

MESSING UP OUR WORLD MAP

Practicing (for) the Kingdom: Scripture and Sermon

Luke 4:14-21

I was three or four years old
when I memorized my very first whole Bible verse: Jeremiah 17:9.
I remember exactly where I was when I learned it.
I was down the street at a neighbor lady's house
in the city of St. Petersburg, FL.
She was leading a Neighborhood Bible club for kids.

I remember how proud I was
when I came home to our little tan house on 11th Avenue
and recited my Bible verse to my family,
“The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately wicked—who can know it?
Jeremiah 17:9”
To this day, that King James verse and its reference
are etched on my mind.

I didn't dawn on me at the time,
but I have since wondered why they *started* with a verse
about my desperately wicked four-year old heart,
instead of a verse about how much God loved me.

I have a hunch.
I think this neighborhood Bible club was
a well-meaning, but misguided child evangelism strategy.
The strategy was to use scripture and reason,
to teach four-year-old children
how wicked their little hearts were,
so they would make a personal, rational decision for Christ,
and never, *ever* follow their wicked and deceitful hearts *again*.

I don't think I suffered any permanent damage from the Bible club—
you can be the judge—
but I *am* glad that wasn't my *only* exposure to scripture growing up.

I was *also* part of a loving church family in St. Petersburg,

that met every Sunday morning for worship,
and Sunday evenings and Wednesday evenings,
and regularly engaged in the public practice of reading scripture
and proclaiming good news in sermons.
And *furthermore*, in this small church, the preachers were my friends.
I knew and trusted the fun-loving Ray Himes,
and the gentle and quieter Paul Zehr.
And I felt safe with the matronly, African-American woman
who was my Sunday School teacher,
and who taught the scripture,
and demonstrated God's unconditional love for me.

Personal reading and study of scripture is *vital*ly important.
Neighborhood and community Bible studies are wonderful!
We have two strong community Bible studies here,
on Tuesdays and Wednesdays,
that fill an important function,
and we will *keep* them going.

But . . .
the real home of scripture is in the midst of the church
gathered in worship.

Theology professor Jim Fodor wrote, “worship is Scripture's home,
its native soil, its most congenial habitat.”

James K. A. Smith wrote,
“scriptures are the script for the worshiping community
they narrate our identity as a people of God.”

Our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* says,
“The Bible is the essential book of the church.
Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit . . . guides the church
in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship.”

Scriptures *are* at the core of our identity as a people gathered.
They witness to the nature and character of the God we worship.
They witness to the person of Jesus Christ, the Living Word.
They are the starting place for the worshiping community
to do ethical discernment.

They are essential for us as a church
to develop our collective vision of the good life.

It is, perhaps, one of the most important things we do when we gather.
Most of our practices of worship involve us saying things to God—
praise, thanksgiving, confession, commitment.
The practice of hearing the scripture *read*,
and then proclaimed, and reflected on in a sermon,
is an exercise in *listening*.
It's an essential part of what makes worship a conversation.

Of course, when the Bible is read or preached
that's not the *end* of the conversation.
It's not God's "last word" so to speak.

At least *I* won't claim that kind of authority when I preach.
I want all of you who hear my words to realize—
I speak simply in hope and in trust
that my words are pleasing to God,
but they are not the *last* word.
They are the beginning of a conversation,
and all of you, *always*, are invited to join the conversation.

But I would also say that the reading aloud of our sacred text,
and the preacher's proclamation of what she or he
believes that text might mean for our life in this world,
are ways that we put scripture out on the table, so to speak,
in the midst of the church.

We put it on the table in order for the church to be shaped by it,
to reverence it as God's word,
to be obedient to it, for *sure*.
But *not* without, at the *same* time,
doing the hard work of communal discernment.

We listen to it, *then* we respond,
we ask questions of it,
we wonder out loud together,
we sit in silent meditation,

we diligently compare and contrast,
we analyze for greater clarity,
we pray for illumination,
we read it from different cultures, different locations,
to see if our vantage point changes how it speaks to us.
And then, *ultimately*, we submit ourselves to it
as the Word of God to us.

