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Texts: Ezekiel 3: 1-3; Revelation 10: 8-10; Romans 2: 2  
April 27, 2025

### “Eat the Document”: Thoughts on the Life of the Mind and the Journey of Faith

In the opening chapters of the book of Ezekiel, we find one of the stranger scenes in all of Scripture: the prophet is told by God to consume a scroll as if it were a meal. Ezekiel does so. He then reports that it tasted sweet to his tongue. Much later, in the book of Revelation, toward the very end of the Bible, we find a rewritten version of that scene. This time, an angel offers a “little scroll,” to the visionary seer, saying, “take it and eat.” The seer does so, and again, the parchment is sweet in his mouth, but now with a difference: it is bitter in his stomach.

In both passages, the meaning seems clear enough. The writers are ingesting Scripture itself as nourishment. They are taking the words - the images, the metaphors - inside of them, making them their own, so that the words become an extension of the self. This isn't scholarship hovering above the page, in other words, considering the text from a distance. This is someone absorbing words into their very being. Think of the opening of John's Gospel - the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John says. Ezekiel shows us the origin of that metaphor. There, words are converted to muscle, bone, sinew, organ, and limb - so that the words themselves might be lived out in practice.

I love these images. I love what they suggest about the Word, writ large (Scripture) and about words in all of their more humble connotations. I love them for what they imply about the life of faith, and the life of the mind. But so too I love them for what they suggest about our calling, as people of faith: to be stewards of the life of the mind, by becoming those who ingest both the Word and words, and in so doing, to put them to use in our lives.

I'd like to suggest this morning that these texts hint at one of the great gifts of the Congregational Church, of which FCCOL is a part. (Did you know, by the way, that if you look up Congregationalism on Wikipedia, a picture of our church is there? We are, at least according to Wikipedia, the epitome of what it means to be Congregational!). And these texts hint at one of the great gifts of the Reformed tradition, to which, again, we all belong. You and I are a part of an incredibly rich and literate lineage that values careful thought, that prizes learning and study, and that invites clergy and laypeople - all of us - to engage in a lifelong pursuit of wisdom and understanding. We are a part of a tradition that, for centuries now, has encouraged its people to consume the Book and books, to eat the document, to feast upon words.

It was that impulse that led our ancestors in faith to establish a center of learning and study in the earliest days of the New England settlement, a humble endeavor that soon became Harvard College. It

was that same spirit that led a small group of clergy to establish a similar center of learning in Old Saybrook in 1701, just across the river, an endeavor that soon came to be known as Yale College. The first minister of this congregation, Moses Noyes, served as a Trustee of that fledgling institution during its time in Old Saybrook, and his brother, James Noyes, a minister in Stonington, served as one of its founders. Down in New Jersey, the Presbyterians, who are closely related to Congregationalists in theology and history, founded Princeton University, and not long after that, the Congregationalists had a hand in founding Brown. Wherever Congregationalists have gone, and in truth, wherever earlier generations of the Reform tradition have ventured, they have established institutions of learning. They were those who feasted upon words, and upon the Word. They are our people, and that is a crucial piece of our heritage.

Of course, neither the Reform tradition, nor Christianity in general, has a corner on that set of values. Like many of you, I've followed the happenings among our Catholic brothers and sisters this week, and I've been humbled and inspired all over again by the deep intellectual and spiritual roots of that tradition, which has nourished us all. The Holy Catholic Church is a root from which we all have grown, and it is from them that the Reformed tradition received its greater impulses toward feasting on words. So too, I have been astonished and challenged over the years by the powerful traditions of learning in Judaism and in Islam both, which also take seriously, perhaps more seriously than we do, the ingesting of text.

But I have been reminded, too, that some of the most learned and wise traditions are oral in nature, not rooted in books at all. So it is among our Native American friends, and so it is among the traditions belonging to the African Diaspora. Each in our own way, we have learned to ingest the sacred truths of our traditions, to make them our own, and to preserve them in our bodies, our minds, and practices in the world.

