

September 30, 2009

The Way It Looks from Here Scripture as Authority: Can't the Bible Just Settle This?

Dear Partners in Ministry,

Another frequent stream of conversation over the past month has centered on Scripture. So let's look at those conversations.

Scripture as authority

Those unhappy with the churchwide assembly decision will often say it runs counter to 2,000 years of understanding the Bible on this matter. Others make a corollary observation that the decision separates us from the great majority of Christian teaching and practice over those same 2,000 years. These same observations were made 39 years ago in my church body (the former American Lutheran Church) by the 42 percent who opposed the decision to ordain women, a practice that continues to be opposed on biblical grounds by the vast majority of Christians around the world. My point: Scripture is indeed our authority, but often leaves the believing community working hard to discern its leading in a particular time and place.

In the days following the assembly, each synod bishop was in communication with his/her synod. The bishops were as varied in their views as the church at large. Bishop Robert Driesen wrote to the Upper Susquehanna Synod in Pennsylvania:

I did not support the ministry recommendations of the Task Force on Human Sexuality, because I cannot overcome the scriptural passages that I believe are clear on these matters. I have also said, however, that I know there are people in this synod who disagree with me on this, and I am not willing to say that they simply have abandoned the scriptures. Instead, they point me to the Christ who is the Word of God and who is held at the heart of the scriptures even as an infant he was held in the manger.... While I disagree with their conclusions, I know them to be my brothers and sisters in Christ...

The silver lining here—if I can take such a giant step—is in our impetus to examine Scripture. There's been a renewed interest in some of the fine study materials the ELCA's sexuality task force prepared, especially "Journey Together Faithfully, Part 2," a six-session course published in 2003 that examines our use of Scripture particularly around these matters. An accompanying piece entitled "Background Essay on Biblical Texts," by ELCA seminary professors Arland Hultgren (Luther Seminary) and Walter Taylor (Trinity Seminary), who themselves come to different conclusions, but together lead us into deeper examination of the biblical passages related to homosexuality.

At last year's theological conference, arising out of the ELCA's Book of Faith Initiative, Dr. David Lose led us in thinking about understanding and preaching the Bible not as a rule book that sits on the library shelf, but as a series of concentric circles that anchors us in the central truths at its core, and moves out from that center in concentric circles, all emanating from the heart of the faith. I don't think anyone would claim that the church's teaching about homosexuality is at the very heart of the faith. The disagreement seems to relate to where it belongs in these series of concentric circles—whether these matters are located very close to the center, as if to get it wrong is to reject Christ, or as far out as the passages that speak of the sun moving around the earth. Or somewhere in between. I believe there's room for discussion—fruitful discussion if done respectfully.

We are in a time, I dare hope, of rediscovering the authority of Scripture in the life of our church in a way that takes us away from the poles of proof texting on the one hand ("hurling Bible verses at each other," my brother calls it) and dismissing the Bible as an interesting but optional old book. At our best, we Lutherans have discussed Scripture without shying away from the complexity of digging deeper for nuance and interpretation as we live into and embrace its meaning for our lives.

I choose to believe that we can step away from using Scripture as a weapon and use it as an avenue that leads us more deeply into holy living. At the heart of that holy living will be a humility toward God, toward Scripture and toward one another. We thank God for Martin Luther's leading us to a re-centering on Scripture as the "source and norm" of our faith and life. But when Luther spoke without humility (he was, you recall, prone to do that with some regularity!), he could lose sight of what lies at the center of Scripture's concentric circles: "This fool Copernicus wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred scripture in Joshua 10:13 tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth."

Scripture is a treasure, but its value—as Bishop Driesen was quick to name—is that it brings to us at its core the God we come to know in Jesus the Christ. We will continue to cite Scripture in our discussions of sexuality and other matters. But let's always be sure that we never, in all our conversation about the authority of Scripture, never lose our clarity over that fundamental truth.

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