

Wrestling with Biblical Authority

The Parable of the Wedding Feast

Matthew 22:1-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
October 12, 2014

Let's start by checking to see if there was anything in the news this past week that might have an impact on our ministry here at College Hill. O yeah, **marriage equality is now the law of the land here in the good state of Oklahoma!**

As you know, this past Monday morning the U.S. Supreme Court allowed lower court rulings to stand, thus declaring Oklahoma's (and certain other states) ban on same-gendered marriages unconstitutional. I sent a text that day to a friend with a simple message, "Guess we can retire the phrase, 'Not in my lifetime.'"

I was pleased that Bill Sherman, the Region Editor at the *Tulsa World*, called me on Tuesday to ask not only what I thought of the ruling (of which he already knew the answer), but also to ask where the Presbyterian denomination currently stands on this issue of marriage equality. Bill was a bit surprised to hear that the Presbyterian General Assembly's ruling this summer that allowed pastors to officiate at same-gender marriages, where it was legal, meant that the pastors who choose to do so here in Oklahoma can start doing them immediately. I reiterated, however, that the General Assembly's ruling also meant that no Presbyterian pastor, nor any individual congregation, is mandated that they have to support marriage equality. This is in hopes, of course, that fewer congregations will chose to leave the denomination.

What's really splitting our denomination, and others, isn't really the church's response to homosexuality itself. Rather, that's just the latest in a long line of issues where there is disagreement in how to interpret the Bible. Perhaps the primary point of contention between conservatives and progressives deals with the approach and understanding of **biblical authority**.

The bumper sticker, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it," is a completely indefensible argument, however. For **there's not a single person in the history of Christianity who isn't guilty of picking and choosing what to declare as God's unwavering word and eternal truth, and what's conditioned by the culture in which it was written, therefore no longer transferrable, lock, stock and barrel, into our day and age.** In other words, based on one's own biases and world perspective, people (including ourselves) claim that certain biblical passages must be understood literally and followed to the letter of the law, and that other biblical passages have wiggle room because we now understand things differently as they did two and three thousand years ago.

Experts, especially in the field of sociology and psychology, are still trying to figure out why there is such vehement opposition to accepting homosexuality as simply a point on the continuum of human sexuality is still so divisive, when other issues that are supported in the Bible, like slavery, the subjugation of women and their restriction from church leadership, and the removal from or denial of divorced persons to serve as

church leaders, are no longer such an issue – at least not in most mainline denominations.

It appears that the line in the sand used to determine what is pure and clean and what is not is a moving target. And that drives absolutists crazy. By the way, absolutists are found perhaps as much on the left as they are on the right. But for some reason, **accepting homosexuality as a part of God's good created order is among the issues where the line in the sand remains absolute for so many.** And most will claim it's because of what they believe the Bible has to say about the topic. Yet, Christian blogger Rachel Held Evans asks:

So why do so many Christians focus on the so-called “clobber verses” related to homosexuality while ignoring “clobber verses” related to gluttony or greed, head coverings or divorce? Why is homosexuality the great biblical debate of this decade and not slavery, (as it once was) or the increasing problem of materialism and inequity? Why do so many advocate making gay marriage illegal but not divorce, when Jesus never referenced the former but spoke quite negatively about the latter?

And perhaps, as is the premise of Mark Achtemeier's new book, *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart*, the Bible is talking about specific exploitative and abusive same-gendered sexual acts, not homosexuality itself as we now understand it today as involving the loving committed relationship between two people who just happen to be of the same gender. By the way, Mark Achtemeier, a Presbyterian pastor, seminary professor, and now author, will be the keynote speaker of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians' Regional Conference, held right here at College Hill on Saturday, November 15.

A big question remains, however. **Why do most progressives appear to take biblical authority less seriously than conservative traditionalists, let alone fundamentalists?** For more than 150 years now, biblical scholars have recognized the highly influential role that the gospel writers *themselves* played when crafting their version of the life and ministry of Jesus. It is not a recent phenomenon, therefore, to declare that all the words in red in the red-letter editions of the Bible, that give the impression that they were spoken by Jesus himself, are not the actual words spoken by Jesus, but sometimes by the gospel writer.

