

Scripture-Reading Disciples: Acts 17:10-13, 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Norwalk Christian Church, July 5, 2015, Year B, Proper 9, 6th Sunday after Pentecost, Disciples Together Series

A few quotes from history.

16th Century: *"People gave ear to an upstart astrologer [Galileo] who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon. This fool...wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth."* - Martin Luther.

1637: *"Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents...We have sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings."* - Captain John Underhill, defending the Puritans decimation of the Pequot tribe.

1846: *"The evidence that there were both slaves and masters of slaves in churches founded and directed by the apostles, cannot be got rid of without resorting to methods of interpretation that will get rid of everything."* - Rev. Leonard Bacon, in defense of American slavery.

1869: *"The Bible is the revealed will of God, and it declares the God-given sphere of woman.... Who demands the ballot for woman? They are not the lovers of God, nor are they believers in Christ...."* - Rev. Justin Dewey Fulton speaking against a woman's right to vote.

1960: *"Wherever we have the races mixed up in large numbers, we have trouble.... These religious liberals are the worst infidels in many ways in the country... They do not believe the Bible any longer...They have gone over to modernism...Every good, substantial, Bible-believing, intelligent orthodox Christian can read what the Word of God says and know that what is happening in the South now is not of God."*
- Bob Jones Sr., founder of the "Christian" school Bob Jones University in South Carolina, declaring Segregation is Scriptural.

Well, good morning! That's a heavy way to begin a sermon. I give credit to the Christian author [Rachel Held Evans who compiled these quotes on her blog](#). They may be heavy, but they are a good introduction to a sermon on "Scripture-reading Disciples". They remind us that were we Christians to chose a relationship status on Facebook between us and scripture, we'd have to chose "It's complicated."

I love the Bible. I was raised on the Bible. I grew up memorizing scripture. I have chosen a career, that has as its primary vocation, reading and interpreting scripture. The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me.

Yet, I have been accused of throwing the Bible out because of the way I believe. I remember when I was a Freshman in College at a Christian school in Montgomery,

Alabama. I was taking a class on the book of Acts, a book which, my professor suggested, gave us a blueprint for how the church should believe and act.

However, through my own study of scripture, I disagreed with his conclusion, and on my final paper, I wrote on the verse we read together last week. The text from Acts 2, which showed that the first Church shared everything they had in common, breaking bread together daily, and making sure no one had any need. I suggested in my paper that God was most concerned with how this church treated one another, not what they believed, and if we were to learn anything from this first century church, it was that we should do the same, making sure no one in our community was in need.

I have never, in all my life, received a school paper with so much red ink on it. I got an A, but my professor argued with me in red pen throughout, accusing me of perverting the Bible, and, when handing me back my paper on the final day of class, said to me, shaking his head, “Travis, I just don’t know what happened to you.”

Here I was, taking the Bible seriously, yet to this professor, I was throwing it out. Let me say, again, I love the Bible. It’s the book for me. But, the more I read the Bible, the more complicated it is to me.

“The Bible clearly says” is something I can’t say anymore.

In the story from Acts 17, we see the struggle that the Church has had since the beginning with scripture. When Paul and Silas takes the message of the Gospel to the people of Berea, they welcome the message, and search the scriptures to see if what Paul was saying was true. They took the message seriously, and their scriptures seriously.

But when the people from Thessalonica heard that Paul was preaching in Beroea, too, they were offended. The Bereans listen, study and believe. And the Thessalonians, themselves people devoted to scripture, cause a ruckus because they can’t believe that God would welcome people like those Bereans. What is it about this book that causes so many divisions?

We members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have an interesting relationship with the Bible. We were born as a church during a time of growing division among Christians. As Creeds and lines of division on American soil were increasing, our founders, Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell had enough.

So they came up with this radical idea: what if we just all read the Bible, and just the Bible, than Christians would all agree and be united. They had two slogans: 1) Let us speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent; and 2) In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.

I love their optimism. They truly believed that their call to returning to the Bible would bring about the unity of all Christians. The problem is, where one group wanted to be silent, the other spoke, and what one thought was nonessential, the other saw essential.

This back-to-the-Bible unity later divided, essentially, over two things: one, slavery...the lines were clearly drawn in the aftermath of the Civil War between Disciples of Christ in the north and Churches of Christ in the South, with many slaveholders on both sides using scripture to justify their ownership of another human-being.

But this Back to the Bible unity movement also divided over how to read the Bible. Many began advocating for scripture to be read with, what is called, an “Historical-Critical Reading”, as they took into account that the Bible is a book birthed from a particular culture and as readers of scripture, we must read on several levels, as we pay attention to this culture and context, understanding that these texts were written in a particular time, by a particular people, with particular understandings of the world and of God.