This all amounts to a kind of charge for us here at FCCOL to be stewards of the life of the mind. We are to be those who feast upon words, and upon the Word. But it's also a way of helping to explain who we are, and why we do some of the things we do - why we insist, for instance, upon the study of Scripture, say, and why we move very slowly through the Bible in our studies, so as to let words and phrases sink in; it's why we read Dante - the greatest of all poets - out loud on Maundy Thursday, letting words sweep over and through us. Being stewards of the life of the mind is why we have a new science discussion group; it's why we travel together, and why we explore religious traditions adjacent to our own; it's why we have robust children's, youth, and adult education programs; it's why our services are constructed as they are, with references strewn throughout to poetry and theology; and it's why I preach as I do, allowing my own curiosity to roam, in hopes that you might do the same.

You see, we in the Reformed tradition, and we in Congregational churches, possess a mandate to be stewards of the life of the mind. That's not the entirety of who we are, but were we ever to forego that piece of our identity, we would do ourselves, our tradition, and perhaps even the world, a grave disservice. This sacred charge, to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, as the Apostle Paul put it, may yet have an important role to play in our time.

Years ago, I came across a famous book by a professor from Princeton, named Richard Hofstadter. It was called *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. It traced how, from the earliest days of the American experiment up through the present, there has been a severe distrust among many in the United States for traditions of learning, and the expertise that comes from years of preparation and study. That distrust actually emerged from one of the nobler impulses of the American experiment, namely the creation of an egalitarian society in which all human beings are equal. The ironic underside of that idea is that those who do have specific expertise in a given field or subject are often treated with suspicion, for that expertise seems to undermine the very notion of equality. As an example, we might think here of how Anthony Fauci was regarded during the Covid outbreak. So too, Hofstadter suggests that, from the very outset of the American experiment, there has been an emphasis upon praxis, upon doing, within the American character that has often made us reluctant learners. Often, it leads us to prioritize skills, while downplaying a wider habit of sustained reflection and study. We prize action, and we pick up the pieces later.

To that picture, we can add a religious strain that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, as Protestant evangelicals emphasized inner experience and heartfelt conversions, often at the expense of careful study. In essence, evangelicals began consuming Scripture, but only in tiny tenderized morsels. And they neglected to ingest other words, other texts. It's good to know the Bible. It's problematic if that's the only thing you know.

In the mid-1990's, a scholar of American evangelicalism, Mark Noll, published what amounted to a follow up to Hofstadter's book, called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. The scandal, Noll wrote, was that there *was* no evangelical mind. That's why evangelicals have had to adopt, often quite awkwardly, thinkers outside of their tradition - C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Dietrich Bonhoeffer - writers who wouldn't have sat comfortably within the evangelical fold, and who probably wouldn't have understood its habits.

In my early 20's, when I was trying to claw my way out of the evangelical world, it was Mark Noll's book that blasted my own doors of perception open, helping me to understand the features of that subculture that I found so frustrating - its antipathy, at least popularly, about science; its suspicion of all complex forms of reading; its careful avoidance of anything that might challenge its notions of piety. Ultimately, it was that book that chased me into the arms of the Presbyterians, and then into yours, as I sought to ingest large and small scrolls alike. Ultimately, I stand in this tradition, and in this pulpit, because of its - because of your - fundamental trust in the disciplines of learning and knowledge.

If anti-intellectualism has always been with us in American life, it has become especially pronounced right now. There are a lot of reasons for that. There is the soaring cost of a university education, putting it out of reach of many individuals and families. There is the advent of social media, which keeps us permanently glued to our screens. There is the proliferation of information, which makes it difficult to discern what is worthy of our attention, and what is not. There is the rise of AI, and an increasing reliance upon the knowledge of our machines, rather than that of our own minds. And evangelicals - the very tradition that Mark Noll diagnosed in the 1990's, have found their way into the

highest offices in the land. That has led, disastrously I would say, to the willful suppression of intellectual life that has resulted in the targeting of libraries and schools, that has sought to control universities, that has emptied out scientific laboratories and that has peddled junk science gleaned from social media, rather than peer reviewed journals. That same anti-intellectual impulse has suppressed the teaching of history, which is to say, the formation of a public memory. You see, rather than feasting upon language and words, many are now content to overturn the tables upon which such meals are served.

