

“The Proof Is In The Pudding”

13th Sunday After Pentecost
September 8, 2019

I sometimes wish that we read less Scripture in the Anglican liturgy. I understand how important it is for us to be biblically literate -- to understand the Bible's stories, its proverbs and poetry and perspectives on life -- as well as its limitations: the ways in which the biblical text inevitably gets coloured by the (more or less hidden) personal, political, and cultural agendas of its human writers and editors. Agendas that are not always holy or healthy. But the Sunday liturgy is really not the place to learn all of these things. It can't be. Our focus is on the Eucharist, not on Bible study, and I very much agree with that. But we do **hear** a great deal of Scripture being read in the liturgy.

And I sometimes struggle during the readings, because how the texts may, or may not, relate to our lives is often unclear. And because, *sometimes*, there are "**thorns**" in the texts -- things that are not just "challenging," or hard for our egos to hear -- but that are actually quite toxic and harmful -- things that are often attributed to God, but that actually come from the fallible minds of the writers and editors of the texts. We don't "censure" such texts out of our Lectionary. We don't pretend that the Scriptures are all "love and light." We want the full story, so we listen to them all.

But I confess -- that when I hear a "thorny" text being read out in the liturgy, I tend to cringe. Because I know that this is not **meant** to be a Bible study, where we would explore the texts more fully and "detoxify" any "thorns" they might contain with sound interpretations. And so, I worry that one of these "thorns" in the texts might get lodged in someone's mind, and perhaps leave them worse off than when they came. So if you see me "twitching" up here during some of the readings, that might be what's going on.

But I don't really think that the solution is to read fewer Scriptures on Sundays. So how can we handle this potential problem I've been describing?

I would like to offer you a simple principle for making sound biblical interpretations. It can help us listen to the Scriptures more discerningly. And, as needed, it can serve as a kind of "first aid kit," when we get pricked by something "thorny" in the readings.

It is an old principle. The shortest wording of it comes from St. Augustine, in the 5th Century. It goes like this: "*Any interpretation of Scripture that does not increase your love of God and neighbour is a wrong interpretation.*" And the other side of this is also true: *Any interpretation of Scripture that increases your love of God and neighbour is a right interpretation.* In other words, **the proof is in the pudding!**

It's quite a wise and helpful principle:

- Notice how it is "evidence-based." You can't really **know** if an interpretation is right or wrong, apart from its practical effects on your capacity to love.
- And notice that it is not **just** about your love of others, or **just** about your love of God, but about both, working together at the same time.
- It is also a Christ-centered principle: it is rooted in Jesus' core understanding of the Scriptures as a whole, and how that core understanding manifests practically in the quality of his love.
- And, a nice bonus is that it's a principle that is fairly easy to remember.

As I said earlier, sermons in our tradition should not be full-blown Bible studies. They're not meant to be. But let's "bend" that rule **just a tiny bit** this morning, and see how this simple principle might help us to soundly interpret today's readings.

Our first reading from Deuteronomy (30:15-20), and our Psalm (# 1), share a core Jewish theme. The theme of "The Two Ways" -- the way that leads to life, and the way that leads to death. And, in both of these texts, the counsel is very clear: **choose life!** As always, there are many possible interpretations of these texts, but let me share two with you.

One interpretation is that "the way that leads to life" is about acquiring **spiritual virtues** -- like faith, love, justice, and so on; while "the way that leads to death" is about acquiring **spiritual vices** -- like faithlessness, lovelessness, injustice, and so on. In this interpretation, then, the Two Ways are "*the way humans become humane*" and "*the way humans become inhumane.*" And where these different ways lead (whether to "life" or to "death"), this interpretation understands in a spiritual, not a literal, sense. In this spiritual sense, they don't refer to our physical life or death on earth; nor to a far away destiny after this life is over; but rather to the **spiritual quality of our lives** -- how life-giving or life-draining they are -- in the here-and-now of this world. For this is what *spiritual virtues do* -- they empower us to flourish and help those we encounter do the same; while *spiritual vices*, on the other hand, drain the life right out of us, and diminish the lives of those who are affected by our actions.

A second, more popular, interpretation of the Two Ways goes something like this: **"There are good people and bad people in this world. The good ones deserve to be rewarded, and the bad ones deserve to be punished, both in this life and the next."** It's not hard to see how this interpretation arises. God is frequently portrayed in the Scriptures as cursing, harming, and even killing those who go against him -- but as *blessing* and *helping* those who do what he says. Unlike the first interpretation, this one takes that at face value. It does not consider that the Scriptures were written and edited in a very violent, tribal, kill-or-be-killed, world. A world where the "**winners**" were those who were the most feared, because they secured their power the most

ruthlessly; and the “losers” were those who, if not killed off by the “winners,” suffered in slavery to them. Although in many places the Scriptures denounce this vicious way of life, the “voice” of God in the ancient tribal world was still often “heard” as the voice of a violent warrior – the fiercest one of all. And this violent voice was frequently put into the mouth of God by the writers and editors of the scriptures. Divine truths were naturally coloured by the culture that received them, just as they are today. It's tragic, we may say, but it's the way it is. **All** of our minds are vulnerable and fallible in this way.

From the way I've presented these two interpretations, it's probably pretty clear that I accept the first one and reject the second. There are many reasons why I do. Some are technical reasons that have to do with biblical studies. But, in the end, I find that I always come back to the simple principle of St. Augustine. The real proof is in the pudding. I find that when I reflect on the **first** interpretation, it increases my love of God and my love of others in this world – a Jesus kind of love -- that is just and compassionate. On the other hand, when I reflect on the **second** interpretation, it instills in me a fear, a perception of God and others as harmful and unsafe. It diminishes my trust and leaves me wanting distance from both God and my fellow human beings. And that is mostly why I accept the first, and reject the second. You may see it differently. You may have come to another interpretation. And that is a good thing. If we openly converse about it, we can both grow in our understanding. Both of our minds can change for the better.

