

*The Importance of the Little Black Box*  
Dr. Bob Hawkins

This past week I was reminded of the importance of the little black box which quietly stands in our home office. The computer's modem suddenly stopped working altogether. We had noticed some odd, interrupted signals on the television and occasional blips on the internet, but until the tiny lights on the modem went whacky and then went out, I didn't include it on the list of usual suspects. Our modem is a modest device, the typical matte black box with a discrete set of lights which flash rhythmically before settling into a quiet presence. Because the modem ceased functioning, so did the router which serves as the digital messenger service for all our gadgets. The wi-fi television, phone functions, I-pad and tablet, a Kindle Paperwhite ®, and both computers went on a sudden strike when I pulled the plug on the modem, assuming it to have passed over into cyberspace heaven. Obviously, the modem had been a significant but silent player. Fortunately, it was only a faulty power cord causing the chaos. A new cord has brought back the modem's twinkle of little lights.

Modems are major participants in this digital, internet-imbued life so many of us depend upon. The internet cable brings a cyber-load of raw data to our homes and offices 24/7. It is the modem which interprets and transforms the data into accessible information, communication, entertainment, and no end of irritation given what can show up uninvited on the television, computer screen, or lurking in the computer's directories. Life itself brings a glut of raw data into our personal space, uninterpreted and thus often puzzling, threatening, aggravating, and perpetually distracting. To be perfectly honest, the life of faith itself offers up to us as much that is unfiltered and bewildering, presented in the Bible, the Church and its teachings, and our local congregation. Whether it is life in general or life as a disciple of Jesus, we desperately need some type of modem to sort and present in understandable ways the challenges we confront.

Sunday School has become a spiritual modem for me and hopefully for others attending on Sundays at 9:00 AM. Together we have been looking and listening to the Sunday gospel readings as well as considering some things we often haven't taken the time to do. Do we ask ourselves as we read and hear scripture: This seems very important to me! I don't quite understand this word or phrase. What IS Jesus saying in that parable? Although we likely have Psalm 23 or John 3:16 down cold, do we hear other passages of scripture which would be appropriate for any of us to remember, even memorize? Does some of what we hear suggest a course of action for ME as Jesus' disciple? Does what we hear suggest a viable and faithful course of action for US as a congregation? Whom can we ask? Who will explain? Whether we attend Sunday School or not, these are important AND appropriate observations and questions to pose as God's people. We wrestle with the Good Book because 1) it IS good; 2) God's Word speaks differently to each of us as the Spirit guides, offering insights and wisdom, indeed the message of eternal life. Personally, and with a gathering of God's people, we can explore and share insights, able also to accept clarification or steering in better directions because folks have first taken the time to listen to us.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, drafter of the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, included a wondrous prayer addressing this dynamic of corporate study and reflection. It is included in the ELW on page 72, "Grace to receive the word":

*Blessed Lord God, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

Spiritual modems work by providing the opportunity and whatever else is needed for us individually and as a community of faith to “hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” scripture AND life, not only the easy parts and old favorites, but the challenging and puzzling parts as well. For several weeks the Sunday School class has been doing just this with several phrases of the Lord’s Prayer. We’ve discovered the surprising way the Lord’s prayer is presented in Matthew’s and Luke’s versions. Neither is quite the polished, liturgical text we pray each week but a group of phrases about God and human need. The Lord’s prayer is likely as much a WAY to pray as a TEXT to recite. “Daily” bread probably means far more than being insured a regular meat-and-three every day. “Lead us not into temptation...” does, in fact, sound a bit odd when “...heard, read, marked, learned, and digested.” Does God deliberately lead us down a proverbial garden path of pitfalls? Some do fear that God sets out to trap the unsuspecting. Thankfully, scripture dispels such uninterpreted “raw data” misperceptions. Holy conversation is a significant help for better understanding. The class also concluded that the far more important issue is the relationship of “temptation” – those things which derail our good intentions and “evil” – whatever presents serious, even mortal, threat to our well-being as God’s people. God does not willingly burden us but provides what we need to withstand both temptation and evil [Lamentations 3:33]. When we gather, the Spirit guides our minds and hearts first to listen – to scripture, to the Spirit, and to each other – so that we then can respond with more insight than we first brought to the table. Happily, we then can go forth as Jesus’ living modems, helping relay the Good News of God to those we encounter, friends, family, and strangers alike.