

October 24, 2021

“Interpreting the Bible”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Galatians 3:23-28; 2Timothy 3:16-17

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A few weeks ago I mentioned the “English as Second Language” classes going on here at John Wesley, and how difficult it can be to learn and understand English. But the truth is, even for those of us whose primary language is English, it’s often difficult to interpret what someone else is really saying. For instance, some of you men may be interested to know what we women really mean when we use a particular word or phrase. For example, the word...

Fine!...I'm Fine! – Now “Fine!” is a word women use to end an argument when we know we are right and you are wrong, and need to just stop talking.

Or, *It's nothing... It's nothing.* This phrase is the calm before the storm. “It's nothing” means something, and you should be on your toes. Arguments that begin with “It's nothing” usually end in “fine.”

Go Ahead... Go Ahead – This is not permission, it's a dare! Don't go there!

Loud Sigh – This is actually a word, a non-verbal statement that means she thinks you're being a jerk and wonders why she's wasting her time arguing with you about nothing. (Remember “nothing”.)

Hmmm – Another non-verbal statement which this time means she is momentarily content. Your best bet is don't move or breathe in the hopes that the moment will last a bit longer.

I'm okay... I'm okay – This is one of the most dangerous statements a woman makes. “I'm okay” means she wants to think long and hard before deciding how and when you will pay for your mistake.

Finally... Don't worry about it, I got it... I got it – Another very dangerous statement, meaning this is something a woman has told her man to do several times, but is now doing it herself. This will later result in a man asking “What's wrong?” For the woman's response, refer back to “It's nothing.”

Now obviously, this is meant to be humorous, but I'm sure you can see how interpreting words and putting them into their proper context is so important to understanding the real meaning of what's being said or written. That's why today I want to talk about how we interpret and understand the Bible.

Because it's one of the underlying reasons the Methodist Church is divided on the issue of homosexuality. There is disagreement over the language in our Book of Discipline which states “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” as well as the rules which forbid same sex marriage and prohibit LGBTQ+ persons from serving as pastoral leaders. Now this is important because if you read the email I sent out earlier this week, I mentioned there are some within our own congregation here at John Wesley who don't feel fully loved or accepted because of their sexual identity or orientation. And, there are many in our congregation who have children who are part of the

LGBTQ+ community and they see firsthand how alienated their children feel from the church. And so it's now time for us to consider John Wesley's position on this issue and declare where we stand on this important matter.

So now let's go to the Bible and how we are meant to interpret it. The Bible. It's made up of sixty-six separate books written by forty-five different authors over the course of one thousand, five hundred years. From about 1400 BC to 100 AD. That's a long time ago. Now it is important to note that these authors did not know they were writing "The Bible." In fact, the Bible, as we know it, didn't come about till around 400 AD when a group of church leaders decided what writings and letters would ultimately comprise what we now call "the Book." Now people talk about the Bible as the "Word of God," but the Bible was not dictated by God as many may think. In fact, in Job, Satan speaks – and he's definitely not God. As we heard St. Paul say today, scripture, the Bible, is "inspired" by God. "Inspired," not dictated. You see, the Bible was written by human beings who were addressing the problems, issues and challenges of their particular time and place and culture, and God's part in all of it. So the Bible has to be interpreted from the context of when and why it was written. And another thing, the Bible often uses imagery, poetry, metaphors and symbolism that are not meant to be taken literally.

Because look at how often most of us don't take the Bible literally. In Leviticus, we read, "The pig is unclean for you, you shall not eat of its flesh." And "Everything in the seas and rivers that do not have fins and scales, you may not eat. They are an abomination to you, and you shall not eat them." And so if we are to take the Bible literally, then those of us who eat ham, bacon, shrimp, or lobster, are sinning, because the Bible explicitly forbids eating these foods. But how many of us here are going to change our eating habits? Or – let's go to Jesus. He said, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away." Now, consider – how many of us might have used our hand to pick up the phone and gossip about someone, "Did you hear about so and so? Do you believe what she did?" Or, how many times have we clicked that computer keyboard and forwarded one of those off-colored, or divisive emails to a friend – one that you wouldn't have sent to Jesus. Or have any of us ever, "flipped someone the bird?" If you think honestly about the sins we've committed, do we really want to take Jesus literally and cut off our hand? Or how about this one – Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but instead treasures in heaven." Now I'm sure most of us have retirement accounts or savings of some kind, and do we really want to give away all we have? No, we definitely don't want to take that one literally! I could go on, but I think you can see my point. That's why we have to be careful when we talk about interpreting the laws and words of the Bible.

Now, let's go back to Leviticus and the scripture that people often quote when speaking against homosexuality. The verse reads, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death." Now, I hear a lot of people tout the need to uphold the first part of that verse, but I don't hear anyone talking about upholding the second part – putting all homosexuals to death. And what about the Ten Commandments. Remember the 4th Commandment: "You are to keep the Sabbath day holy. You shall not do any work on the Sabbath" – like clean the house, mow the lawn, go shopping, etc. Well, the punishment if you're caught working – that too is the death penalty. And, here's another – the Bible says that if sons are disrespectful to their parents, the community needs to get together and stone them to death. So I think we can all see that if we're going to talk about the Bible as God's literal "word", then we can't have it both ways. We either adhere to everything the Bible says, which I think we would all agree is impractical and unreasonable, or we come to the realization that we have to look at the Bible in a more broad, comprehensive, scope.

