

“Reading All of the Texts Together”
Palm 146; Isaiah 35:4–7; James 2:1–10, 14–17; Mark 7:24–37
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September 5, 2021

As is often the case, there are common themes that run through today’s lectionary texts — feeding the hungry, giving sight to the blind, healing the sick and disabled, pursuing justice, replacing desperation with hope. These themes are found in all four readings, including the psalm, and God is seen as the ultimate source of every redemptive act.

But there are also tensions between today’s texts, especially between James’ admonition not to show favoritism and Jesus’ blatant act of favoritism in Mark, as he tells a Gentile woman whose daughter has an unclean spirit that the children — the Israelites — must be fed first and thus it is not fair to throw food to the dogs — the Gentiles. Not only is this offensive to dog lovers, it is a deeply troubling view of Jesus, and it creates a theological problem because we say Jesus is without sin, but James says that showing favoritism, as Jesus does, is sinful.

One conclusion might be to stop reading so much scripture so that we don’t run into these conflicts. But this isn’t much of a solution. A better approach might be to embrace all of the realities that come from reading texts together — claiming the common themes and addressing the tensions. The latter task often raises important questions about many things, including how we should approach scripture, and these questions can make us uncomfortable, but the tensions exist, whether we acknowledge them or not, and asking questions deepens faith.

One thing we see as we read all of our texts together today is the need for interpretation. The old mantra, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it,” simply doesn’t work. The Bible says many things about many subjects, often contradictory things. And some texts are difficult to embrace by themselves.

Bill Leonard has said that his snake-handling preacher friends are the only true inerrantists because they are the only people who take the final

verses of Mark literally. For those who do not have the word of the Lord hidden in their hearts, in Mark 16 the resurrected Jesus says that those who believe will pick up snakes with their hands... By this standard, how many of us are believers?

I have never met anyone who takes the whole Bible literally, even if they say they do. W. A. Criswell, one of the architects of the takeover of the SBC, claimed to take everything literally but interpreted much of the Old Testament allegorically, following Irenaeus. We all interpret. As Elmo Scoggin used to say, every translation is an interpretation. What we need is a consistent approach to interpretation, what we call hermeneutics, so that we don't just pick and choose which texts to take literally and which to interpret. But the reality is we all interpret, and we need to interpret, as the juxtaposition of today's texts makes clear.

The reading from Mark presents challenges by itself, but they are heightened by pairing them with the words from James. There is no easy explanation for Jesus' behavior. Some have suggested that he may be testing the woman, which is possible, but he does not usually do this, and the derogatory language about Gentiles is still problematic. Some have argued that maybe Jesus means "cute little puppies" and not dogs, but that is not what the text says, and in this time — though this may be offensive to us — the reference is derogatory. Maybe Jesus is just in a bad mood. He is human, after all, he is tired. He keeps trying to get away and rest, but people keep following him everywhere he goes.

There is no easy explanation, but the text cries out for some interpretation, and the good news is — as Baptists, this is in our comfort zone, or at least it should be. One of the foundational principles of our faith is the freedom to interpret scripture for ourselves, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. This is not always an easy task — freedom and responsibility are heads and tails of the same coin — but it is a sacred one. Some texts cry out for interpretation. This one certainly does.

But as we examine our texts together today, we not only see the need for interpretation, we also see the need to read multiple texts on any given subject, to consider the biblical witness as a whole and thus not allow an isolated verse or passage to have the only word.

We have all encountered people who point to one verse on a subject they have made up their mind about as definitive proof of the divine intent. “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” some will say, referencing Proverbs 13:24, as a rationale for corporal punishment. But the psalmist says, “Your rod and your staff — they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).” The shepherd’s rod is not a bludgeoning tool, it is an instrument of guidance. The shepherd uses it to keep sheep together, to keep them from falling off a cliff. Seen in this light, the verse from Proverbs calls parents to provide consistent boundaries, not physical punishment.

Basing our beliefs on a single text or passage, which we may or may not understand accurately, is a precarious practice. In fact, basing our faith on one biblical book alone can be problematic. Would we want to base our faith entirely on Leviticus or Revelation, Joshua or Jude? The book of Esther doesn’t have a single reference to God. And while the book of Job presents a helpful corrective to the notion that God always rewards the righteous, if it were our only sacred text, we might conclude that God routinely punishes the righteous.