Several years before he died, Harold Bloom, the great scholar of literature down at Yale, noted this ascendent far right trend in America. He said, "Unless you have read and absorbed the best that can be read and absorbed, you will not think clearly or well, and democracy will not survive." Speaking of those held in thrall to such tendencies, Bloom continued, "They have no democratic vision, and I don't mean with a capital 'D,' I mean with a small 'd'... That is because they have not read deeply and widely enough."

Perhaps those words might serve as an invitation. What if, in this age of shrunken imaginations, churches such as this one reclaimed our history, and our identity, as stewards of the life of the mind? That's the motivation behind much of what we already do around here, but it may be that we need even more of it. It may be that it's time to think comprehensively about our religious education programs here, to design a multi-year plan, across all ages, that would instill in us a pattern of deep learning. In the effort to create oases of sanity in these anxious and confused times, that might help us to ground ourselves within the wider humanistic traditions that have shaped us. But then, as a means of renewing our own faith mandate to steward the life of the mind, I would also urge upon each one of us a personal practice of daily reading - of Scripture, yes, but also of things somehow adjacent to Scripture - novels, poetry, drama, essays, memoir, philosophy, music, art, theory, or theology. Even if it's only 5 or 10 minutes a day, it's something. To that end, I've printed out a 52 week reading plan, a crash course in the best that human cultures have produced, with weekly readings, as well as listening and viewing suggestions. It was created by Ted Gioia, a music historian who also happens to be one of our most alert cultural commentators right now. Not coincidentally, Gioia has been formed by a faith tradition. I've been following along with some of his recommendations on the syllabus, and I'll continue to do so for a long time, I'm sure. But I invite any of you who are intrigued to do the same.

I'll conclude with a song of praise to one who ate of the scroll, and indeed, to one who ate of many scrolls - many books, many traditions - and whose life was infused with wisdom and understanding as a result. I'm speaking, of course, about Pope Francis. He was a Jesuit, one of the most learned of the Catholic orders, which entails rigorous training in all of the arts and sciences, as well as theology. For a time, Francis was a teacher of literature in Buenos Aires, and he even befriended the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, inviting him to speak to his students. He was a lifelong reader. Then, I noticed an article this week that reported that the Pope had a collection of some 2000 CDs and records in his personal collection, with recordings of Elvis, Edith Piaf, Argentine tango, and hordes of classical recordings among them. Most of all, though, he had ingested the Scriptures, evidenced in his encyclicals and his speeches. They seeped into the very fiber of his being, which might be why he

called a church in Gaza every single night at 7 PM since the siege began, to ask the people there how they were doing - he learned that from the Scriptures. It might be why his first papal visit was to Lampedusa, and then later to Lesbos, where migrants were gathered after crossing the Mediterranean - this too, he learned from reading the Bible. It might be why he continually reached out to those on what he called “the peripheries,” and why he made it a practice to apologize for, and to atone, for past and present injustices - again, a practice he learned from Scripture. This was a man of deep and wide learning, one who made a practice of ingesting large and small books of knowledge. It was this, at least in part, that made him the voice of conscience and humanity that he was.

Take this scroll, and eat. Take this book, and feast. That call was given to two ordinary people at different times in the Bible, both of them living in exile. These were not the privileged few. They were not scholars. They were not aristocrats. They were, rather, those who felt an urgent need in their existence for the Word, and for words, and for the powerful force contained there. They were people like us, in other words. People invited to a great feast.