



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminsternpls.org](http://www.westminsternpls.org)

## *Inherited Treasure: The Word of God*

Trish Van Pilsum

Sunday, August 25, 2019

*1 Peter 1:23; Luke 12:13-21*

A scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists recently said, "If God had wanted to create the perfect place for growing corn, God would have created Iowa." Rain, sun and soil in almost perfect proportion come together in a state that, because of that finely crafted agricultural cocktail, boasts thousands of fertile farms, some as large as 15 thousand acres. And one 140-acre holdout that refused to give up during The Depression. Refused to sell out during the 80's farm crisis. Refused to consolidate during this century's transformation to the mega farm. This is the Van Pilsum family farm. This, shared among 6 siblings, is my inheritance. Or so I thought.

In the years since my dad died we have spent many hours trying to work out this inheritance. Trusts and taxes. Lawyers and land assessments. And throughout that time, all I really wanted was something of my Grandma Van Pilsum. Something that captured her essence and helped me hang on to it.

Because, for a long time, I believed that only my grandmother loved me unconditionally. That was before I got a puppy. And got to know God.

- Grandma Vera was tiny, not even five feet tall. She was quiet. She was nice. Her home was a place of safety and comfort, for me and many others.

There are so many things I wish I'd inherited from my grandma besides land:

Her patience.

Her coleslaw recipe.

Her humility.

No such luck.

But years after my dad's death...decades after my grandmother's... I unexpectedly found this:

A bible carefully covered in Christmas wrapping paper. Like a gift. God's well-worn word, loved until it was literally falling apart.

This is my inheritance.

Not just the book...but a deep, lifelong need to spend time in it. A longing that until I found grandma's bible, had been a mystery to me. Like, I always wondered why as a little girl, I hid under my covers to read a children's bible. Or, why, when I was young I prayed in times of distress although no one had ever taught me how.

In today's reading, Jesus shares a parable with a man who is obsessed with **financial** inheritance. In the parable a farmer is so determined to increase his wealth that he wants to tear down all of his out-buildings so he can build bigger ones to make room for more. This is most commonly interpreted as a warning against greed. It's a message I need to hear.

But, I see more: I see an invitation to reconsider what we value most.

What if, soaring Iowa land values aside, this bible is the real treasure? God's precious word, enduring and transforming.

I like to tell our high school youth that the bible is a long love story. About a God who loves us so much that he calls us back even after we stray and who gave us Jesus, the most beloved and loving character of all.

But love stories aren't always easy.

The last book that Christian writer, Rachel Held Evan's, penned before her death is called *Inspired, Slaying Giants Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. It is the story of her making peace with the word of God.

Held Evans grew up in the conservative church in the south. In her youth she never questioned the literal truth of the bible's stories.

That God created the world in a week, that relentless noise brought down the walls of Jericho, or that Jonah flipped the food chain when he was swallowed by a fish, that, 3 days later, spit him out like some unwanted olive pit.

It wasn't just the fable-like qualities of these unlikely tales that began to trouble Held Evans. Rather, as she matured and applied them in her widening world, she worried about the implications of what she read for women, for LGBTQ individuals, for her agnostic friends, and for the earth itself.

Theologian Marcus Borg would say that Held-Evans had moved from the first stages of belief: a kind of pre-critical innocent to the second stage: Critical Thinking. She was in her early 20's.

I've come to realize that Westminster's youth enter this critical thinking stage at birth. Or maybe it's a consequence of the way we at Westminster honor our baptismal promise by refusing to browbeat them into belief.

All I know is that by the time they reach me and the other volunteer leaders in the youth room on Sunday morning, they are ready to raise their hands and challenge, respectfully, with unanswerable questions like: “That didn’t really happen did it?” or, “haven’t scientists already proved that isn’t true?” These young people are among the smartest people I know.

My favorite part of this summer’s high school mission trip was the time I spent scraping paint from the front door of the converted warehouse in Greensboro, North Carolina, where tiny houses for the homeless are built. We all rotated through a variety of tasks...the actual construction of the walls of the houses and improving the facility where the work is done...painting, cleaning, scraping. I liked the scraping because I couldn’t really goof it up.

And because it was the only work that allowed me to spend time in conversation...or song...with the youth. One of whom posed a question that went something like this: “Given artificial intelligence, which will soon be able to mine our brains...not just our social media accounts, but our actual brains... for data, won’t the idea of an all-knowing **God** become obsolete?”

How do I hand down to kids this smart and curious my conviction that the word of God matters? That the devilish details of the stories don’t stand in the way of accepting that they have a power to transform that transcends fact checking. Marcus Borg calls the third stage of belief post critical affirmation. When the truth of religious stories *does not depend upon their factuality.*

*Rather, it means that the truth of the bible is its, "more than literal" meanings, its "more than factual" meanings.*

More than literal, more than factual. I like that. It fits what I have come to know: the word is nothing more and nothing less than the truth that God loves us, no matter what.

It's not only our youth who are thoughtfully considering the word.... Working, some of us, through the stages of belief. This winter about two dozen of us quietly started adult bible studies here on Tuesday evenings. No committee or session approval. We just did it. It was the Presbyterian version of anarchy. We were drawn together because we have all felt for some time that knowing **about** God is not the same as knowing God. And that a good way to know God is through the word.

There were enough of us to divide into two small groups. There is room for more. We read the word. Sometimes it's hard. But we take our time and we work it out together.

There have been moments during these Tuesday evenings when I have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit so profoundly that it has brought me to tears. We pray for each other, care for each other, even lay hands on one another, heal each other. We have become a family of faith. To me, it feels like home. Safe and comforting. Like Grandma's.

I believe there is a faith family for everyone here. If there were people poking and prodding the word in every pocket of this place, every week, imagine the opportunity for transformation. If God's word is a treasure, it is not to be stored up and set aside as the farmer in Jesus' parable wanted to do. The word is a treasure to be shared.

I realize now my grandma was the word, in human form. Her farm stayed small because she and my grandfather, unlike the foolish man in the parable, believed that you never take more than you need. Grandma Vera left food on the back steps for homeless people who rode the rails that passed just behind her house. She fed the farm hands in her dining room, with her family. White tablecloth and her best silver. Every day. She loved everyone, no matter what.

But she never talked to me about God or Jesus. She never told me the stories she spent so much time reading. I wish she had. I suspect she deferred to my grandpa, who had a falling out with the church and fell out of love with the word. He could be ferocious, and a bit set in his ways. Now there are a couple of traits I **did** inherit.

But Grandma did save her precious bible for one of us to find. I'm amazed and grateful to God that I am the one who found it. I like to think Grandma knew I would. I am quite sure she hoped I would find God.

In the epilogue of her last book, Rachel Held Evans looks forward to passing along the bible's stories ... even the strange and unbelievable ones ... to her own baby boy. When she died, at the age of 37 following a massive infection, her son was just three years old. Her second child was just an infant. But they will know, because of her writing, that she loved, questioned, then loved again the word of God. This is their inheritance.

By the time I'd inherited my grandmother's bible, I had a good study bible. My own version of God's well-worn word. Loved until it's literally falling apart.

I do not hide it away. I take it into the youth room on Sunday, so they can see that this is a living, breathing book that speaks to me and that I share with them in gratitude to God.

I hope that, one day, one of my children or grandchildren will want it. This book, 1/6<sup>th</sup> of a tiny Iowa farm, and my faith in God will be **their** inheritance.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.