What if the first part of our reading from Mark were the only story we had about Jesus? We might view him as a messianic figure capable of healing, but also as a bigoted man with a with a limited worldview, someone who only cares for one group of people, the Israelites, and treats others with disrespect. The good news is we have the rest of the Christian Testament which tells us he is a savior for the whole world and shows us repeatedly that he treats all people with dignity and respect and includes Gentiles in his ministry. But we have to read more than this passage to develop this broader understanding of who Jesus is.

How many rigid positions have people of faith established over the years on the basis of a selective reading of cherry-picked verses, and as a result, how much damage has been done to beloved children of God and to the witness of the church? Divorced people have been condemned, women have been “kept in their place,” slavery has been justified, jingoism and xenophobia have been embraced, LGBT people have been demonized, Jews and Muslims and others have been condemned to hell.

This is not to say there isn’t scripture to support these perspectives. But the texts are isolated, and to say otherwise, to say there is a clear biblical word

to support these positions, is either uninformed or dishonest. On any matter, if we genuinely seek God's intent, we need to take into account the whole of scripture, and we need to do so prayerfully, humbly confessing our biases and seeking God's guidance.

So, as we read all of our texts together today, we see the need for interpretation and for reading multiple texts on any given subject. And then, we see that while there are tensions we cannot resolve, as well as questions we cannot answer, at least this side of eternity, there are also common themes that provide more than enough to ground our faith.

There are unresolvable tensions, like the one we have named. James condemns favoritism while Jesus seems to practice it, at least on this occasion. There are also unanswerable questions, like the questions of evil and suffering. Job helps us understand that just because a person suffers doesn't mean he/she has done something wrong. But the book doesn't tell us why suffering exists, on the level it does, in a world where God is in control. We can grow from struggles, God can work for good through all things, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8, but when we examine horrors like the Holocaust, all of these pithy explanations seem insulting — to the victims, to our intelligence, and to God.

We are better off leaving certain tensions unresolved because the alternative is developing an image of God that is woefully inadequate. There are things we just don't fully understand. But even though this is the case, there is so much we do know, so many clear teachings, so many common themes. For example, in today's texts, as in much of scripture, there is a constant calling to respond to human need — to pursue justice and deliver the oppressed, to heal the sick and give sight to the blind, to feed the hungry and empower the poor.

“The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,” says the psalmist, Jesus heals the sick, and we are called to do likewise. When God's realm is restored, Isaiah says, “The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” says James. “Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them,

‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

In these texts and throughout scripture, God is described as caring for the whole of creation and having a particular concern for those who suffer. As a result, God’s people are called to follow the path of lifting up the downtrodden, delivering the oppressed, empowering the poor, and at least welcoming people with disabilities and thus extending a kind of healing. This isn’t an isolated perspective. God’s concern for the poor and the stranger in the land, the alien, the immigrant — are two of these most common themes in all of scripture. And thus, they lie at the heart of our understanding of who God is and what we are called to do.

In fact, in Matthew 25, Jesus says judgment hinges on our willingness to reach out to the least of these in need. In her book *Hallelujah Anyway*, Anne Lamott put it this way: “To get into heaven, you need a letter of recommendation from the poor.” I sometimes wonder if the reason we obsess over unanswerable questions, as important as some are, is so that we can avoid the responsibilities found in the clear teachings of scripture, like our calling to help others.

This perspective too must be considered in the light of the whole biblical witness. Ephesians 2:8 says that we are saved by grace through faith, and not by our own doing, not by works. This claim has to be placed alongside James’ assertion that faith without works is dead. We can’t throw out Ephesians any more than Martin Luther could throw out James. We have to embrace both texts, perhaps claiming that we are saved by grace, but realizing that anyone who has been saved by grace will want to extend grace to others. We have to interpret, taking into account every relevant text, even in regard to common themes.

Someone once said we need to swallow the whole Gos-pill, meaning we need to embrace the individual and social sides of Jesus’ teachings. We also need to swallow the whole Bi-bil, as difficult as some parts are. I understand why people like Martin Luther and Thomas Jefferson have wanted to remove certain parts, but it’s all scripture, it all speaks to us in some way, and it speaks best if we consider the whole.