

Braving the Bible
Ephesians 5: 15-33
First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN
August 22, 2021
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart

As Pastor Lauren noted in this week's Chronicle, we may feel the pain of conflict and suffering around the world, especially this week with the earthquakes in Haiti and turmoil in Afghanistan. Since this sermon will not directly address that suffering I invite you into a practice to try from Valerie Kaur¹:

Notice the grief you have been carrying in your body about what's happening in the world. Now think about the causes of that grief. Let images flash before your eyes. Slowly, if it's available to you, let your fists start to clench.

Notice what it feels like to want to fight back. Notice your fists clench, jaws close, heart beat rise. Your impulse to fight is not something to be ashamed of or to suppress. Honor it. You are alive, and there is something worth fighting for. Then stop, breathe, and ask:

What will you do with this energy? How will you channel the fight impulse into something that gives life? You have a role to play that no one else can play. You don't have to know all the answers now. You simply need to allow yourself to feel the power that you have, the abilities that you have, the voice that you have, and invite that deepest wisdom inside of you to guide you into what you need to do now and next.

May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

Have you had that stop in your tracks, open-mouthed gasp moment reading a verse of scripture wondering- why is that in the Bible? Maybe it happened just a few moments ago as Elizabeth Olson read these words from Ephesians. If the lectionary had its way, you would not have heard those words read as part of today's selection.

The lectionary is a three-year cycle of set readings followed by Christian churches across the denominational spectrum. Pastor Lauren and I have been preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary focusing on its journey through the letter of Ephesians.

A series could be devised from what was excised from the lectionary. We could do a whole sermon series with those scriptures and ask why - why was this slice preserved? And why did this part not make the cut? Today's section of Ephesians is such a section. Why would the lectionary shapers lop off verses 21- 33? Why would these editors eliminate it all together from the lectionary readings? If we are called to love in every venue of our lives, why would you wipe out what has been termed the Household Code?

It might be because these words are problematic! How do the words, "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" sit with you? For our contemporary ears these words ring harshly, especially for women. And we know that over time the word *submit* and the phrase *be subject to* have been used to sanction violence within our homes and relationships. Too often interpretation of words in the Bible have been used as a weapon and justification to maintain unequal even abusive power. I have heard your stories and shared my own of how words from this book have been used to shame, blame, correct and control.

¹ This practice was shared in an email entitled- "How to show up for Afghanistan with love", sent via info@revolutionarylove.net

In a worldview that sees black and white and not a lot of gray, scripture has been used to bind people rather than liberate them to be fully who God created them to be. What do we do with texts such as these? Is it enough to imitate the lectionary and take them out of circulation?

Many days I wish it were that easy. Let's just ignore the hard texts and agree we will only cobble together the stories that confirm our view. But we have harmful examples of that practice. Our nation's third president, Thomas Jefferson, published his own version of the Bible conveniently removing any references to freedom for enslaved persons in order to maintain power over the people he owned.

Peter Gomes, author of the *Good Book: Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind*² would urge us not to give up on the Bible – even passages such as this. In the book Gomes tackles biblical passages that support slavery, condemn homosexuality, subjugate women, and contribute to anti-Semitism. As he wades into the chapter entitled *The Bible and Women* he recalls the ministries of the numerous women in the Christian scriptures who serve significant roles in the church – Phoebe a deacon, Lydia a preacher by the river, Priscilla who with her husband were fellow workers with the apostle Paul and “risked their necks for his life.”³

The lifting up of these women's significant ministries stands in stark contrast to the image of wives being subject to husbands even in the most Christly love that we find in Ephesians. To this conundrum Gomes writes, “... the more seriously one takes scripture, the more difficult becomes the problem of its several, often contradictory, voices, and therefore more urgent becomes the development of a persuasive principle of interpretation by which the differences are reconciled, the authority of scripture maintained, and the moral and theological life developed from its teachings affirmed.”⁴

Whew! In simpler terms, we need to find and commit to a brave way to read the Bible that does not dismiss its context but finds the truth we need to live for today. In the United Church of Christ, we are fond of saying we don't take the Bible literally, but we do take it seriously. And thank God for that affirmation! As our social and political discourse draws on references from scripture or makes arguments that claim to be built on principles found in the Bible that demean and diminish people, it is incumbent on us to know the Word. We do this not to win an argument, but to take seriously that there is something to be gained in braving the Bible.

