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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 15:1-20
The Bible is ...

You might be surprised and intrigued by the enactment performed by Clay. He played the role of “Beadle.” In the Church of Scotland, a “Beadle” (spelled Beadle) is one who attends the minister during divine service as an assistant. The Presbyterian branch of the Reformation was first established in Scotland.

The part played by Clay happened at the beginning of every worship service at Scottsville Presbyterian Church in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, where our daughter, Anna, was baptized.

Precisely on the hour when most people gathered for worship, the prelude stopped and in the ensuing silence the door next to the pulpit opened and the Beadle, an elderly man with black suit, white shirt and white hair solemnly entered the sanctuary with a huge Bible and proceeded to the lectern. He placed the Bible on the lectern and opened it as Clay did. Only after this was done, would the minister greet and welcome the congregation and worship began.

The action symbolized the centrality and seriousness of the Word of God. *Sola Scriptura* is one of the five *solas*, considered by some Protestant groups to be the theological pillars of the Reformation. *Sola Scriptura* (Latin for “by Scripture alone”) is the doctrine that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness.

The Bible was strongly emphasized from the Scottsville pulpit. The Rev. Donald Dowie’s recurring phrase was, “I’m going to break open the Word for you today.” He would then preach for 20 minutes on one word from scripture. The single word was broken and opened a thousand ways and the Gospel preached with eloquence and power.

The Reverend Dowie was one of the first pastors I experienced as a theological student just as I am now one of the first pastors Stephanie experiences as a theological student. Although scripture is essentially central to every sermon I preach and the Bible is just as important, my style is different from the Reverend Dowie. Students take what they can from their mentors and develop their own style.

In her internship, Stephanie has experimented with different styles of preaching – sometimes from the pulpit and sometimes away from the pulpit, both in the

sanctuary and Fellowship Hall. She has preached from the lectionary and is developing her own version of the Reformation's emphasis of scripture as central to all we do.

This brings us to the lectionary passage provided for us today. I wondered whether it would be appropriate for Stephanie's last day as intern with us today. It is but one could argue that all scripture is appropriate when interpreted correctly. I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight a kernel from the text today as a way of giving something to Stephanie and us as she ends her internship and moves towards her life as pastor.

Jesus emphasizes the significance of interpretation when it comes to scripture. The Bible is the book that one holds in one's hand but the real Bible is the Bible interpreted and that is why seminarians spend years studying the Bible through the original languages and excellent scholarship, which one gets at Stephanie's alma mater, San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Going beyond literal interpretations of scripture, one learns to understand the world in which the Bible was written via historical, source, literary, form and reduction criticism, and the like, and one makes the leap from the days of the Bible to today. One discerns in scholarly fashion what is timely and what is timeless. One understands the role of story, symbol, myth and metaphor when interpreting the text. All this is called a liberal understanding of the text, not "liberal" in a political sense but liberal in academia. The best universities offer good, liberal education. We call arts education, "liberal arts."

At the outset in the Gospel passage today, there is a tussle between Jesus and the learned elders. Jesus claims that they have misinterpreted the commandment to honor father and mother. For Jesus, it is simply that (thank God!) but the scholars provide reasons from their tradition not to honor one's parents. It's strange but true.

Both the scholars and Jesus appreciate the Torah but Jesus feels that certain traditions of the elders depart from the truth. The point here and developed later in the text is that right interpretation of scripture is fundamental for right living.

I recently read the final book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, which highlights the last days of Israel's wandering in the desert and Joshua, the first book of Israel's entry into the Promised Land, Palestine, later to become Judah and Israel. .

These books are akin to the Gospel for the Jewish religion and yet I found much of it difficult to stomach. God sanctions the sacking of towns and the killing of men, women and children for Israel's sake. Much of it repulsed me and this was the Word of God?

You can imagine my relief when I read what local rabbi, Michael Lerner, recently wrote in response to the current Israeli/Palestinian conflict: “Those compilers of the Torah who heard God’s voice commanding the Israelites to wipe out the inhabitants of the promised land in order to start afresh were explained away some 2,000 years ago by subsequent interpreters who emphasized that those peoples referenced in Torah no longer existed, so the command to love the “other” was the only relevant guide for our lives as Jews.” The teaching on love is embedded in the Torah.

One wonders why people still interpret these books to justify current day killings. Correct biblical interpretation is a matter of life and death. Correct biblical interpretation separates the dross from the silver.

Stephanie has graduated from San Francisco Theological Seminary with distinction, she has shown in her Tuesday morning Bible study leadership and preaching that everything I say in this sermon is par for her course. What more can she hear from God’s word at this point? She hears what God wants her to hear just as you and I hear daily what God wants us to hear.

In today’s passage, Jesus adds an additional item. He affirms the “heart.” He says to the scribes and Pharisees, “...for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

While Jesus affirms a positive “heart” response here, he later decries negative expressions of the heart. He says, “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Jesus calls for a good head and a good heart for correct interpretation. When the word of God goes through our heads and touches our hearts, it touches our lives and the lives of others – for good or ill.

Jesus encourages us to embrace good, prayerful scholarship for understandings that cleanse the heart and encourages us to go from head to heart and into the world. A sound church is a heart cleanser. A good heart receives the good word and reaches out to a world in need. A good heart nourishes the head. A sound church creates good minds. Head and heart work in tandem. It’s a synergy. In the final analysis, the best interpretation of scripture is scripture lived with compassion, justice, and the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, generosity and self-control.

There is another aspect of biblical interpretation that I have not touched on; what is traditionally called a liberationist perspective. It sees the Gospel through the eyes of the poor, marginalized, dehumanized and disenfranchised in society. One reads the text in the light of one's social context. One looks through the eyes of the starving child in Africa and the Bible becomes bread. Various races and ethnicities, classes and gender, etc., grapple with the text and experience God's liberating love and justice for them. The Bible challenges them and us to dismantle the forces that perpetuate oppression. Earth stewardship and justice fits in this realm.

The challenge for us in Marin and the Bay Area is to understand our context, our social context, and see how the liberating word of God speaks to and liberates that context. Robin Williams' death was extremely sad and it provided a glimpse into an area where the general populace can be understanding and compassionate. We look forward to the day when depression is discussed on a par with other conditions such as diabetes. Churches as places of welcome can cut through stereotypes and stigmatization. People are looking for that church.

There is a lot to consider as we grow in faith and especially now for Stephanie as she grows in ministry and embarks in her life as pastor of the Church of Jesus Christ. God's word as communicated through scripture and our lives is central. God bless Stephanie and God bless us as we continue together in ministry. Amen.