

Sermon, 11/12/17

*The Path*, Chapter 7, Joshua

This week, we are covering chapter seven of *The Path*. This chapter surveys the book of Joshua. How many of us have read this book of the Bible before? It contains a few of the best loved Bible stories that many of us heard read to us by parents and grandparents and in our Sunday schools growing up. Which stories do most of us remember? (Jericho) Others?

There is something else we encounter as we read Joshua—there are parts of the book that are violent and that seem to justify violence and even exterminating other people because they oppose God and God’s people. As followers of Jesus, these stories raise questions for us. We explored some of them in our Bible study group this past Thursday. Some of us may struggle to try to twist our Christian views to fit with what we read in parts of this book.

Throughout history, some leaders in Christian nations have done just that. The Crusades of the Middle Ages-- not only in the Holy Lands against Muslims but against Jews and other non-Catholic Christians in Europe; the violence of the conquistadors against native people in the Americas; the religious wars of Europe in the 17th century; the English Civil war waged between Puritans and Anglicans; Cromwell’s war in Ireland; and on and on.

In these dark parts of Christian history, leaders have used biblical stories like Joshua’s conquest of Canaan to justify their wars and even what we would consider war crimes today. These leaders have presumed to speak for God, telling their followers that God commanded these unspeakable atrocities against their enemies. Awful. So what do we do as people of faith with these beliefs that are rooted in the Bible?

Well first, let’s consider how other Christian leaders have viewed Joshua and those parts of the Bible that are like it. From early in the life of the Church, our ancestors in the faith have expressed questions about the violence of the Bible. Origen, one the first great Christian theologians and biblical scholars, said that passages like these needed to be interpreted spiritually. Instead of an endorsement of violence, Origen told us that these stories were allegories to tell us how to fight enemies like sin and injustice and death. That helped the book of Joshua to stay relevant in the Christian era.

St. Benedict put restrictions on when Joshua (and other books like it) could be read. You see, in Benedictine practice, someone reads from the Bible or other Christian literature during dinnertime in the monastery. The Rule of St. Benedict prohibited the book of Joshua from being read during the meal because it might cause distress or disturb the dreams of the monks. Benedict knew these stories were powerful and could affect how people think and behave.

Another way to consider the book of Joshua is how often it is referenced in the New Testament. Certain books are cited a lot in the New Testaments—the Psalms, Isaiah, Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy are the top five (by far). Other Old Testament books are cited rarely

if at all. Joshua is in that latter category. There are no direct citations (i.e., quoted verses) from Joshua in the New Testament. There are a handful of references to stories from Joshua that give us a clue about what we can learn.

The story of the walls of Jericho coming down is cited once in the New Testament. The author of the book of Hebrews used it as an example of the faith of the people of Israel. That fits with an allegorical interpretation of the story. It is not cited as a literal battle plan to be used against the church's enemies, but as an example of trust in God.

The other story referred to in the New Testament may surprise some of us: the story of Rahab the prostitute. How many of us know that story? The basic story is that Rahab, because of her emerging faith in the God of Israel, hid Israelite spies so that they did not fall into the hands of her people, the Canaanites. In exchange for this, the spies provided protection to Rahab and her family when the Israelites conquered Jericho. Once in the letter of James and once in the book of Hebrews, Rahab is commended for her faith.

Still, those are the only three New Testament references from Joshua. So why not just throw out this book; or at least not read it often or with the same reverence we have for the Gospels or the Psalms? One reason is that it is in the book— the Bible, not just *The Path*— whether we like it or not. So we remain on the hook for reading it prayerfully, in community, and with faithful scholarship, to learn what the Spirit is saying to God's people through it.

We can use a spiritual interpretation of Joshua so that we can read it and still remain true to our faith in Christ. We believe that violence against others justified in God's name is not congruent with that faith. To be clear, the Church does acknowledge the important role that police and military can play to serve, protect, and defend *against* violence. But Christians do not accept violence as a way of life.

Instead of using the book of Joshua as justification for violence, we can learn instead non-violent alternatives from these New Testament references from Joshua. The story of Jericho is a prime example. The people of Israel marched around the city of Jericho for days, blowing trumpets and trusting in God to defeat their enemy. And God did. The rest of the story turns ugly including mass destruction. But the first part is an example for us to this day.

Throughout more recent history, people of faith have used a similar approach to bring change. Marches and music, prayer and protests, have brought down other walls without the need for violence: the end of English rule in India; the Civil Rights movement in our nation; the fall of Apartheid South Africa; and the fall of a literal wall in Berlin. Without firing a shot in anger, great changes came that reversed the course of history.

This is important for us to remember because some of us may think non-violence is impractical. But in the fall of the walls of Jericho, it was God's supernatural intervention, not human weapons, which brought the miraculous change. In our world today, we need to remember how non-violent action combined with trust in God can bring down what seem like insurmountable walls of injustice.

The story of Rahab teaches us to look for unexpected allies in our life of faith and our work for justice. In today's divisive public life, we are too quick to stigmatize people as enemies. We write off people as uninformed or unintelligent or even immoral. When we do that, regardless of the issue, we miss the opportunity to find our Rahab. Someone we may think we have nothing in common with may have been hearing what God is doing and want to switch sides.

When the Spirit is working among people different from us, it is important that we be open to them and what the Spirit is doing. No one group has the exclusive franchise on working to bring God's peaceable kingdom to earth. A good recent example of this is Gov. Deal's work for prison reform in our state.

Though his political party is known as being tough on crime as the "law and order" party, the governor has worked hard to bring justice and compassion-- and common sense-- to the issue of prison reform. He and his allies are working to reduce recidivism by better reintegrating into society our fellow citizens who have completed their sentences. There is still much reform needed, but it is heartening that liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans can find common ground in this area.

The passage we heard read today is from the end of the book of Joshua. Ironically it is the same Old Testament lesson assigned for today from the Revised Common Lectionary (what we normally use to find our Sunday lessons for the Eucharist). In it we hear Joshua's farewell address, his challenge to the people of Israel, to stay faithful to God. In a powerful statement often represented today on bumper stickers and motivational art, Joshua said:

"...choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

That is the type of statement that should excite our faith and motivate us to love and serve God. But as we move on from the book of Joshua, it is important that we remember what our faith is. It is not a faith that embraces the violence from this biblical book or the dark parts of Christian history. Instead, we have committed to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Let us choose this day whom we will serve and what our service will look like in our world today. Amen.