Some thought that the historical-critical reading was unbiblical. To suggest that this text we call “Holy” was compiled over time, through multiple authors and edits and cultural complexities and political baggage, this, for many, makes the Bible seem, well, less Holy. And so, our Back-to-the-Bible Unity movement fractured over how to read the Bible.

Some of you have been engaged in a study on Monday nights, led by Kate Raun, called “Making Sense of the Bible”. You may not have known it, but you have been doing a historical-critical analysis of scripture. A few sessions ago, you were asked to compare the four gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection...realizing that, while they tell the same story, they differ from, and at times contradict, one another on the details. This may have left you feeling like Alice, as you fall down the rabbit hole to a new world.

(And if you want to learn more, show up tomorrow, 7pm. It’s not too late to join!)

Today, we live in a time when Christians seem to be as divided as ever over scripture. I’ve seen it play out on Facebook in recent weeks in debates over sexuality, which have intensified in recent days after equal marriage has become the law of our country.

I’ve shared with you before, how it was my experience AND my serious reading of scripture has led me to to welcome and affirm those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, a conclusion that many of you have come to as well. And some of you have shared with me how your experience and your serious reading of scripture has led you to take the opposite position. And some of you have shared with me how you’re not sure what you believe, but want to study scripture and learn more.

(By the way, later this year, I hope to have a Bible study around some of these issues, and if that’s something you’d be interested in being a part of, let me know.)

But here we are, in the midst of this disagreement, and we still love each other, and are still Disciples together, and say, sincerely, that All Are Welcome, and All Means All.

We just read from 2 Timothy that scripture is inspired by God, but what does inspiration mean? Does it mean every word, on every page, is a dictated word from God, a command or example to be followed? Yet, here in this book, are stories of some pretty horrible things, from God sanctioning mass-murder and rape, to rules about women remaining silent in church and submitting, always, to their husbands. Are these inspired words from God, too?

For me, I have come to see inspiration as bigger, that God does speak through this text, the presence of God is here, in these words, which comes to us from a particular time and place, written by human hands who were seeking to follow the leading of God, even though they weren't always perfect on this journey, but not dictated by God.

But not everything they wrote down as "God told us to do this" was, in fact, something God told them to do. People then, just like today, believed that God told them to do horrible, troubling things. Scripture reveals to us that humanity has always had this tendency. The author Anne Lamott has said that we should be very concerned when we believe God hates all the same people we hate.

That's why God gave God's people the prophets, and later Jesus, who call God's people back to God's purposes of love and justice in this world. Through their words, we are given a lens through which we can re-read all of scripture, seeing that through all of this, God is breathing--inspiring--love and peace and justice through these text, speaking to us above and beyond the text.

Being a scripture-reading Disciples...well, it's complicated. You can love scripture and still be confused and troubled by scripture. What do we do with, as Adam Hamilton calls it, this "Disturbing, Wonderful, Perplexing and Inspiring Book"?

I'd like to leave you with some general principles to follow when reading scripture. Call it Pastor Travis' guide to reading the Bible...and take it with as much authority as that name demands. :-)

First, Jesus said the greatest commandments were "To love God" and to "love your neighbor." All interpretations of scripture should lead you to do both of these better. The goal of reading scripture is not to figure out the rules, but to become more like Jesus. And if your reading of scripture is leading to hate, and not inspiring love, then you're getting scripture wrong. Period.

My Second principle, never say, "The Bible Clearly Says." Just don't, because, on most things outside of the call to love our neighbors, it doesn't.

Because, third, when reading, you must realize that this text is as encumbered by culture and history as you are. When you approach a text, ask, Who wrote this, why did they write this, who did they write to, and what are their assumptions? But also ask, From what place am I reading this text, and what assumptions might I have as I read this?

Finally, always remember, Jesus is the final Word of God, and all readings of scripture should be read through the lens of Jesus. Would Jesus say and advocate this? Is this how Jesus taught us to live? Does this reading of scripture lead to Jesus' abundant life?

To be honest, I don't think God even cares much at all about what we believe. That may be our game, but it's not God's game. What God does care about is the kind of people we are becoming. Are we loving and kind? Do we seek justice for the oppressed? Are we becoming more like Christ? Are we loving God more by loving our neighbor more?

As the Jewish prophet Micah said long ago, "What does God require of humanity? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

That's what matters, and scripture is a tool to inspire us and guide in this journey.

But so is this community we call Church.

Living together as Disciples teaches us that we are not all the same. That our experiences are different. That we read scripture differently. That we believe differently. That we love differently. And that our life together is as complicated as this book we hold so dear. And yet, here we are, friends, sisters, brothers--a family.

It's not quite how our founders envisioned it, but here we are, united, in the midst of our disagreements.

Our life together is God's gift to us, that reminds us that all of life is complicated and diverse and beautiful, and our best response to it all is always love.

Love...as God has loved us, we must love one another. Love is the subject of the Bible. Love is goal of our life together. Love is all we really need. Amen.