

## **What is Your Truth 11/20**

Opening Prayer and Question (What is a Biblical passage that you think about a lot?)

I wanted to begin our talk today with that prayer that Brooks shared with me, and by giving all of you a chance to share what passages for scripture were special for you, because part of what I think of when I think of Scripture as God's word is that when you read it becomes part of you. As the prayer put it, it is like we digest God's word contained in Scripture. And when we digest God's word, when it becomes a part of us, when it is on our minds and in our hearts, it makes a profound difference. When we are in a time of difficulty and remember the words contained in Philippians that "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength," or we see someone in need and remember Jesus' words that "whatever you do to the least among you, you do for me," or we lose a loved one and remember Jesus' declaration before raising Lazarus from the dead that "I am the resurrection and the life," the fact that it is these words that come to mind can make a profound difference in our lives and the lives of others.

We talked in a previous session about the power of liturgy, and in our Sunday school class at First Baptist we are discussing creeds. Now the Baptist tradition that I'm part of isn't very liturgical (at least in the traditional sense), and we are not creedal, so often it is the passages of Scripture that we know well that function much like creeds or liturgy. They stick deep in our memories and deep in our hearts to remind us of who God is and what God is calling us to do. Such to me is power and truth of God's word contained in Scripture.

However, anyone who has spent time in God's word also knows that for all the passages that inspire us with hope, there are also those passages (even whole books) which perplex us and challenge us. And I want to spend some time tonight addressing this aspect of the Bible as God's word, the aspect of when it is challenging to accept the idea of the Bible as God's word.

Now at one level, the fact that the Bible challenges us is part of what makes it God's word. If the Bible simply affirmed what it is we human beings usually do and think and say, it really wouldn't be God's word. As I say this, I think of the

Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel which contains lines that challenge the way I live my life every time I read them. Passages like: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'<sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

<sup>23</sup> Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." I used to read that growing up, when I fought with my brother all the time, and would think to myself "well Jesus didn't have my brother to deal with." Luckily my brother and I get along very well now. But when I read passage like that one, or when Jesus says in the same chapter: <sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," I begin to think of how that word does not apply to me or my situation or my enemies. Surely not I Lord!

Now I'm guessing I'm not alone in this, in fact as one of my professors from seminary put it, there is a long history on the Christian tradition of trying to explain why what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount doesn't really apply to me. And indeed, much of what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount is challenging, even seemingly impossible to live by, but then again the words of a holy God to a sinful humanity should strike us as challenging, difficult and counterintuitive. Yet they also seem to strike us (don't they), despite their challenging nature, as the way things really ought to be. And indeed I hope that I will continue to return to Jesus' challenging words in the Sermon on the Mount throughout my life, that they would continue to challenge me to live a more godly life.

However there are passages of Scripture, that I think challenges us in a different sort of way. We find some passages of Scripture challenging because we are confused, perplexed, bothered even by how God acts in that passage. As I say this, I think of the stories of Israel's first two kings, Saul and David, as recorded in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. In my mind these two books contain some of the most engaging stories of Scripture, but there are also moments in those books that can leave us perplexed at God, especially regarding his decision to reject Saul, but not do the same for David, who seems to have sinned greatly as well. In fact, it often seems that others bear more of the brunt of David's wrongdoing than David does. However, I read a commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel that helped me make a little more sense of how to approach these two books. The author suggested that those who lived through the events recorded probably wondered about and were perplexed by God's actions as well, as we are today. Like them, we wonder today as we see events unfold why did it happen in this way, where is God in all this.

Indeed there are some passages in Scripture (especially the Book of Job and part of the Book of Psalms) where we see people explicitly wondering where God is and what he is up to, but I had never before thought that some of the passages of Scripture that don't explicitly feature these questions might still invite these questions and that's OK. In fact, it is kind of amazing that the words that God inspired would invite these kinds of questions. It tells us that God, in his mercy and love toward us, is willing for us to come to him with the questions about justice, fairness and bad things happening in this world that all of us have. We as human beings have these kinds of questions and I think it is wonderful that God's word provides space for these questions that are part of our human experience.

And this is partly why Scripture rings so true to me as the word of God. It rings true not only in regard to who God is, but in regard to who we are as human beings. This is partly why I love to read the Old Testament, as well as the New. I hear a lot of people say they don't care for the Old Testament, just give me the New. However, I see in the Old Testament who we can be as humans at our worst and at our best. We see the faithfulness we can aspire to in Abraham, the diligence, courage and wisdom we can aspire to in Esther, Daniel and Joseph, the care and concern toward other people we can aspire to (even when people are stubborn and hard to love ) in Moses. On the flip side we see the corrupting power of greed in King Ahab, the folly of human arrogance in the story of Babel,

the evil of jealousy in the story of Cain. Sometimes in the same individual we can see us at our best and worst. In David we see incredible courage and faithfulness early in his life, giving way to horrible abuses of power later on.

Yet throughout the Old Testament, in the face of human sin and injustice, we see God's grace. Sometimes we dismiss the Old Testament as containing a portrait of a God of wrath, in contrast to the New Testament depiction of a God of love. I even wrote a paper at Colgate making that contrast, but I wouldn't write that same paper today after actually reading a lot more of the Old Testament, because I now see God's mercy and grace is all over the Old Testament. We see it when God spares Adam and Eve's life when they disobey him and commit a sin that is supposed to carry with it the death penalty, but instead God lovingly makes clothes for them to help them endure the harsh new reality they have created for themselves. We see it in God forgiving the city of Nineveh after they repent. We see it in God having mercy on his people and delivering them from exile in Babylon. The Old Testament is full of God's grace.

