

Bookends brace up one of the things I love most in the world—books—but is also the way bookends *show off* a set of books that pleases me. Using a set of nice, modest bookshelves is like *framing* a piece of art. The enclosure effect magnifies what's interesting in the picture. It's not just bookshelves that have that effect. Most of us appreciate things or events that mark beginnings and endings or the past and the present: birthdays, anniversaries, holidays. Morbid soul that I am, I even find a certain amount of balance in obituaries that list *both* the date of birth and day of passing of one of my fellow mortals. We like these events when we can see the *symmetry* to them—for example, a golden anniversary or the bicentennial celebration of statehood. Again, that's why bookends are so perfect. These bookends *contain* texts, but don't *trap them*. There is a comfort in finiteness; there is a balance.

That's how I read these two scriptures from Old Testament Micah and New Testament Mathew. They serve as *bookends* to each other. In Micah, God lays down the law in solid Old Testament language. In Mathew the law is phrased more simply and more *inclusively*. Both readings share an interesting *similarity*, and both readings are *redolent* with the themes laid out in what Christ called the Greatest Commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” By the way, this scripture is found in all the gospels. Thus, it's an *inclusive* doctrine, spanning the four Gospels and inclusive to all humanity, not just a “chosen people.”

As most of us know, making things simple to *understand* doesn't always make them simple to *do*. Take “love your enemies.” Doesn't take a genius to unpack that. But it can take a saint to make it real. And if you noticed, simple saintliness (even civility) was in short supply this election cycle. That's true of the general public, but it also seemed true of the Christian community—and we should be one community—as we, left and right alike—failed to *love* one another *first* before *diving* into our *divisions*.

Let's look at the end of the Micah passage, starting about verse 5:

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Next, the reading from Matthew 9:13: “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

The Old Testament reading is a bit reactionary to common practices of that time, all these holy barbeques that get eaten by no one, and all that sacramental waste of a valuable commodity—even today olive oil ain't cheap. The sacrificing of children—I'm even going to go there. Glad the Israelites got that notion out of their system. Micah then tells the Israelites to strip it down to the essentials: be fair, be generous of heart, and walk with God. Jesus makes it even more simple: again, skip the sacrifices and focus on being *merciful*. *Being merciful* here is not just something one does to *please* God; it's something we are to do to *find kinship* with the essence of God. Again, to paraphrase the greatest commandment: Love God, and love other people with the depth of affection—and devotion—that you would direct to God.

I'm not going to spend a ton of time unpacking this. Some Christians, Christians like the members of this congregation, *get* this. We put our money with our faith it even if our pockets aren't as deep as some folks'. Our hymns and prayers are structured by a love of the Almighty, mysterious as She is. We get it: Christianity ain't something you *are*; it's got to also be something you *do*!

Back to the *bookends* metaphor. This love of God and fellow humans is *entrenched* in the Old Testament over and over. It's just that it gets clouded, at least for me, by so many stories of wars and the lineage of kings, and the long lists of *do's* and *don'ts*. So, even if the scriptures bookend each other, there is an evolution in *The Word* as it fills in the metaphorical volumes in between. The volumes of the bible get a little thinner towards the New Testament end of the bookends, and maybe a littler easier to read. But that doesn't mean the directions get *easier* to *follow*. In fact, it might be a lot easier if our God just took sacrifices as payment for Her love and guidance. After all, *livestock* are easy to come by, and we Iowans might get way with substituting *corn oil* for *olive oil*. As for human sacrifice, there are some citizens in the United States who are *fine with that*, although such unintended "sacrifice" takes the form of *neglect* and a *blind eye* to the suffering of others; only by turning their eyes *away* can such folks ignore the paramount importance of mercy.

