



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost August 30, 2015

“Nothing More, Nothing Less”

(Deuteronomy 4:2)

Rev. David K. Groth

“You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you . . .” (Deut. 4:2).

COLLECT: O God, the source of all that is just and good, nourish in us every virtue and bring to completion every good intent that we may grow in grace and bring forth the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

A French poet once said, “A poem is never finished. Only set aside in despair.” That’s kind of the way it is with sermon writing. I write a little . . . and delete a lot. I am constantly tweaking, sanding, tearing out, building up. And it could go on and on that way. But at some point, one just has to say, “Enough! It is what it is.”

God’s Word, however, is different. It is complete. It is finished. The canon of Scripture is whole and comprehensive. It is the authoritative Word of God. It doesn’t need or welcome amendment from us.

Our text says, “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it.” This is in reference to the commandments of God, and it’s a good reminder because you and I are plenty tempted to edit the commands of God.

If you could, which commandment would you delete? The third, the one about keeping the Sabbath so you wouldn’t feel tied down on the weekends? Or how about the seventh, the one about stealing, so that could stick it to the government on your taxes? Which commandment would you take away? Are there commandments you would add?

“Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” (Deut. 12:32). For example, the command to keep the Sabbath day holy . . . that command is good. It doesn’t need to be edited. We need a day of rest just to be human again. We need a day to disengage the gears, a day when we don’t even check work emails, but simply receive life as a gift. We need a day set aside so our faith can be fed by the Word of God, our sins can be washed away by his blood, a day we can be filled again with mercy, so that we have mercy to give during the week.

The commandment to Sabbath rest was good, but man was not content to leave well enough alone. He started adding to it, so that there wasn't just one simple command but now many hundreds, defining what constituted work, what constitutes an emergency, how heavy something was before it became a burden, how many steps you could take before it constituted work. It all became grist for their legalistic mill, to the point where the Sabbath was no longer a blessed rest. It was, in fact, exhausting, something to endure. Jesus had to remind people, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27). He was a little sharper with those who were adding to the command. "Isaiah was right" Jesus said, "when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people . . . worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men" (Mk. 7:6).

"You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it." As I said before, that passage is in reference to God's commands, but there are other similar passages that expand the prohibition. John applies it to Revelation, the last book of the Bible. "These words are trustworthy and true" he writes. "If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from them God will take away his share in the tree of life" (6,18-19). Clearly, this is serious business.

The author of Proverbs applies it to *all* of Scripture, "Every word of God proves true . . . Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar" (Prov. 30:5-6). Paul does the same, "All Scripture is breathed out by God (which means inspired) and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). That is, keep Scripture complete so that you may be complete. If your Bible has holes in it, your faith will have holes in it.

This is important, because we have a tremendous incentive to go through Scripture picking and choosing those

things we like, while leaving the rest behind. It's been called "cafeteria theology" and it leads to an unbalanced diet, an unbalanced faith.

For example, consider the 6th commandment which prohibits sex outside of marriage. The temptation is to say, "Well that Law was from ancient century Jewish culture. It does not apply to our 21st century American culture."

Let's just think about that for a moment. Sex outside of marriage is a way of saying, "We want bodily oneness, but not economic oneness or legal oneness." But the Bible simply teaches we should not do with our bodies what we are unwilling to do with the rest of our lives. You should not share bodily oneness (with all its naked vulnerabilities), if you're not also willing to have economic or legal oneness. Can't you see how that's there for your protection? If you don't trust a person enough with your money, for instance, or if you wouldn't choose them as a parent of your child, you probably shouldn't be having an intimate relationship with that person. Can't you see how that's there also for the protection of children?

General rule of thumb: Just because you don't like something in Scripture does not mean that it's wrong. Similarly, just because we don't understand something in Scripture, also doesn't mean that it's wrong or useless. I don't understand medical bills as they relate to health insurance. They befuddle and enrage me and part of me thinks they are deliberately written to confound me. I know myself well enough to know that that which I don't understand, I don't like.

It would be a mistake, however, to do the same with Scripture. There's plenty in Scripture that I don't understand, but that doesn't mean it's extraneous, unimportant, or unessential. It means I don't understand it.