Scholars have come to recognize that each biblical author has framed his narrative to fit his own theological purposes, geared to his own Christian community in a particular time and place in history. Yet, as progressive Christian scholars will agree, that does *not* mean that the stories don't point to and reveal truth. Rather, those stories are simply **more often the construct of the biblical author than they are the record of specific literal historical events and actual conversations** that they are portrayed to be – or, as biblical literalists have chosen them to be.

Understanding biblical authority, therefore, is a much trickier issue than most admit. Today's parable from Matthew 22, known as a parable of the Wedding Feast, is an excellent case-in-point in demonstrating how the biblical author has taken the core of a parable most likely told by Jesus, and reframed it, by means of allegory, to suit the point that he is trying to make. I offer now, for your consideration, the commentary on this parable by the progressive biblical scholars who are part of a group called the **Jesus Seminar**, that include some folks you may be familiar with, like Marcus Borg, John

Shelby Spong, and Jon Dominic Crossan. And they base their views by comparing Matthew's version of this parable to the one found in Luke, as well as one found in what is called the Gospel of Thomas. They write:

The Matthean version has strayed from the original parable. The body of the parable (22:2-10) has been turned into an allegory of the history of salvation: a king (God) prepares a feast for his son (Jesus) and invites his subjects (Israel) to the banquet. They treat the invitations lightly, or kill the king's servants (the prophets). The king destroys them and their city (Jerusalem), and invites others (foreigners, including non-Jews) to the feast. **This allegory is alien to Jesus, since the story has been thoroughly Christianized and looks back on the destruction of Jerusalem** [in the year 70 CE, nearly 40 years after Jesus' death, but before Matthew wrote his gospel].

To the basic parable Matthew has added a warning addressed to those who enter the banquet hall but are not properly dressed. This is a reference to Christians who join the community but turn out not to be fit and so are expelled. **This addition was probably of Matthew's own devising**, since it agrees with one of his favorite themes: the Christian community as a mixture of the good and the bad, the deserving and the undeserving, who will be sorted out in the judgment.

The final saying attached to the parable in 22:14, ["For many are called, but few are chosen"] is also Matthew's invention: it expresses his point of view precisely.

The quandary for me, as a pastor and preacher, is wondering how much weight to put behind what so many believe are the words and the perspective of the gospel writer, not Jesus himself – and therefore, perhaps not God's perspective in the first place. Here's an extremely important question: By building his own interpretational spin into the biblical account, has the gospel writer actually *distorted* any of the actual teachings of Jesus and the purpose of Jesus' message and ministry? If so, **how does that affect the way we consider the scriptures to be the "authoritative Word of God"?**

I found a helpful blog on the patheos.com website, written earlier this summer by the Rev. Peter Laarman entitled, "*Weightier Matters of the Law: Biblical Authority for Progressives.*" He writes:

Having to extract the core meaning while rejecting unhelpful accretions returns us to the main dilemma facing progressives. Sooner or later we will make our own decisions about which parts of the biblical testimony hold ultimate authority for us. But this is never a solo decision; it is one made within a company of believers engaged with each other, with the texts, and with the Spirit.

When traditional readings of a given text are rejected, it will never be a matter of believing whatever we want but it will be a respectful and reasoned rejection whereby the authority of a given text is judged by the example and teaching of Jesus and not the other way around.

That's why I often ask you to reflect upon your understanding of the nature and character of God. For that, in turn, strongly influences how we interpret the Bible.

So to apply that to the parable of the Wedding Feast, is the original point that Jesus wants to make that the **kingdom of God is inclusive** in that it embraces the unexpected, **or is it one of exclusion and rejection** of those who do not conform to the Christian code of belief and conduct? Since the second condemnatory interpretation doesn't mesh with how most progressives understand the nature and character of God, we choose to side with those scholars that believe that this parable, as written, includes an addition to Jesus' original in order for Matthew to make his own point for his own Christian community.

Or at the very least, we could interpret the line, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 13), to refer *not* to eternal damnation in the afterlife, but simply that an ungrateful life is its own judgment – an "outer darkness" where life *now* is desperately lonely and devoid of joy.

So needless to say, there is a crisis over biblical authority within Christianity, and certainly within Presbyterianism. But that's why many of us who continue to identify ourselves as Christians can also fully support marriage equality – even from a biblical point of view.

How do you wrestle with biblical authority?

Amen.