Me? I'd much rather go meet the Maker if I were complicit with folks who might break *man's* laws, especially if those laws are something *arbitrary* like current immigration or laws that deny a young woman access to birth control or other medical assistance. I have a confession. As a teacher, I did something that could have gotten me fired back in the 1980's. A high school teacher should generally stay out of issues revolving around ones students' reproductive issues, unless that person has been raped or so on. Then one is to be *only* a reporter and step aside to let those trained in such things take over. However, one young woman—one of my best journalism students and newspaper reporters as well as my family's occasional babysitter—told my wife, now my x-wife—that she was afraid she was pregnant, and she wanted to know for sure. Let's call this young woman Renee, which is not her real name. At that time, at least in Nebraska, pregnancy tests were highly regulated. My spouse and I talked about Rachel's dilemma and decided to help her out. My spouse bought a pregnancy test in our small town where everyone knew everyone (I'd bet the pharmacist whom we both knew went home that night to tell his spouse that Cheryl Rose, Steve Rose's wife, might be "in a family way" again.) We gave the test to Renee. Later, she called Cheryl, crying and laughing. The test was negative. Did Cheryl and I break man's law? Yes. But if you put the decision that Cheryl and I made in between the bookends of the scriptures—God's laws—that we've just read, you'd find it passes muster.

And if you are curious to know how things turned out, Renee grew up fine; Renee turned out super! She produced two wonderful children at a time when she *chose*. She found a wonderful career as an editor of school textbooks and other books, primarily for children. She edited and contributed to a magazine called *Greenwoman*, which is dedicated to gardening and ecology. As you might have guessed, Renee and I remain close to this day. We talk occasionally, text a bit, and so on. In fact, she's kind of like one of my own kids. She was supposed to call me this week, and forgot. And like my kids, she rescheduled. And like I do with my kids a lot today, I am going to ask her for some advice on something she knows *more* about than I—publishing for juvenile readers. There is an old saying: "It's poor teacher whose students do not surpass him." Rachel makes me look like a good teacher.

Earlier this year, attorney general Jeff Sessions (now “X” attorney general because he will not protect our President from prosecution) cited part of Romans 13, proclaiming that Christians are obliged to “obey all earthly authorities.” His point was that it was “unchristian” to support the cause of undocumented Americans and American wana-be’s. But Sessions didn’t acknowledge the Greatest Commandment at all. To play with the *bookends* metaphor again, we have secular law at one end and theological precepts on the other. In this case, one needs to recognize the *lesser bookend*--laws developed by humans, especially those which are primarily *regulatory*. As a slew of theologians quickly pointed out to Sessions—the two don’t always match! Quite simply, you *can’t always render* onto Caesar what is Caesar’s without *shortchanging God*. Regardless of ones politics, I would hope that all sincere Christians (and Jews and Muslims and Sikhs and Buddhists and so on) *embrace* the precept that *mercy* is clearly a dominant axiom held by almost all the faith community. That means we should treat our brothers and sisters (and certainly their kids!) as equal. So, should we *protect ourselves* from folks we let inside our borders? I suppose so, that being a worldly, practical thing to do. But should we exhaust all means (including sharing some of our own wealth, time, comfort and even land) to help those more unfortunate? That’s clearly the theological trump card in this game.

Bookends. Our lives seem to be almost defined by their existence: work and play, communion and autonomy, gathering up stones and casting away stones—I could go on and on.

Last Sunday, I was walking from my truck to this little room (slightly late, as usual), I observed a gorgeous set of “bookends.” Larry Pulse and his grandsons Josh and Justin Patton were walking up the sidewalk to my east. Bringing up the rear was Larry--moving slow and steadily. Several yards ahead of him were the boys, energetic, bouncing like tennis balls, springing along, then trotting back a few yards toward Larry, then bounding ahead again. The boys at one end and Larry at the other, they were living bookends. They were united by family ties, they were bound by a shared goal of making it to church. Josh would occasionally scramble back about half the way to his Grandpa to yell something important, although I don’t think Larry could hear him well—I couldn’t. Larry would smile at the boys as he followed along, handling his cane with a style and aplomb I’ll never master. What you *don’t see* are *all the memories* those guys share, but if you looked real hard, with your eyes plugged into *your heart* instead of your *head*, you might get a glimpse. Laughter and meals, games and roughhousing, maybe even a bit of shared sadness there—you could see it all in these human bookends. I watched them, perhaps a bit too long, and something got into my eyes—something suspiciously like tears?