God's Word is sacred. We are not to change it. We are not to delete any of it or add to it. I suspect that got the attention of the scribes whose job it was to copy the Scriptures. Remember, for most of human history, books were copied by hand. There were lots of opportunities to

make mistakes, such as misspelling a name or accidentally forgetting a word. Any mistake was serious business because it was compounded every time that mistake was copied. The scribes were aware of the importance of their work. They knew they were copying the Word of God, not some recipe.

To insure top-quality they labored under ultra-strict rules and had lots of checks and balances for accuracy. For example, they would count the verses to make sure none were omitted. Then, they'd go back and count the words in the verses to make sure none were omitted or added, and then go back and count letters in the words. These and other strategies resulted in a very high degree of copying accuracy, much higher, in fact, than those who copied other ancient texts such as the Greek philosophers or playwrights of the day.

We know this in part because of the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the earliest known Old Testament manuscripts went back only about a thousand years ago. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, they went back another thousand years, to more than 2,000 years ago. So scholars would be able to compare the present day text with the text from more than 2,000 years ago. People were nervous. How many additions and deletions were made over that span and what would that say to the reliability of Scripture. The verdict? Those ancient texts from over 2,000 years ago are near perfect matches to what we already had in the modern era. It's proof that the Bible was transmitted faithfully through the centuries.

Now, it is true we have none of the original books of the Bible. We don't have a psalm written by David *in his hand*, or an original Gospel written by Matthew or an Epistle of Paul. We don't have any of the autographs. We have copies. Does that mean we cannot be sure of the truth? I don't possess the standard 36 inch yard. That's housed in the National Institute of Standards and Technology. What I have is a copy hanging in the garage. But I'm pretty sure it's

accurate. When you open the Bible, (provided it's a faithful translation of the Hebrew and Greek), you can trust that what you have in your hands is God's Word. Don't you think the one who created the heavens and the earth also has it in him to get his Word into your hands?

If you are one who worries about the accuracies of the copies, might I suggest it's far more important what you do with that Word once it hits your retina? Don't add to it or take from it. Rather, "Let that word of Christ dwell in you richly." Let it change who you are.

An Italian painter by the name of Carletti defined beauty. He said it was the summation of the parts working together in such a way that nothing needed to be added, taken away or altered. By that definition, God's Word is beautiful. All the parts work together. Nothing needs to be added or taken away.

God's Word is beautiful because without it, we would never know God's Son, our Savior. God's Word is beautiful because it creates faith in us. Romans 10: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (v. 17). God's Word is beautiful, because it is not just ink on a page but its "living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, it pierces even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow." (Heb. 4:12). God's Word is beautiful because "You have been born again . . . through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23).

One last thing: this Bible belonged to one of our members, Robert Rubin, who died last month. He lived in a Bethesda group home. He loved babies. He loved dogs. He loved pens and he loved making staff retrieve pens he would drop or toss. Robby's favorite song was "Jesus Loves Me." And one of Robby's favorite things to do was to underline words, and circle words in the Bible. He wouldn't do this with other books. It had to be the Bible.

This is one of Robby's Bibles. When I visited a couple of weeks before his death, I managed to find a page that didn't have any of Robert's ink on it, and I teased him

about it a little. He flashed a big toothy smile, and started going to town on it.

I like to think there's a link between those two favorite things. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And then opening a Bible and underlining the words, circling the words, highlighting the words as if to say "These are precious words." "These are important words." "These are beautiful words."

Of course, I don't know how much of the Bible Robby understood. I couldn't read his heart. But I do know what is in God's heart, for he has revealed it for us in his Word. And so I can tell you with a certainty that God loved Robby and loves you. On the basis of God's Word I can tell you that God died on a cross and for the whole world to forgive us our sins. And I have it on good authority (God's Holy Word) that he saves us by forgiving us and faith receives that forgiveness. And I know that God delivers that forgiveness to us in this Supper, and there's no way I would know that outside of God's Word.

It is beautiful as it is. All the parts are working together in such a way that it is whole and complete and beautiful. We need not add to it or take from it. Thanks be to God. Amen.

