

“SHARING BREAD”

Matthew 7:7-12; Luke 13:20-21

February 5, 2017

Rev. Jerry Duggins

The four Gospels that we include as part of our scriptures, despite some different emphases, all agree on the main point: Jesus brings good news. The ministry of Jesus, as described by Matthew and Mark, begins with the proclamation that “the reign of God is at hand.” In Luke, Jesus concludes his inaugural sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth by noting that God has sent him “to bring good news to the poor.” And John opens his gospel with: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth... and to all who believe in him, he gave power... to become children of God.”

Noted feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues that we should read the Bible with a view toward the good news that dominates its pages. She remarks that literal interpretations of scripture frequently stand in the way of hearing the good news. You may remember when I talked about racism several weeks ago how theologians of the pre-civil war era used scripture to justify the institution of slavery. Interpreted literally, Paul’s instruction for slaves to obey their masters certainly suggests tacit approval for the institution. Taken literally, Joshua’s conquest of the land of Canaan suggests divine approval for violence, at least in some circumstances. And more importantly to Fiorenza, the patriarchal culture presumed by the biblical world, taken literally, has led to the ongoing oppression of women down to the present day.

By way of contrast, she proposes that a feminist approach to the Bible “has to explore and assess whether and how Scripture can become an enabling, motivating resource and empowering authority in women’s struggle for justice, liberation, and solidarity” (p. xxiii). If her language seems a little abstract to you, let me put it in the form of a metaphor. You are no doubt familiar with the notion that it’s better to teach people to fish than to go on catching the fish for them. With respect to reading scripture, I’m suggesting that if you want to catch fish, it matters what kind of bait you use. If you want to understand what God desires through reading the Bible, it matters what kind of questions you ask. If you approach the Bible with a view toward unearthing all its inadequacies, you will generally find yourself catching a lot of carp, inedible fish. But if your desire is to discover the good news in the text, you may find that there are some quality eating fish in this pond.

This is not the same as wishful thinking. It does not mean ignoring everything that is difficult in the Bible. It does mean beginning with the assumption that the God of the Bible intends good for the world, for creation, and for human beings. For example, the Bible gives us a picture of the world in which people are different and these differences, like ethnic identity for instance, often lead to violence. This is the world we live in today as well, but the Bible offers an alternative to the violence. God promises to bless Abraham and Sarah... but with a view to blessing the rest of the world. God makes a covenant with Jews... but in the New Testament, we see that covenant extended to all

peoples. Paul acknowledges that there are differences in the church and recognizes that some have used these differences to divide... but they are in fact what makes the church strong. Diversity is beautiful.

Good news isn't always the easiest thing. Welcoming the stranger can be scary... but building bridges is in the long run better for the world than putting up fences. Jesus tells us to love our enemies... not easy, but there is no other path to friendship, to a safer world.

Janet talked about prophetic ministry last week. The prophets had some harsh words for the people of Israel... but these challenges open the path to peace, freedom and justice. Martin Luther King argued that whites could not be free until blacks were free. Fiorenza would argue the same for men and women. Freedom happens when we recognize the good and the dignity of each other.

I have to confess that I've never finished Fiorenza's book. In fact I've only ever read the introduction. It's not a book I'd recommend, since she writes for scholars, but the title holds a host of wisdom for all of us. In three words, she describes what we should be looking for when we read the Bible. *Bread Not Stone*. When we look to the Bible for nourishment, as a source of food that helps us mature in faith and grow into the sort of people that God calls us to be... well, the manna is there. Each day it comes to us fresh, not stale.

But we have not always done this. Too often we read the Bible as a tablet of stone. We see an unchanging set of rules that are unable to adapt to new circumstances. We impose ancient prejudice on our own time, seeing the shortcomings of humanity as outlined in scripture as signs for how to behave today, instead of as warnings designed to point us down an alternative path. We have used the Bible to bind us instead of freeing us for life.

Not only should we read the Bible as bread not stone, we should live this way as well, offering to others bread not stones. The kingdom of God, according to Luke is like a woman who adds leaven to the bread until it is leavened all the way through. Jesus asks in Matthew, "Is there anyone among you, who if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?"

Well, we do sometimes give our children stones. If we gave them bread all the time, we wouldn't need the prophets. We'd already be working on finding the bread that's going to nurture the 25 per cent of children living in poverty in this county. We'd be looking for alternatives to incarceration for vast numbers of nonviolent drug offenders inhabiting our prisons. We'd be more passionate about working toward a healthier planet than continuing to find ways for us to take more and more from it.

But to be fair, it's not always easy to discern the difference between bread and stones. At what point does pushing our children to become successful in life compromise their

ability to build healthy and happy lives? When is tough love the bread that nurtures a person toward health instead of the listening and compassionate ear.

The scriptures offer us some important principles. Love conquers fear. Forgiveness heals. Justice and mercy belong together. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that God is about religion alone. Faith is constantly crossing the artificial boundaries we've placed between religion and the rest of life. God cares about the refugee, about the oppressed, about justice. Hopefully, we've been clear these past few weeks that God opposes words and actions that promote fear and hatred, that the stranger holds a special place in God's heart and that prophetic witness in some form belongs to the life of faith. God loves the world, not just you and me.

Jesus sits at table with his disciples and shares bread, not stones. One will betray him. The others will deny him. None will stand with him in his hour of trial. Still he gives bread not stones. "Feed my sheep," he tells Peter as he prepares to leave the earth. Give bread, not stones.

If you wanted to find stones in the scripture, it would not be hard. You can manufacture a rationale for slavery, make up reasons why women should be subordinate to men. You can twist its intent to justify self-righteousness. But these things are so far from the love of God that we are meant to discover in the scriptures. There is bread to nurture our faith, bread to refresh the soul, to build community. Bread that helps to let go of fear and to have courage for the struggles we face in life. There is bread that feeds the desire for justice, that builds us up in love. And there is bread enough... bread enough to share. Amen.

Resources:

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Beacon Press: Boston, 1984.