Now you know that I let an opportunity to preach pass by without alluding to one of the great American singer-poets of my age. “Bookends” is that song. How can we not talk about the *troubadour* Paul Simon, and one of the most haunting of the songs that he and Art Garfunkel ever put out? To share some of the lyrics:

Old friends	On the high shoes
Old friends	Of the old friends
Sit on their park bench	
Like bookends	Old friends
A newspaper blown through the grass	Winter companions
Falls on the round toes	The old men
	Lost in their overcoats

Waiting for the sunset
 The sounds of the city
 Sifting through trees
 Settle like dust
 On the shoulders
 Of the old friends

Can you imagine us
 Years from today
 Sharing a park bench quietly?
 How terribly strange
 To be seventy.

~~Old friends
 Memory brushes the same years
 Silently sharing the same fear~~

Time it was,
 And what a time it was
 It was . . .
 A time of innocence
 A time of confidences

Long ago . . . it must be . . .
 I have a photograph
 Preserve your memories
 They're all that's left you

So, these two old guys are bookends. I imagine them dressed the same, even scrunched over at the waist the same way, shoulders rolled inward around their chests to stay warm on that cold fall day. And this song provides bookends to my life. I remember listening to this album (*the third 33 rpm I ever bought*) as a teen and trying to imagine what it would mean to be *that old*, to *sit still* long enough that a wind-blown newspaper might have time to find purchase on my *restless* feet. As I now approach three score and ten, those two old guys remind me of one of my best and most long-term friends on the planet, Mark Hardy. Mark and I met at a summer construction job where we both worked as bricktenders. We became the closest of college buddies, sharing the best and worst of that experience in those weird times when Richard Nixon seemed like the penultimate evil. One activity I remember well: Mark and I would come home from classes or work in the spring and summer of 1974 to gather on my coach, and consume ice cream, Marlboros and beer, (Yah, college boys in the 1970's) and jeer at Nixon's attorneys and witnesses.

By total coincidence, we ended up teaching in the same small high school in Hershey, Nebraska a few years after we graduated, during the 1979—80 school year. We later took separate paths in the field of education, but both met our goals, Mark as a school superintendent and I as a college professor. After that we never lived near each other, but we still *connect* with each other by phone or computer at least monthly, and visit each other every ten years or so. It was Mark who knew the women of my past relationships, and, after meeting Mary the first time, he told me "Don't blow this one, Rose."

As the scriptures we've read serve as bookends to each other, so do the events and people in our lives. Larry and the boys, Mark and I, Renee and I, as just a couple of examples; You see bookends don't just stand at either end of a set of books or whatever. They also serve to define the contents *in between* them and *connect* those contents. So it is with the people in our lives. Through the grace of God, we are able to meet such people, and through the grace of God we are able to connect. And thanks to a gracious God, we have solid marching orders to do so.

Maybe this is the greatest gift of a gracious God: to connect us humans as children of God. To help us find our purpose: to comfort and nurture our brethren, but also to push and define each other when that need arises.

It might be “terribly strange to be seventy,” but it’s also amazingly wonderful to have walked this planet that long. Simon ends his song with the line, “Preserve your memories. That’s all that’s left you.” He’s got it **part** right. Our memories are the *richness of our lives* on this earth. I advise you to look through your stockpile of memories the next time you want to get out your phone. Which activity is more *fulfilling*, scrolling Facebook or checking your email compared remembering your daughter’s *first* step, your lover’s *first* kiss? And I’d also suggest that Paul Simon is selling us short. We’ve got more life to live, no matter our age at this minute, and we’re blessed to live that life much more richly if we attend to God. A *discerning* faith helps illuminate ones path, a *deliberate* faith points a finger at the best way to go, a *resilient* faith can make a crappy day a reflective one. Most importantly a faith helps you know what a *bookend* you are, you who are holding together what is precious, sacred and beautiful, but you are not alone, thank God. You have the help of some other folks of all faiths and goodwill, who are bookends also.

Benediction.

Let us go then as bookends, holding up your end of the deal; let us go then as bookends, needing one each other to get the job done.