

How Not To Read The Bible

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Sunday, June 05, 2011

This is a sermon about how not to read the Bible. In particular, I focus on the subject of same gender relations, or how some Christians use the Bible to exclude Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered persons. I focus on this subject because I frequently hear the condemnations implied when otherwise thoughtful Christians come up against the subject of same sex relations. They get a little weird. It's as though Christian love and welcome apply everywhere except to this one area of life.

But my purpose is still to talk about how to read the Bible because it's not just in the area of sex and gender that Christians can get strange. It is as though the Bible has become a book of rules instead of a book of love. You can see what I mean in the passage of 1 Corinthians today. Once upon a time the Corinthians lived hopelessly divided, contentious, sad and angry lives. Paul came to them with the wonderful news of Jesus Christ – his love and forgiveness. For a time the Corinthians give over their lives to the Lord in gladness. But little by little they fall back into old ways. It's not a pretty picture. People have started to use the name of Jesus to beat each other over the head in disputes about work, marriage, sex, family, food, and worship. They seem in particular to be quoting scripture at each other.

No, Paul says. Get to know Jesus himself. Let his life take over. Have his mind. He will change everything and you will have everything you need! And then in this beautiful passage, Paul says, *Look at me. Look at what Christ has done with me. Knowing Jesus, I have let all knowledge, all boasting, all judgments, all positions and roles go, in order to share with you the richness of Christ's love for you without condition and without condemnation, so you can receive it and let Jesus' love work in you.*

Now I want you to notice something. Paul does not quote Scripture! He speaks of his own experience of Christ's life-changing love. He invites the Corinthians into their own experience of Jesus. But he does not quote a word of the Scripture available to him. He speaks from his heart.

The Bible, you see, is a window. In this passage it is a window into Paul's heart. In the bigger picture, the Bible is a window into God's heart.

We live in the house of our lives as though that's all there is – our memories and hopes, our histories, our fears, our judgments. The Bible is a window in that house. Outside the house is a bigger world, of light and seasons greater than anything we can imagine living inside. The Bible is a window constructed by others before us who, like us, have lived in the house. They wanted to let the light in!

But the window is still part of the house and the Bible is still only a frame for the glory that is God! The window is made of glass and wood, and the Bible is made of human stories and human judgments. What is authoritative for our lives is not the window, but what shines through! You can describe to me in glowing terms the beauty and importance of the window, but the window does not make sunshine and warmth. I can study and appreciate and practice and learn the Bible, but it is Christ himself who gives life and truth.

I say this because sometimes people mistake the Bible for a locked door. They want to tell you there's a world of God's love out there, but you can't see it until you unlock all the Bible locks. You have to read certain things, do certain things, avoid certain things, decide certain things, oppose certain things, stand for certain things, then you get to open the door. It's the biggest "To Do" list in the world.

God forbid you should look out the window! Or open it!

I once was asked to be a guest preacher at a church in Massachusetts that was approaching the subject of Open and Affirming – the UCC statement that GLBT folks are welcome and celebrated in our churches. My own congregation had been through an Open and Affirming Process in 2000, and this church wanted to know how to go about it. So I simply told the story of my church got there and how Open and Affirming became part of the spiritual DNA of the church. The service went well. Afterwards, during coffee hour, a couple of people came up to me and demanded that I explain how I can welcome GLBT folks when in the Bible – particularly in

Leviticus and in some of Paul's writing – there are passages that appear to scorn sexual relations in same gender relationships. They did not want to discuss these passages. They did not want to talk about our direct experience of Jesus. They did not want to pray with me about the subject. They simply wanted to lock the door of the church.

Well, you can't argue with someone who wants to put a locked door where a window is. So I invited them to continue in the conversation in their church and inside I asked for help from Jesus not to get angry.

My point to you this morning is that once you begin to let in the light and love of Jesus Christ, there is no dark corner of life that stays hidden. The Bible is the words of our ancestors about their experience of the Word of God. The Bible is inspired. It is transforming. But the Bible is still part of the house and does not create the light!

So let me offer you a couple of things about how to read the Bible:

1. Never read the Bible as condemning who you are. God did not create you for condemnation.
2. Never read the Bible as dictated by God word for word! The Bible is a gift from our ancestors and it is filtered by their times, their languages and their cultures. God's love is perfect and we are not.
3. Never let someone beat you over the head with Scripture! They may surely be reading their Bibles, but are they lifting their heads up from the book and listening to Jesus?
4. When it comes to what the Bible says about homosexuality, remember what Jesus himself said about same gender relationships: nothing, absolutely nothing!
5. When people quote the highly select passages in the Old Testament from Leviticus and in the New Testament from Romans and in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, remember that scripture condemns any relationships that turn out to be predatory, oppressive or exploitive – heterosexual or homosexual.
6. Remember most of all that scripture and the Bible are not all about sex! You want to know what Scripture is worried about? Look at the 2350 passages that concern money and possessions, and not the

fewer than a hundred passages that worry about sexual relations of all kinds.

7. Finally, If you must quote scripture, remember on what Jesus said all the law and all the commandments hang: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength. This is the first commandment. And a second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.*

When anyone tries to make a locked door out of scripture for any reason – when anyone tries to make a rule book out of scripture that puts him or her in a position of judging you – when anyone condemns you on the basis of scripture – when anyone speaks with a voice of scorn or anger or resentment using scripture – when anyone lords it over you because he or she knows scripture and you don't – when anyone tries to fix you with scripture – when anyone speaks for God with the voice of scripture – I say to you: *Go to Jesus directly and ask: Is this what you want for me, Jesus?*

When Jesus replies, he may not use words at all. He may not quote scripture at all. But you'll know it's Jesus. You'll feel your heart come unlocked and the window of your mind slip open to let sunshine and warmth come streaming in. You'll find that you no longer have to be afraid of anyone or anything on earth!

Amen