

“Something To Offend All of Us”
Isaiah 56:1, 6–8; Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32, Matthew 15:22–28
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Dana had two relatives who were library deans — one retired from the University of Michigan, the other from the California Institute of the Arts. Both were bright and witty, but the latter, whose name was Fred, had a t-shirt which said, “There is something in my library to offend everyone.” It was a reframing of something Mary Jo Godwin, the longtime editor of the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, said. Godwin made her claim and Fred wore his shirt long before the current movement to ban books, but the fact that they made these statements so long ago indicates that this yearning to censor certain ideas has been around for some time.

It makes sense to consider whether material available to children is age-appropriate, and each of us has a list of things we find personally objectionable for different reasons, but banning books simply because we disagree with their content is a slippery slope on a dangerous path that is a feature of fascism, not democracy, and in the religious realm, it goes against the spirit of Baptist heritage which embraces the freedom of the individual to discern matters of faith and truth. Furthermore, if we are going to ban books which someone finds offensive, we probably need to begin with the Bible because it has something to offend all of us.

Consider today’s texts. The reading from Isaiah talks about a time when God will bring justice to the land, and a part of what this involves is the welcoming of people from all nations. It is probably written around the time exiles have returned and there is tension between those who have remained all along and those who have not. But the text says foreigners are welcome in God’s house. Not only are the outcasts of Israel gathered in; all people are welcome in God’s house of prayer.

It is not a text that is quoted these days by those who want to keep immigrants out, but it’s not the only part of this chapter that some might find offensive. You may have noticed that the lectionary editors have

omitted verses 2–5. Chuck Nichols may be grateful that they have, but we should always wonder what has been left out and why. These verses are about eunuchs whom the prophet says shall not be cut off...

I'm just quoting the Bible, but beyond the pointed language, the message is that a group of people formally declared unworthy because of who they are now are embraced fully by God. Leviticus 21:20 says eunuchs cannot be priests, and Deuteronomy 23:1 forbids them from participating in worship, but Isaiah 56:2-5 says they are welcome and given a name better than sons and daughters by God.

We may not be all that concerned about eunuchs, but what this text might say about other people formerly excluded being fully embraced by God is another matter — women and divorced people in another time, LGBT people today, who knows who in the future. Some might find this troubling, if not offensive. Maybe we should cut it out!

But consider also the reading from Romans 11 in which the Apostle Paul says God has not rejected the Jewish people, indeed, the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. This may not seem troubling to us, but what is Paul saying? There are still plenty of anti-Semitic people in the world, even in the church, they don't want Jews to be welcomed by God. There are many others who can envision them as welcomed only if they accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. In fact, in every church I have served, there have been people who were angered because no one would say from the pulpit that Jews are going to hell.

I think judgment belongs to God, along with the nature of judgment and whether or not there is a literal hell, but Paul doesn't say Jewish people must convert. He is a zealous evangelist, he wants everyone to embrace Christ, but he says God has not rejected his people. Some might find this offensive if they understand what he is saying.

And then, consider the reading from Matthew. My goodness... If the first two readings trouble conservative people — for lack of a better word, labels only try to put us in boxes where we don't fit — this reading troubles liberal people who think Jesus is always gentle and kind. For the most part, he is, but he does talk about weeping and wailing, he rails against religious leaders who burden people with rules, and here he is downright rude to a Canaanite woman whose daughter needs healing.

The Jesus who embraces all people and commissions followers to make disciples of all nations says he has only come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He can't help this hated outsider. He even uses a racial slur common for the time, saying it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. I don't even like the belittling of dogs that underlies the slur! In the end, Jesus affirms the woman's faith and heals her daughter, but why is he so rude? Various attempts have been made to rationalize his behavior — he is testing the woman, he is tired. I don't buy any of them. If I were going to edit the Bible, this would be one of the first texts I would remove, if...

But there is something in these texts to offend all of us. If we were to ban the offensive parts of the Bible, we might cut out more than Thomas Jefferson did. But then, for all practical purposes, we do. We embrace some parts of scripture and either ignore or reject other parts. We all have our canon within the canon. And there are some biblical books we never read — Leviticus, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Esther, Lamentations, Jude, Revelation. I won't ask for a show of hands.

