Sermon - “Recognizing Scripture’s Potential for Harm”
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August 19, 2018

What should we do with Scripture? That’s the question that I’ve tried to tackle briefly last week and today. How do we engage Scripture so that we can open ourselves to its riches, while acknowledging its potential for harm, and still believe that in it we will see God’s presence not just in the human story, but in our own lives?

All it takes is opening the news to find some new way that Scripture has been leveraged in hurtful ways - take the images of members of Westboro Baptist Church, for example, who protest this or that, signs emblazoned with the most awful slogans - “God hates…” (and I won’t say that last word) At the bottom there’s always a Scriptural citation. Westboro Baptists use their reading of Scripture to call out what they see a national sins - targeting mostly gay people.

But, although the LGBT community has suffered tremendously at the hands of Scripture, it’s not just us - divorcees, Jewish folks, women, black folks… Remember that the staunchest supporters of the continuation of race-based chattel slavery in 19th Century America justified their position with Scripture; and not but a few weeks ago, the Attorney General cited Paul’s letter to the Romans in defense of more stringent deportation policies…

And if you’re like me, we’d like to write all of this off as simply the mishandling of Scripture by less enlightened minds! But Holy Scripture, in all its richness and beauty, contains some very difficult material, and it’s not just the Old Testament! The New Testament - the so-called Christian Scriptures - can be equally hard-nosed!

Early in the 19th Century our third President, Thomas Jefferson, set out to extract from the New Testament what he believed its most important truths - its “sublime moral” teaching. He wanted to get rid of all the stuff he thought Jesus’ benighted followers had added. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it, but the 1820 edition of what Jefferson titled “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth” looks a bit like a grade school art project. Jefferson painstakingly cut the Scripture apart with a knife, and pasted it together in parallel Greek, Latin, French, and English, of course!

But Jefferson wasn’t alone. Once things had settled down after the American Revolution and The Episcopal Church was founded and a first draft of a new Book of Common Prayer was proposed in 1786, the compilers chopped up the psalms to get rid of parts - of which there are quite a few in the psalms! - that might be offensive to enlightened minds.2

I imagine we’d like to think of ourselves as enlightened minds, and yet, we say as a church that we believe Scripture to be holy, and inspired, that it contains the narrative of how human beings have

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1 See an article about Jefferson’s work in the Smithsonian Magazine here: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-thomas-jefferson-created-his-own-bible-5659505/
2 From 150 Psalms, 60 were created in pieces and parts. See: http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1786/BCP_1786.htm
received and documented and responded to God’s own self-revelation to us throughout history. We say we believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to contain all things necessary to salvation - that has been the Anglican position for a very long time.³ We make those who are ordained bishop, priest, or deacon publically sign an oath to that effect before ordination.⁴ What we mean by that, I think, is that, as a church we believe Scripture to be primary in developing doctrine; that nothing that’s not in Scripture can be billed as essential for the Christian life.

On the other hand, modern scholarship has shown us the fragility of our holy texts - that many of them are composite and highly edited - that Isaiah was probably written by at least three different prophets; that Paul’s letters to the Corinthians might be pieces of up to 7 letters - that there’re many conflicting accounts; that some Psalms were originally prayers to other gods before being reworked for worship of the Hebrew God… and remember David? There’re literally two different accounts of his monarchy, one which favors him, the other which reports his flaws.

Let’s not forget to mention the substantial difference the theological background of a translation makes… if the translators are Evangelical, the text tends to assume evangelical ideology, if the translators are Catholic, you’ll find Catholic tendencies…

And then there’re those bits of Scripture that get used again and again to put people down. A verse from Leviticus or Romans; a few sentences from Ephesians… like the ones on the Westboro Baptist signs.

I was raised Pentecostal, so we adored the Bible - and we believed firmly that every word was inspired and infallible, that God basically wrote the Scriptures through the agency of human hands. In my late teens when I awoke to my own identity and began to come out to myself, I scoured the index of my Bible for “homosexuality” hoping to find some words of comfort. And in my New International Version, which had been translated by scholars with a heavy Evangelical bent, homosexuality appeared, and was condemned in stark terms.

There were no footnotes in my Bible to let me know that the Greek word⁵ Paul uses in I Corinthians, for example, is a word that he coined based on the Hebrew in Leviticus, and that we’re not exactly sure what he’s intends for it to refer to; that the Hebrew text⁶ Paul would have known in Leviticus is equally obscure in its reference; there were no footnotes to suggest that our worldview on human sexuality in general is significantly different than Romans or Jews in antiquity,⁷ that it’s not quite as simple as saying “The Bible says it. I believe it.”

³ Article VI of the 39 Articles of Religion, goes back at least to 1563.
⁴ 1979 Book of Common Prayer, pp. 513, 526, 538 respectively.
⁵ Paul’s neologism, arsénoíkites - literally “male-bedders”, I Corinthians 6:9
⁶ W’eth-zakhar lo’ tiskav miskeve issa to’eva hi - literally “and with a male you shall not lie the lyings of a woman”, Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13
⁷ There is substantial scholarly debate about both of these terms, what they mean, how best to translate them, how to take context into account, etc. Very little consensus exists and seems to be heavily colored by the ideological aims of each scholar. That there is so little consensus might suggest we be careful with these texts as “mandates” for anything.
⁸ From what we know, there is almost no congruence between late Roman concepts of sexuality and ours; similarly with Jewish concepts in late antiquity.
As with most holy and powerful things, the Scripture cuts both ways. It can be tremendously life-giving, and it can be sadly destructive. Someone seeking justification can find a few words or a phrase to justify almost anything, really, likewise, someone seeking to find ways to exclude and demoralize will find material to support their ends; and anyone who proposes to know just exactly what the Scripture means is almost always a little too full of themself…

This is why I am so grateful that our primary engagement with Scripture as a church isn’t so much for individual devotion or for academic study, but for communal worship. We hear the Scripture read aloud within the context of our liturgical life week after week - we’re invited to reflect on and study it individually, of course, and we ordain and train bishops and priests to break open the Word and teach us in sermons, helping us to frame and focus and reflect on Scripture; but when we read Holy Scripture, we read it together, aloud… the great parts and the tough parts - we’re in it together…

For us, Scripture is most true within the context of relationship - within relationship one to another, you and me, and in relationship with the Risen Christ, who promises to be with us always, most especially when we gather together in worship.

So let us turn our minds to Christ this day, who is standing at the center of our community at worship, at the intersection of the fulfilment of the Scriptures we have heard read; who binds our wounds and protects us from harm, and loves us into abundant life.
It takes time, and spiritual maturity and, perhaps, a little sense of the deep irony of life to fall in love with the Scripture - to be able to hold its riches and beauty and foibles and insecurities together and let it still speak into our lives. But that’s what we’re called to do as a people of God. To work toward that kind of openness through study and devotion; to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scripture, sometimes as we would a plate full of mushy peas after everyone else has left the table, sometimes, like a piece of the best Birthday cake -

To recognize that when we tell the story