all books. A book is not the final truth. What is written is not “written in stone,” but can be discussed, debated, discarded, and developed. We recognize some truth in those words of Ecclesiastes: “Of making many books there is no end.” One book begets another...and another...and another.

And yes, as Ecclesiastes tells us, “Much study is weariness of flesh”—perhaps a warning for those beginning classes in the weeks ahead. But our Congregational tradition has put a great value on reading and education and books over the centuries.

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation and American mainline Christians valued education and literacy so that people could read scripture in their own language.

The founders of that little college in Cambridge, Massachusetts, received a bequest of money and 400 volumes of books from a Congregational clergyman in England and in gratitude named their school after John Harvard. Congregationalists went on to establish public schools everywhere they went—and institutions of higher learning as well. We cannot underestimate the influence of religious institutions on the development of education in nation.

But as William Schweiker, who teaches at the University of Chicago Divinity School reminds us, “Religious people, especially some brands of Protestant Evangelicals, ...have neglected their heritage’s previous commitments to education, and this neglect has profound social and political implications.” By some estimates, two-thirds of fourth graders struggle to read—with growing social and political consequences—greater and more pernicious social stratification and a decrease in many people’s access to social goods and services.

Schweiker concludes: “The Christian, and especially Protestant, tradition...that has historically and globally been a driver of literacy and education is now, in the guise of conservative nationalism, weaponized against books, educational programs, and with that literacy itself...We see the violent, ignorant, and racist consequences of such misdirected policies in every sector of American society.”¹

Which brings us to what is happening in our state.

When Iowa public school bells start to ring in the weeks ahead, libraries in the schools will have fewer books to offer students. *Animal Farm*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Diary of Ann Frank*, and many others will be missing from the shelves. This also includes, of course, *Captain Underpants*, the delightful children’s classic that includes those who would ban *that* book because “There’s nothing funny about underpants.” (Actually, apparently there is.)

You probably know what happened:

In May of last year, Governor Reynolds signed into law a requirement that schools adopt an “age appropriate, multicultural and gender fair approach.” Now, that *sounds* good. But what it means in practice is that nearly all books depicting sex acts in any way are banned from public schools.

The law exempts religious books, which is good, I guess. Otherwise, the Bible would most certainly be banned. After all, I don't even try to read most of the Song of Solomon aloud in public worship, to say nothing of the troubling account of David and Bathsheba, or all the "knowing" that goes on in Genesis.

The Federal injunction blocking this ban from taking place was overturned a little over a week ago.

To be fair, it is important for children and youth to be given some protection against the assault of over-sexualized material that comes their way every day in so many ways. Some of the sections of some books could rightly be considered pornographic. Voicing approval of the judicial decision, Iowa Attorney General Brenna Bird, said it "ensures age-appropriate books and curriculum in school classrooms and libraries." And in some ways it seems fitting to seek age appropriate material.

But, as I said, the ban is also leading to the removal of many texts that *are appropriate* for older students. And I should say here that several of the books that have been removed from the libraries of public schools can be found in our own church library.

Here's the larger problem—and you know this—the Iowa book ban is only one in many states throughout our nation including Florida, Texas, Missouri, Utah, and Pennsylvania. And those who pass such bans are not concerned with sex alone. In other states, banned books can contain themes or instances of violence and physical abuse, characters of color or themes of race and racism, and even themes of grief and death. None of these are easy subjects in fiction or nonfiction, but there is a great danger in banning such books.

There is, indeed, a great danger in banning any book. The work of a member of this congregation was subjected to this. Many will remember that *Mother Country*, an expose of the nuclear industry in the United Kingdom and the book that Marilynne Robinson considers her best, has been banned in Britain.

I worry that the growing number of book bans in our country are an attempt to stifle the free flow of ideas. And while most of the effort toward such bans is currently coming from the Right, there are certainly books—from authors as varied as Dr. Seuss and J.K. Rowling—that people on the Left have sought to be removed from libraries and bookstores. The Left and the Right both worry that certain books will get into the wrong hands, that certain ideas might get into the wrong minds. Perhaps C.S. Lewis was onto something when he said that "A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere..." Both the Left and the Right worry about the traps of books.

All attempts to ban books go against our Christian understanding of the importance of reading and the nature of books. As I said, no single book is the final truth. Just because something is printed between two covers does not mean that it must be accepted. What is written is not "written in stone," but can be discussed, debated, discarded, and developed.

Open access to all books does put a demand, a burden, on parents and teachers—requiring them to be aware of what their children are reading, to read and discuss what they are reading with them. But this burden is light compared to the heavy weight of stifled thought and stifled discussion.

So, as faithful people, as *people of the Book*, a burden is place upon us—to continue to work with those in government to increase both literacy and the availability of literature for students of all ages.

In the musical *1776* Stephen Hopkins, a delegate to the Continental Congress from Rhode Island, tells the assembly why he wants to move forward the debate on independence, saying: “Well, in all my years I ain't never heard, seen nor smelled an issue that was so dangerous it couldn't be talked about. I'm for debating anything!”

I would paraphrase those words and say “I ain't never heard, seen nor smelled an issue that was so dangerous it couldn't be written and read about. I'm for reading anything!”

And I would say with the author of II Timothy: “Bring the books—and above all the parchments!”

¹ William Schweiker, “Banning Books, Banning Brains, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/banning-books-banning-brains>.”