So, what is the message for us here? For one thing, banning books seems unwise. We need to hear different perspectives. We don't have to agree with everything we read, but nor do we benefit from trying to silence voices. Doing so is a mark of fascism and a sign of fear, not faith. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his First Inaugural Address on March 4, 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, "...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

But especially when it comes to the Bible, though we might prefer to eliminate some parts — specific verses, chapters, perhaps entire books — it is all part of scripture, and sometimes the parts we might excise speak to us at a different place in life. I might want to do away with our Gospel reading today, parts of Chronicles that have too many names, and the whole book of Joshua which seems to promote genocide. Revelation is the most misunderstood book in the canon. Perhaps we could put it in a restricted area? But alas, no.

Consider the words of Psalm 137. It begins with the mournful lines, “By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps.” It is deeply moving. How could they sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? But the psalm ends with these words. “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones (your children) and dash them against the rock! Why is this in the Bible?

I had never used these words in a worship service until Wednesday evening, September 12, 2001. It was not the only scripture we read nor was it the last and final word, but in the middle of the service we read it because it allowed us to express the anger we felt about what had happened the day before. Scripture as a whole attends to the full range of human emotions, especially the psalms. We should not act on such anger, but we do feel it. The psalter gives us permission to do so.

We never know how any writing may help us, and we certainly shouldn’t throw out sacred manna that may one day feed us.

But while banning books is unwise, there is a need for discernment in regard to all knowledge, especially biblical knowledge. The church kept the Bible out of the hands of people for centuries. Many could not read, and those who could read only one language. The church refused to translate scripture into languages like English, saying people couldn’t understand what they read. It was a way to control people, but there was truth in the claim. Parts of scripture are difficult to understand.

“Spare the rod and spoil the child,” from Proverbs 13:24, does not recommend bludgeoning children. The shepherd’s rod was a tool used to keep sheep safe. The psalmist says, “Your rod and your staff — they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).” In the KJV of John 14, God’s house has many “mansions,” but the English translates a word that referred to a one room place where a gatekeeper lived, not a palace. Genesis 5:27 says Methuselah lived 969 years. A seminary student told our professor he added up the numbers and discovered that he died in the flood, and a Google search confirms this. But the professor noted that while this is the case adding up numbers in the Septuagint, the Greek translation, using numbers in the Masoretic text, the Hebrew, Methuselah died two

years after the flood. So, since he wasn't on the ark, he has the record for the longest swim, and he was 967 years old when he did it!

We all have the privilege of interpreting scripture for ourselves, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but it doesn't hurt to get a little guidance. I know a little bit about medicine, but I'm not going to attempt brain surgery. There is a body of knowledge around biblical interpretation. Some people view it to be in opposition to the work of the Spirit, but I'm with John Wesley. A man wrote to him saying the Lord directed him to say that while he knew Hebrew and Greek, the Lord could do without his book learning. Wesley said that while the Lord didn't tell him to say so, God didn't need the man's ignorance either.

Banning books is unwise, but we need help with interpretation, especially of scripture, and then it is important to pay attention to the broader themes in the Bible. There are isolated verses that address subjects Jesus never mentions, like those that tell women not to wear make-up, but while we may find it interesting to debate their meaning, it is more important that we see the bigger picture. What matters most, according to Jesus, is the love of God and neighbor. He comes bringing grace and truth. He counsels forgiveness, not vengeance, and follows his teaching, even as he dies on a cross. He spends his life among the poor and marginalized and calls us to do the same. It doesn't matter what we do with the isolated issues if we miss the big picture.

The big picture of our texts today is that everyone is included in God's love. Isaiah envisions a time when people of all nations are welcome in God's presence. Paul tells everyone about Jesus but insists that God hasn't written off the Jews. Jesus may be rude to the Samaritan woman, but he praises her faith and heals her daughter. No one is left out of God's concern, certainly not the stranger or immigrant, and thus no one can be crossed off our list either. This may not be what we want to hear, we may even find it offensive, but it is the nature of God's love.

There is plenty to offend all of us in the Bible, but there is so much more to inspire us, and in the end, scripture is a lens through which to see God, ourselves, and the world. It is not an object to worship, but a gift to guide us if we will allow it to do so.