And if we really take a look at the New Testament, God's judgment is by no means absent. Jesus speaks of separating the goats (who neglected those in need) from the sheep (who helped those in need) on the day of judgment, he says it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the last day than for those towns who reject his disciples, and that it would be better for someone to have a mill stone tied around their neck and thrown into the sea than to be the cause of one of the little ones who believe in him to stumble. We are sometimes left feeling uneasy after reading passages like these, but in a world where we see children exploited, children killed in war and brainwashed into being soldiers, women abused, people becoming the victims of hate because of the color of their skin, I don't think we should shy away from thinking of God's grace, yes, but also his judgement on our sin (which proceeds his grace). Furthermore, if God is a God of love which I thoroughly believe him to be, is it not inevitable that he would also be a God of wrath? For if we truly love someone, we are going to feel some wrath when they are abused, mistreated, attacked, or treated unfairly. I think the same is true of God. When we read depictions of God's wrath, I think it is intimately wrapped up in God's love.

Such is my truth that indeed the Old and New Testaments do fit together as a single witness to God's love for a sinful humanity, but even when it comes to the

New Testament, we sometimes aren't too interested in reading all of it. I've heard several people say, including one my TAs at seminary, that they don't care much for reading Paul's letters. I couldn't disagree more. I love reading Paul's letters, for me they explain the why behind Christ's death and resurrection. More than that, Paul helped found some of the very first churches and his letters speak in a powerful spirit-filled way about the same challenges we face as pastors and churches today. I have a special place in my heart for 1 Corinthians, where it is clear the church in Corinth has written to Paul to ask him to settle the various squabbles they are having, and he declines to do so, instead saying the real issue isn't who is right and wrong, but that you all aren't loving each other as Christ called you to do. And then he famously reminds them "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. [5](#)It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. [6](#)Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. [7](#)It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. [8](#)Love never fails." These words are powerful on their own without knowing the context, but when you know the context how powerfully do they speak into our current context of division among Christians and in our nation. Now one thing that we have to be cognizant of when we read Paul's letters is that he is writing into a different cultural context, with different assumptions about the role of women for instance, but I think a community like ours in Hamilton is well qualified to understand and appreciate the differences in culture that exist when we read Paul's letters and other parts of scripture.

Part indeed of the wonder of Scripture for me is that God partnered with specific human beings who were inspired by his spirit in a concrete time and place. He partnered with human beings, foibles and all, to write his word. And in the same way he partners with us, in our current time and place, to live out that word in our world. One thing I love about God's word is that he inspired many different authors to compose it. I love the fact that we get four different perspectives on Jesus' ministry through the four Gospels. We see Mark's focus on Jesus as a Messiah of action casting out demons, which would have connected well with Mark's original Roman audience, we see Matthew focusing on Jesus fulfilling the words of the Old Testament, which would have connected with Matthew's original Jewish audience, we see the Gentile physician Luke focusing more than any other Gospel writer on Jesus' miracles of healing and writing a second volume (the Book of Acts) about how the church came to embrace both Jews and Gentiles, and we have John who gives us a decidedly more spiritual Gospel than the other three. I feel that my perceptive on Jesus is greatly enhanced by these multiple viewpoints on his

ministry. But there is one notable problem of having four accounts, there are places where they don't all agree. For instance, there are variances in where three of the Gospels say that Jesus cast out demons who bear the name "Legion," but to me such variances are part of the fact that God partnered with real live human beings.

Jess and I have been reminiscing recently about the huge snowstorm that hit Buffalo one November, and how we were happy to be Illinois at the time and not in Buffalo. We remember watching national TV and saying that's right where we went out to eat all the time, or right where I used to work. We remember watching the radar loop of the band of snow and being amazed because it was not moving even a little bit, it just sat there and periodically you could see more energy moving into it off the lake, but it did not move. And we thought to ourselves, that's just south of the city right where our families live, oh boy. We remembered all this, but one thing we were having trouble remembering was what year it happened in. One of us said 2015, one of us 2014. So, if we had written accounts of this before we could just check on Wikipedia, we would have had two differing accounts of what year this happened in. That wouldn't have made the incredible events we remembered false, it would simply have meant the accounts were written by real live human beings trying to remember. In fact, if you read testimony from multiple people that is exactly the same in every detail, it is almost certainly contrived (not trustworthy).

So, I am thankful we have multiple Gospels, I am thankful that we have 66 Books in our Bible, because they together form a kaleidoscope of perspectives on our God who is greater than any one perspective. I'm thankful for the oft maligned legalistic passages of Scripture because, as psychologists have shown, it is often very important to have lines you will absolutely not cross, like not committing adultery, not killing someone, not stealing, etc. In the same way, I'm thankful that Jesus elucidated the spirit behind the Law, because anyone who has encountered overly bureaucratic structures has seen the danger of knowing the letter of the law but losing track of the spirit. I'm thankful for the theology of Paul that helps me connect to God with my mind, and I am thankful for the narrative passage of scripture that help me to connect to God, and to others, with my heart. I'm thankful that Scripture teaches me the truth about who God is, who I am, and who God calls me to be. And that is why Scripture being God's word for us is my truth.