

May 12, Easter 7B (Psalm 1; John 17:6–19)

In meditating on the words of scripture, I discover a Word who meditates on me.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

A Toni Morrison character once ate blackberries “so good and happy that to eat them was like being in church. Just one of the berries and you felt anointed.” I remember the first time I read that line, a spark of recognition shot through me. The inverse is true for me as well. Sometimes being in church makes me so good and happy that it’s like eating perfectly ripe and sweet blackberries.

I felt such an anointing not long ago when I visited a friend’s church in Seattle. Especially during the reading of the gospel. Technically, Dan did not read the gospel: he recited it, from memory. I was transfixed. I could almost taste blackberries. I heard the text come alive in a way I’d never before experienced. As he concluded the passage and turned to his sermon, I glanced around at the other worshipers. They did not appear bored, exactly, but neither did they share my expression of surprise and amazement. After worship I confirmed my suspicion: Dan memorizes his preaching text every week.

He calls it interiorizing the Bible—not rote memorization, but prayerfully committing the holy words to heart. He invites the members of his congregation to join him in interiorizing passages of scripture; on Good Friday a dozen of his parishioners share verses of the crucifixion narrative from memory. Some of the readings are short enough that young children can participate. My first thought: I could never do that. My second thought: so that’s why Dan isn’t on Facebook.

In the time since I gathered with that congregation of believers to worship God, I felt the Spirit tugging at my sleeve. I decided to trust the Spirit, and to trust that the Spirit would help me interiorize scripture. I also decided to trust that my congregation would give me grace if I completely blanked and had to revert back to the page.

In John 17, Jesus prays for believers—those who have been given to him by the One he calls Holy Father. The ones who receive and keep his word. I think about this prayer when I “run my lines.” As unfashionable as scripture memorization has become, there is something powerful about committing sacred texts to memory. It is a receptive posture; I am keeping the words in my heart of hearts.

I’ve memorized a handful of the texts I’ve preached in the past year or so. It is always worth the time I invest. I often find myself marveling over the details: the prepositions in a Palm Sunday text, the verbs in a psalm. Very truly I tell you, I will not be interiorizing any of the final discourse in the Gospel of John. Dan tells me memory is like a muscle, and my memory muscles are in no way equipped for these run-on sentences.

Psalm 1, on the other hand, is one I’ve managed to hold onto. Just as Jesus speaks of believers receiving and keeping words in the gospel passage, the psalmist sings of happy ones who meditate on the law of the Lord. I’ve spent a good amount of time meditating on this psalm—when I first memorized it and whenever I pass by an oak that makes me start murmuring about becoming a tree planted by water. It’s an image of joy made complete, deep roots drawing nourishment from living water. It’s a blackberry bush of a psalm, with branches weighed down by ripe fruit.

Of course a shadow is cast upon those who are chaff (in the language of the psalm) or who belong to the world (in the parlance of Jesus’ prayer). When I was first memorizing Psalm 1, I recorded myself reading it, clipped my dog into her leash, and set out on a walk. For the next 30 minutes, I spoke the words of the psalm over and over as my own voice droned in my AirPods.

I did feel a bit self-conscious muttering about the ways of the wicked as I passed my neighbors on the block. During a recent Bible study, a parishioner acknowledged that the us-and-them language in the Gospel of John made her a bit squeamish. It’s the same in the psalm, with the righteous on one side and the wicked on the other. I’ve learned to receive these words as both invitational and cautionary. There is a path that leads to flourishing and belonging, and a path that leads to alienation and death. Choose well.

I want to choose well. I want to flourish, and I want to belong. Jesus prays, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine,” and he is talking about me. He is talking about us, the congregation of the righteous. When I meditate on these scriptures—when I receive and keep these words—I feel myself prayed for by the very Son of God. In

meditating on the words of scripture, I discover a Word who meditates on me. In interiorizing the prayers Jesus himself prayed, I discover I am interiorized by Jesus himself.