Gomes would suggest a way to take the Bible seriously is to be aware of the hurdles in our reading of scripture. He cautions, there is no such thing as plainly reading the words on the page. A piece of scripture does not simply “say what it says.” What we bring to our reading of scripture is what Gomes terms the culture or climate of interpretation. The very notion that there are hard passages in the Bible have more to do with how they are at odds with what we now think. “In other words,” Gomes writes, “the text is out of sync with our climate or culture of interpretation... and in order to make sense of the words it must be made to conform to our climate of interpretation.”⁵

Gomes wisely turns to a feminist theologian to close his chapter on women in the Bible. He turns to Dianne Bergant who describes her method of reading the Bible as “recontextualizing.”⁶ It involves three steps:

1. Looking carefully at the received tradition; how has this text come down to us from a history of interpretation?
2. How is the text received now?

² Peter Gomes, *Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, 1996.

³ Romans 16: 3-5

⁴ Gomes, *Ibid*, p. 131

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 132

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 137-8

3. Lifting up what can be important now for the community that reads and hears it.

I am grateful to Marian McKone who suggested the concept of Spiral Dynamics⁷ might add to our practice of reading scripture as well. Gomes summarizes such reading as: what did it mean then? How do we understand it now? What do we do with it or, what does it do with us?

Which brings us back to our text and homework for you! This reading today began with the words, “Be careful then how you live...” and continues with counsel on how to love. We know this scripture was born of a time when men held superior roles in the household and wider community - and women, slaves and children were subject to them. From what I have learned about you dear First UCC, this model does not reflect your households – but still its vestiges can surprise us like any learned patterns of behavior or deeply embedded in our culture. Not surprisingly, the letter writer struggles to hold this household description together with the new life in Christ that Paul and church leaders like him proclaimed. This Code as written does not square with the new life in Christ preached within the same letter where roles are more equalized, access to God’s love is for everyone and women had leadership positions in the church.

The only way we learn about these contradictions, however, is by centering the scripture in some practice of curiosity in our lives. Maybe that curious practice is what the writer to Ephesians lifts up themselves – singing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs. Maybe it is subscribing to the United Church of Christ Daily Devotional. Maybe it is my childhood family practice of reading scripture and a reflection on it out loud after a meal. Maybe it is intentional Bible Study together here.

I like the way Dan Hawk, Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Ashland Theological Seminary, thinks about the Bible. He writes⁸, “The Bible is a conversation that’s meant to be extended by its contemporary readers. It’s more a guidebook for faithful discernment than a rulebook to be imposed... It’s meant to transform more than inform. It invites us into a holy conversation permeated with the Spirit of God. It draws us into a Mystery that exhausts understanding. We experience the Bible more than we read it. In its pages we see the Christ...”

Dear First UCC - it matters that we take the Bible seriously, especially as we learn and experiment and try and fail to practice the courageous love and justice of Jesus. I mentioned homework just a bit ago – I encourage you – find a way to take the Bible seriously together. Tackle the hard texts. Ask big questions. Be brave with the Word. Start with this scripture. Ask, “I wonder what kind of household code now would reflect the love of Christ...” May God bless you in your braving. Amen.

⁷ For an example of Spiral Dynamics Marian McKone suggested the book, [The Never-Ending Quest](#) by Dr. Clare W. Graves

⁸ Dan Hawk, [Facebook post](#), August 15, 2021