

For a good long while there was a placard that affixed to one of the telephone poles on Clairmont road around Mason Mill. It read, “Has your religion apologized to women yet?”

I could never decide whether or not this placard irked me. On the one hand, religions are not people with the capacity to apologize in a meaningful way but even more, they are not monolithic. To be sure, the major world religions do have a somewhat spotty track record where treatment of women is concerned – each one has at least one branch with much for which to answer - there’s no doubt about it. But on the other hand, I am young enough that it is perfectly normal to me that women are leaders in churches. A colleague that I hold in the highest regard in Charlotte, Rabbi Judith Schindler, is the senior rabbi at the largest synagogue in North Carolina. Indeed, a child who grew up at Morningside Presbyterian Church prior to my installation as senior pastor might well have wondered whether or not *men* could lead congregations as I am the first male to be nominated to my office in twenty-five years. (I remain grateful that Christopher Henry blazed the trail of male clergy here as your associate pastor!)

No, in my lifetime it is perfectly normal to me that women serve as pastors, elders and deacons.

And yet, this past Saturday I served as “pastor of the day” for the food pantry of Intown Collaborative Ministries and I was reminded of a different reality.

The food pantry operates out of the basement of the Druid Hills United Methodist Church and it is a pretty seamless operation. The job of pastor of the day is a pretty easy job.

When it is time for the distribution of the food to commence, you offer a prayer and then

make yourself available for pastoral care for anyone who needs it. So I said my prayer, and then I said to the folks who were waiting, “I’m going to sit at this table over here in the corner, and if you want to talk, just come on over.”

So I got situated and eventually a young man came over and asked me to pray for his friend who had been struck by a car and was at Grady hospital. I asked for his name so that I might offer a prayer for him and he got an odd look on his face. He said, well, I don’t know his name but we call him: [a very colorful term].”

I decided maybe we wouldn’t pray for him by name after all.

My next conversation took place with a young woman. She came up to me and said, “I need to talk to you about the Bible but I don’t know which verses.”

“Okay,” I replied, “I’m not good with chapters and verses, but I’ve read the Bible and I know it pretty well, what is it you want to talk about?”

“Well, I want to know where it says that women should submit.”

“That’s in the household codes in Ephesians,” I replied, grateful I actually knew where it was, “But we don’t really use those anymore. The world has changed since the first century and now we know that women and men are equal – besides, Genesis says both men and women are created in the image of God.”

“And the part about women keeping silent before men?” she quizzed me further.

“Well, that one’s pretty specific. The context indicates that Paul probably encountered a bunch of gossipy women and wrote out of frustration,” I replied.

“So if the men had been gossipy, he would have told them to be quiet instead?” she concluded.

“Quite probably,” I said, “A little context makes a world of difference.”

“There is this man who is always yelling at me, ‘you need to submit, woman.’”

“That’s not what the Bible meant at all, even if we took it literally,” I added, “The very same verses conclude that husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the church.

That doesn’t include yelling at them to submit.”

We concluded our conversation and another man came up. “How are you,” I asked.

“I’m fine,” he replied. “I don’t need a pastor, I just need a place to sit.”

Thus ended my morning of pastoral care. But I was left with the striking remembrance of how often the Bible has been used to teach very wrong messages – messages that are antithetical to the Gospel even, and what it has taken to overcome wrongheaded application of our sacred text.

Students of history know that the Bible has been used to justify slavery, defend the subjugation of women, marginalize gay and lesbian people – when I don’t have anything else to worry about sometimes I wonder what attitudes I’m carrying around – and perpetuating that will someday be looked back upon by a preacher with bemused bewilderment for how I could possibly have thought what I think.

To be sure, the Bible has no shortage of problematic texts. The reason that it has so readily been used to perpetuate things that should have ended far sooner is that it is a peculiar book, separated from our time by a minimum of 1900 years or so.

And yet it’s not just an old book without relevancy for our time. It is the source of all we know about God. It is the revelation of God’s plan for human history and the love story of God’s redemption of what God has made.

So how do we overcome the obstacles to seeing what God would have us see?

*With interpretation.*

How does a church move from talking about religion in such a way that might lead someone to post a placard demanding an apology or cause a woman in homelessness to seek out a pastor she doesn't know to get answers – how do we get from that reality to the reality of a congregation whose history includes twenty-five straight years of women in the most visible of church leadership?

*With interpretation.*

Sometimes the gap between what the Bible appears to say and what it actually means is so broad as to lend itself to broad misunderstanding. How do we bridge that gap?

That's right, *with interpretation.*

How do we get the interpretation right? Shouldn't the Word of the Lord speak for itself and require no interpreter?

The Bible contains within itself the expectation that its contents should be interpreted. I remember well sitting in my intro to preaching class fifteen years ago when James Kay had us read this portion of Nehemiah where the priests come out and read the people the Law *with interpretation.*

A living God must have a living Word – otherwise we succumb to the idolatry of the printed page. We must seek to discern God's will for each situation from what God has given us to know God.