And that's the proper way of interpreting scripture. It's what's called "progressive revelation." Progressive revelation says that God is continually at work in each and every generation, helping us interpret scripture so that it is relevant for the times in which we live. Let me give you a few examples, starting with Jesus Christ himself who came over a thousand years after the Jewish scriptures were written. Three different verses in the Old Testament give permission to take equal and just revenge for a wrong done to someone. Leviticus 24:20 says, "an eye for eye, a tooth for tooth." That was Biblical law. However, Jesus comes along and says, "Yes, that's what scripture says alright. But now that I am with you, now that the Son of God is here – I say, 'turn the other cheek, go the second mile, pray for those who harm you.'" Suddenly, it's time to set aside that 'eye for an eye' scripture as no longer applicable. The Son of God himself has said so! Another example is the Apostle Peter. Jewish law forbade Jews to associate with Gentiles. They were "that other group...different, profane, and unclean." But God came to Peter in a dream and told him to go to the Gentiles, that they were no longer unclean. And Peter did. In explaining himself to the Jews, he said, "You know that the law states a Jew is not to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." I should not call anyone profane or unclean. Suddenly that law is set aside, no longer applicable. God has said so! And then there's Philip, an early disciple who, the Bible says, listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and baptized a eunuch. Now because the eunuch was different sexually, different from the norm, he wasn't even allowed to enter the temple, the church. But Philip understood that there is more to scripture than laws, that love and justice supersedes all laws. And he took a man

who was discriminated by the church, and baptized him - in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Now that law is set aside, no longer applicable. The Holy Spirit has said so! And here's an example that's near and dear to me: the Bible specifically states in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy that "Women are to be silent in church. They are not permitted to speak. It is shameful for a woman to speak in church." But somewhere along the way, the church has determined that yes, love and justice supersedes all laws, and there is a shared dignity and authority of both men and women. Now that law is set aside – the modern church has said so!

And so how do we handle this issue of homosexuality and the Bible? First, let's go back to that Methodist phrase about it being "incompatible with Christian teaching." Well, let me tell you – divorce is incompatible with Christian teaching. Jesus said, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery and she who divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Gossip is incompatible with Christian teaching. The only time Jesus spoke about how a person could end up in hell, yes, hell, was for speaking ill of someone. Not forgiving someone is incompatible with Christian teaching. Jesus said if you don't forgive others then God will not forgive you. Laziness is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-righteousness, pride, is incompatible with Christian teaching, neglecting the poor and oppressed is incompatible with Christian teaching. And yet, I'll bet most of us sitting here today fall into at least one of the categories I just mentioned. And so we must be very careful about how we pass judgment on others whose lives appear to be "incompatible with Christian teaching."

I'm going to talk more about this next week. But for today, I want to end with the one true Word of God – Jesus Christ. The "Word made flesh." Look at what Jesus said and did. First, and probably most significantly, he didn't say anything about homosexuality, and that alone speaks volumes. So you won't find an answer there. But when we consider the LGBTQ+ issue we will find answers in Jesus' words, "The two greatest commandments are "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind with and all your soul. And love your neighbor as you love yourself." Love your neighbor as yourself. For Jesus, the way of love always superseded the way of the law. He put people and lives before rules. He touched the unclean, he healed on the Sabbath, he freed an adulteress about to be stoned, he ate with sinners, he dealt with women as equals – all of which were prohibited by the Bible. Instead, he offered love, grace and acceptance to all.

And that is what we, as Christians, and as a church are called to do. Offer love, grace and acceptance to all. And, as you saw in my email, I believe this describes us – all of us who attend and call the John Wesley United Methodist Church our home. That is who we are! Because don't we believe that every person is a beloved child of God, made in the image of God, and is of sacred worth? Don't we believe that God's love, grace and acceptance are available to all people, without exclusion? I think you all believe in that very same way, that the answer is a resounding 'YES.'" And so in a moment, I'll share with you the declaration I mentioned earlier that was accepted and approved by the Leadership Team. You will be given a copy after the service, and then next Sunday, for those who would like the opportunity to ask questions or engage in conversation, there will be a meeting at 1:00 in the fellowship hall. Bonnie Marden, a parish consultant who led our Leadership Team through this process of discernment, will be here to lead the discussion.

One other note. Today I talked about the Bible and how we should interpret it for our time and place. But there's much more to be said on this topic, and next week, I will talk about marriage, sex and sin. So stay tuned.

Now here is the declaration that states our position and which will soon be put on our website.

We affirm that a person's sexual orientation is a natural part of their identity. As such, we do not consider loving expressions of human sexuality as sin. Christian teaching calls us to offer love and acceptance to all people, without exclusion. Therefore, we welcome everyone into our community of faith, fully equal and able to participate in the life of the church, including marriage and serving as pastoral leaders.

And to that, I hope we can all say a resounding.... Amen! Amen!

* With acknowledgment to Rev. Adam Hamilton, in his book, "When Christians Get it Wrong," and to Rev. Eugene Bay, in his book, "A Sower Went Out."