But the Word of God must *always* be situated among the people of God.
One of Mennonite World Conference's seven shared convictions,
says it this way:
"The faith community, under Holy Spirit guidance,
interprets the Bible in the light of Jesus Christ
to discern God's will for our obedience."
"The faith community . . . interprets the Bible."

There's a very popular Sunday School song we all know.
"The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me,
I stand alone on the Word of God, The B-I-B-L-E."
It has a second verse.
"The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me,
I read and pray and then obey, The B-I-B-L-E."
And there's a popular Christian saying that goes,
"God said it. I believe it. That settles it."

We have noble intentions when we sing that song,
or put that slogan on a T-shirt or bumper sticker.
We are *trying*, I believe, to declare that scripture is a reliable foundation,
that it's trustworthy.
As well we should.

But to say it *that* way, with all that "I" language, is—
if you'll pardon me—bad theology.
To think someone, in isolation,
can simply read, believe, and apply scripture
immediately, directly, without the interpretive community,
might sound good to the ears of us modern individualists.
But that would have been a foreign concept
to our sixteenth-century Anabaptist forebears.

It would have been unthinkable in the early church.
And the scriptures themselves reject the idea.
The scriptures belong to the people of God,
and they are interpreted by the people of God.

Even *Jesus* knew that was the case.

He was a rabbi, and participated in the rabbinical tradition
of reading, discussing, and debating the scriptures.
Many times you find Jesus discussing scripture,
either with his disciples, or his detractors.
He started this, apparently, as a 12-year-old,
when he stayed behind at the temple discussing Moses' law,
instead of going home with his parents.

And he continued the practice in today's Gospel reading.
In the synagogue he read the lectionary text for the day,
from Isaiah,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news
to the poor . . . captives . . . blind, etc."

Then he offered an interpretation, a mini-sermon—
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
He was saying this scripture had to do with the present day,
that the kingdom was among them now.

And his fellow Nazareth townspeople did *not*, by *any means*,
accept Jesus' sermon as the last word on the matter.
They disputed it to the point they practically
threw the preacher Jesus off a cliff.

. . . I can only hope my sermons never
bring out that urge in you.

But, *actually*, except for the fact that it escalated into potential violence,
Jesus and his fellow congregants in Nazareth
were practicing *exactly* what all good Jews *did*
when they gathered to worship.
They listened to the scriptures read aloud.
Then they heard someone in their community comment on it.

Then they discussed it.

The way we do worship today, in a group of 300-plus,
makes the sermon hard to turn into two-way speech.
That's why we simply *must* find other ways
to continue the conversation begun here.

Because when we listen to the scripture—
read, proclaimed, interpreted in community—
it has the power to truly re-map our world.

I have a preacher friend who says he inwardly cringes when he hears,
"That was a really nice sermon, Pastor,"
even though he knows the person meant well.
He said he'd *much* rather hear,
"God used you to destroy my world today."

That's what an encounter with the word ought to do.
And *that's* why the folks in Nazareth objected to what Jesus said.
Jesus' way of reading Isaiah did not fit their interpretive grid.
They saw the world *one* way.
And the prophet Isaiah, through Jesus' interpretation,
re-drew the map.
It messed up their world map,
to the point they couldn't think rationally about it.

But don't *all* of us, somewhere deep down,
actually *want* to have our world map messed up,
if the map we have,
given to us the culture we live in,
isn't the same map God uses to navigate the world.
Wouldn't we *rather* have an accurate map
to navigate by.

Our heart cry, I believe . . .
the desire of our heart with which we were created, I believe,
is to be drawn toward God in love and companionship,
and to be drawn toward each other in covenant.
But our desires have been formed in other directions by our culture.

We need the public communal practice of hearing the Word
read, proclaimed, interpreted
to reshape our desires,
to mess up our world map.

Culture's map will only draw us into ourselves.

So . . . if we were created for wholeness,
for relationships of shalom with God and with others,
for just a closer walk with God,
we need a better map.

May God's grace, through our encounters with scripture,
take us there.

Let's turn in *Sing the Journey* #106.

—*Phil Kniss, February 20, 2011*