

In the name of God: +Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's taken years for me to reconcile myself with the writings of the apostle Paul. Years of prayer, years of study, years of learning to put aside my own prejudice and bias about his language. As I learned to read the Pauline letters from a 1st century Common Era perspective, I discovered that Paul wasn't as misogynist as I wanted him to be. Lydia and Phoebe and the other women who supported his ministry and led the small house churches of the day were key players in the spread of the Jesus Movement. If he were the woman-hater I'd convinced myself of, he would never have allowed women to be in leadership...especially in that day and age.

This reconciliation came because my understanding of Scripture changed. My years of Education for Ministry, collegial Bible study, and New Testament classes in seminary gave me the tools to look at these ancient writings critically.

- What was the world like when this was written?
- Why would the 'so-called' authors of these texts choose to make these points?

- What is the overarching message that today's Christian community should take from these chapters and verses?
- What about this is so important that the people who decided it should be canonized?
- If you are focusing on a verse, or several verses, or even a chapter – what comes before and after them. What is the context?

These tools make the difference between the Bible being understood as the story of God's love for God's people and it becoming a weapon for human sinfulness.

Let's look at Paul's letters to the Church in Corinth with a critical eye.

Written somewhere between 54 and 56 of the common era, Paul's desire is to combat the lack of penitence in this sinful, port city. In the second letter, Paul hopes to reconcile with someone who has hurt him deeply. And, if this weren't bad enough, there are opponents of Paul who are using the time-honored methods of triangulation and misinformation to discredit him.

The two letters we have from Paul to the Corinthians are more likely to be 3 or 4 letters, reconstructed to tell the story of Paul and his relationship with this cantankerous bunch of people, who were making it difficult for earnest believers to be Christian without being lumped into the inappropriate theology of that other group.

Any of this sound familiar?

Given the history of the struggles of the Corinthian church in a culture that does not support a Christian message, mixed with a group of people who believe the church should be going in a different direction than one of its founders, is there any doubt that statements such as these are a part of the two canonical letters?

“Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolators, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God.” (1Cor 6:9b-11, NRSV)

AND

“For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil! (2Cor 5:16, NRSV)

Did you notice?

In both of these examples, if the first sentence of the quote had been taken on its own, the message is drastically changed? The first part of the quote, on its own, could be interpreted as threatening. “None of these will inherit the kingdom.” “All of us must appear before the judgment seat...”

To get to the message Paul is trying to send to the Corinthians, we need complete verses, an understanding of the culture, and the point in history in which he lives. When we consider the total picture, we discover an imperfect man of faith using the tools at his disposal to make the case for himself and the Gospel to a people he loves.

This week, another epistle of Paul’s has made it to public discourse. Romans 13 has been quoted by a government official. Well, part of it has, anyway.

The point of Romans 13 was to help a community, living in an incredibly diverse and soul-less society, understand how their faith influences their behavior. This understanding is described beginning IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER in verse 9.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” (Rom 12:9, NRSV).

Paul did not equate Christian behavior with anarchy. In fact, he understood the function of the state is to promote the good of its citizens. Therefore, he is asking the church in Rome to follow the laws for the common good.

Paul completes this chapter by saying “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Christians, therefore, are to be held to a higher standard than the rest of the Roman population.

As a priest, it is my task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion my life in accordance with its precepts. (From the Ordination of a Priest, BCP pg 531) At times, I would love to just chop off the last part of that sentence. Let's face it, sin can be fun! However, that's not what I'm called to do and be.

As laity, you covenant to "continue in the apostles' teachings, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" by saying "I will with God's help." (BCP pg. 304) Don't you just wish you could make that answer go away sometimes? But, our promises are made and renewed and are a part of who we are called to do and be. Our behavior must follow our promises.

In our proclamations and in our learnings, we must always consider what is going on behind the scenes of Scripture. There is always more than meets the eye. We must take the time to learn about the world in which the books of the Bible were written and why they made it through the canonization process. We must be responsible in interpreting ancient texts and connecting them to contemporary culture.

And, we must never – NEVER – cherry pick verses to defend our own actions.

This is not Christian.

In fact, this practice has driven more people away from the message of Christ's redemption of this world than it has attracted. It is the epitome of sin.

The use of scripture to drive secular messaging has been going on for a very long time. It didn't start last week and it likely will not end any time soon. We must use scripture wisely and well and to share the good news of eternal life in Christ.

Remember:

The overarching message of scripture is that God loves us and all of creation, by, through, and in Christ. We are to be known to the rest of the world by how we love each other.

And, as our Presiding Bishop says, "If it isn't about love, it's not about God."

Amen.