The priests shared the word of God with the people with interpretation so that the people understood the meaning.

God gives us God's word but with the expectation that some energy should go into the *understanding* of it.

I do not mean, by the way, to claim as clergy authority over the word of God. Drew and I are trained – indeed we are well trained – to assist in the understanding of God’s Word, but we do not own the interpretation of it.

Indeed, we are all interpreters of God’s Word. There is no way not to be. Even to read the text, because we bring our lives and experiences and culture to bear on the reading, means that we are engaged in the practice of interpretation. Because that is the case, I want you to understand the principles of biblical interpretation.

First, let’s talk about what we should *not* do, Drew, me or any of you, and it is chiefly this: our lens of interpretation should not *begin* with our own opinions.

This is not to say our gut feelings sometimes shouldn’t cause us to question the text as we encounter it, but it does mean that we don’t just believe everything we think or feel.

Here’s a silly example. I’m allergic to mushrooms and I don’t like them. God does reference some dietary restrictions in the Bible using the terms clean and unclean to demarcate what should and shouldn’t be eaten. However, the mere fact that I find mushrooms revolting does not mean that they are unclean. Moreover, even if I found a scriptural proof-text to support my attitude that anything that grows on something that is rotting should be avoided, even then, I would have to check myself against the tenth chapter of Acts where God declares all foods clean.

My attitude would be corrected by scripture.

And that moves us to our first corollary of what we do: we check our attitudes at the door and seek to discern what God would have us learn from the text, even if it means overturning our previously held beliefs.

And this farcical example also contains our second corollary: scripture interprets scripture.

What I mean by this is that when we encounter a text that stabs us in the gut with doubt or confusion, the means that we have before us to seek understanding is scripture itself. We lay the dietary restrictions of Leviticus alongside God's declaration of cleanness in Acts.

We lay the household codes of Ephesians with their apparent tacit approval of slavery alongside Paul's other writings where he tells a slave's master, Philemon, to treat his returned slave Onesimus as a brother in Christ. We do the same with the apparent expectation of silence and submission of women from Paul alongside his letters where he extols the ministry of women and admonishes the newly formed disciples to listen to them.

That is the reformed principle of interpretation. We privilege the Word of God to speak to the Word of God to speak to the people of God. We certainly listen to the voices of the communion of the saints who have gone before us but we do not elevate their opinions or insights above what is contained in scripture itself.

We Presbyterians have always valued education and expected it of those whom we call out from the midst of the body of Christ to preach the Word, but I want to be very clear on this: we stand with all of the reformers in unabashedly declaring that God's Word is for all of God's people to read and to understand and to shape our lives.

Which is to say that if you are studying the Word of God with an eye for how God calls you to live you are as apt to bring a profound insight into God's will for our lives as articulated in Scripture as John Calvin, Dr. King, or Karl Barth. Indeed, all three of them,

and I, and anyone else who stands and preaches if we have any integrity whatsoever started off in the same place – standing under the Word of God seeking to understand it. Since this sermon has turned into an ode to learning, I feel that I must give you a fair warning too: sometimes what you find in the Bible will just leave you wondering even more.

There's a great irony that our text this morning about the people and the priests reading the text together and interpreting it so that all understood should come itself from such a problematic text.

Nehemiah, you see, functioned as a great purifier of the Hebrew people – indeed, so much so that that at the end of it, after the Israelite men have all divorced their foreign wives, Nehemiah stands and says, “thus I cleansed them of all things foreign.”

That's exactly as xenophobic and bigoted as it sounds – and it requires understanding.

Ezra and Nehemiah stand at the end of a period of cataclysm in the life of the ancient Israelites where the people sought to understand why bad things had happened to them.

They sought in the law to find their definition of themselves as a people and so they did.

They needed to be reminded of who they were – and in defining themselves as a community, they made their boundaries very clear.

There are reasons why they did so – and I'm not going to go into them now – but remember, Scripture interprets Scripture – and alongside the exclusivity of Ezra and Nehemiah, we have also the book of Ruth, wherein a foreign woman, Ruth of Moab, becomes a part of the people of God and gives birth to the line that produces King David. We have to look at the whole of Scripture or else we can make big mistakes.

And so I want to make one final point: the truth is never contained in one sermon or one snippet of scripture or even the whole Bible. *In Christian faith, the truth is a person.*

Jesus Christ is the truth. And so whatever we Christians have to say about the Bible or any attitude we have or any insight we gain, we always look at that insight through the person of Jesus Christ.

Which is to say that as we seek to understand faith, as we look at the Bible and our beliefs through the teachings of Jesus, we are always seeking the good news of the Gospel.

And remember, if it's not *good news*, it's not the Gospel.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.