Now let's take a look at our second reading, from the letter of St. Paul to Philemon. It's an interesting letter. It goes far in encouraging a more Christian understanding of slavery, although I would say “not far enough.” We know from Paul's writings that, in a spiritual sense, he understood that **there are no slaves in Christ** (Galatians 3:28.) But... in the physical and social sense... it was inconceivable for Paul to not have slaves at all. He believed that, for some, being a slave was their divine calling – a very “thorny” view for me – one that Paul inherited mostly from the Greeks and Romans. And so again, this interpretation of slavery – which is right there in the biblical text – has much to do with the “cultural blinders” in the mind of its author. We might say: “*But Paul is a saint! He should have known better!*” Perhaps. But Christ does not save us from our vulnerability and fallibility, even though we often wish he would. And St. Paul is no less vulnerable and fallible than the rest of us. That's not why we consider him a saint.

We are fortunate that, over time, our own culture has become a bit wiser in this area. We now find it odd that a “Christian approach” to slavery would only encourage a slave owner to treat his slaves better, rather than to stop enslaving them altogether.

When I reflect on Paul's interpretation here, I have to conclude that, *if I were to make it my own*, it would greatly diminish my love of God and my neighbors. If the love of God endorses that **some** of his children are meant to be the slaves of his **other** children, that is not a love that inspires my trust and desire to draw near. Nor is it a love that

would lead me to treat my neighbor as I want to be treated – for I wouldn't want to be treated as a slave myself. So I have to reject Paul's interpretation, even though it's right there in the Bible, in black and white.

There is another, more subtle, little “thorn” in this text. Notice how Paul **relates** to Philemon in the letter. He tells Philemon that any “debt” he has accrued, any “wrong” he has suffered from his former slave's escaping, should be charged to Paul's own account. In other words, Philemon is not to make his slave “pay for it”, as slave owners typically did. It's all very compassionate and generous and respectful, *until* Paul gets to the part in the letter where he recognizes that Philemon may well not want to do what he is asking. At that point, Paul writes, *“I'm not even going to mention that you owe me your very life – so I'm sure you'll do even more than I ask.”*

Ouch!!!! Have you ever been in that sort of conversation? It's a very common form of persuasion, even in our day. “You owe me!” – It's a way of assuring that people will do what we want them to without question, whether they like it or not. I think my mother told me something along those lines on a few occasions. And, although I love my mother, and even St. Paul, I think that persuasion of this kind is actually a cheap shot. It's designed to instill a kind of guilt that inwardly pushes the person to do our bidding. So when I read this part of the text, I have to ask myself: *“Is this how God relates to me? And, if he did, would that increase my love for him? Is this how I am to relate to others? And if I did, would that increase my love for them?”* To all of these questions, I would have to answer “no.” So my interpretation of this part of the text is that there is nothing divine in it. It reflects a flaw in Paul's way of relating to his disciples. One that I will forgive him for – but not one I want to imitate, even though it's written in the Bible.

And lastly, our gospel text. Jesus tells us that we have to “hate” our father and mother, our spouse and our children, our brothers and sisters, and even life itself. Indeed, if we do not give up all we possess, we aren't really his disciples, and we can't be. **What on earth does he mean? How are we to interpret this?**

If we interpret it in a literal sense, then, to follow Jesus, we have to disown our families, become homeless, and lose our desire to live. Imagine if we put a message like that on our welcome sign out front. I think passersby would *probably not* see this as a place where their love of God and others could grow, but rather as a loveless place they'd rather not be. So would we. I think we can conclude that this literal sense of the gospel text is a wrong interpretation. But what might a right one be?

We get help with this from our forebears, the ancient Fathers and Mothers of the Church. As they understood it, all of creation is rooted in the Love that continually flows between the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the deepest, spiritual sense, our true family of origin is the Holy Trinity. The genuine love that we receive from our parents and siblings and spouses and children – *when we **do** receive that love from them* – flows from the Divine Love that is inspiring them.

But when we do not yet perceive this, we tend to become attached to them as though they were God, and hold onto them very, very tightly. It is a love that is not yet mature.

As we grow to understand our loved ones more deeply, to see the source of their love in the Love of God -- we no longer hold onto them so tightly. We gladly receive the love they offer us, we cherish it, and are grateful for it as a precious gift from God.... But we no longer imagine that we somehow “possess” them. We come to see that all we really possess is the divine love that they have helped us to experience. And that is the ultimate possession, the pearl of great price. A love that is eternal, that cannot slip through our fingers, or decay, or be lost. And this frees our hearts to hold the ones we love more lightly.

Jesus liked to use *hyperbole* – that **over-the-top exaggeration** which “shakes up” our ordinary ways of thinking. This is what he is doing in this text. He is saying that this way of holding our loved ones lightly ... is like “hating” compared to the tighter, more immature kinds of attachments that we sometimes call “love.” For there is a certain “distance” in it, a relinquishing of “ownership,” a giving of space. Loving in this deeper, lighter way is not an easy thing to learn. It requires a lot of “letting go” and “surrendering.” The way we learn it is the way of the Cross, the way of discipleship, the way that leads us to become more fully humane.

I've made you work hard this morning. I hope you will forgive me for that. And I hope that you will take this little principle from St. Augustine home with you, and that you will bring it back with you to church on Sundays. Whenever you are reading the Scriptures or hearing them read, don't take everything that's there at face value. Instead, **interpret** what is there in a way that helps you become more genuinely like Christ, that helps you grow in the love of God and all of God's children.

Amen.

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