

Speaking the Truth in Love in Trying Times: The Role of the Church

Scripture in the MRI: Part I: The Old Testament

Scripture in the MRI: Part II: Psalms

Scripture in the MRI: Part III: The New Testament

Focus: See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be as worldly wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.—Matthew 10:16

So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that, where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.—James Madison, Federalist 10, *The Federalist Papers*.

The two great empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu have been engaged in a most obstinate war over this question . . . there have been six rebellions, one emperor has lost his life, and another his crown . . . civil commotions are constantly fomented . . . and eleven thousand persons have at several times suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end.—Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, on the “LittleEndians” vs. “BigEndians,” a dispute about the end at which one must break a boiled egg.

Scripture in the MRI: Part I: The Old Testament

A few weeks back my wife, Karen, had to have an MRI—nothing too serious: a couple of injections, some physical therapy, she'll be back at full speed in no time.

MRI: Magnetic Resonance Imaging: As you probably know, it's done in a machine, a *big* machine, with a round opening about the size on the door of a clothes 'dryer. They strap you onto a gurney, and push you through that opening back into this cylinder—way back, *all . . . the . . . way . . . in*.

There's about this much room between you and the top, and the sides; you're not supposed to move—but how could you? And then the technician steps out of the room, and the machine begins to whirl and hum and click, taking pictures of the inside of your body. It usually lasts somewhere between 20 minutes and half a millennium.

It is not for the claustrophobic. They offer you headphones (“What kind of music would you like to listen to?”), and often a mild sedative.

So when Karen came out, I asked her, “How did it go?”

“Fine.” I looked at her again.

“It was OK, I just shut my eyes, and went through all my favorite Bible verses. You know, Scripture’s different in the MRI.”

“Scripture’s different in the MRI”—I knew what she meant.

When you’re in the MRI—or any tight place for that matter—you don’t think about historical criticism or form criticism, the history of interpretation or textual variants, or any of the other stuff they taught us to worry about in seminary. You just want to get through it.

And that’s one of the reasons we have children’s Sunday school and children’s and youth choirs—so that years from now, when they are in some tight spot, those words and those songs—and therefore, our love and God’s love—will be right there with them. And to all of you who make that happen week in and week out—thank you.

So today I thought I’d try some Scripture-in-the-MRI verses, starting with the Old Testament. I’m sure many of you have your own favorites, so please think of them too. Listen now for God’s Word to you:

For everything there is a season—Ecclesiastes 3

But strong and courageous, do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you.—Joshua 1

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?—Micah 6

I have a plan for you, says the LORD, to give you a future with hope.—Jeremiah 29

That last for when the MRI is finally over.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God

Scripture in the MRI: Part II: Psalms

The Psalms in the Old Testament—all 150 of them—are some of the Bible’s and the world’s best-known and best-loved poems/songs/prayers—they have been on the lips of more people than perhaps any other words on earth.

So why this enduring appeal? Because like all great art, the Psalms hit the sweet spot, combining the universal and the particular.

The speculation is that the Psalms were originally part of temple worship in ancient Jerusalem. The priests developed different kinds of Psalms for the different reasons people would come to the temple to pray and offer sacrifices.

And so we have Psalms of thanksgiving, of supplication, praise, lament, and celebration, and even so-called “Psalms of Imprecation” (Psalm 109 is an example), where the Psalmist calls on God to curse and condemn his (the Psalmist’s) enemies: “May his name be blotted out, his memory cut off from the earth.”

As one scholar explains it:

A psalm had to be somewhat individualized, reflecting the specific occasion that had brought a person or persons to the temple; so there had to be a lot of them. On the other hand, such psalms could not be overly specific, since they had to be used again and again for a multitude of different worshipers, each of whose circumstances would be somewhat different.

In other words, the psalms had to hit the sweet spot, combining universality and particularity.

And they do. As John Calvin said, the book of Psalms is “an anatomy of the human soul—there is no human emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not there represented as in in mirror.”

And so among other things, the Psalms are particularly well-suited for the MRI. Listen now for God’s Word to you:

How long Oh Lord, how Long?—Psalm 6

Be still and know that I am God.—Psalm 46

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?—Psalm 27

O Lord open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.—Psalm 51

That last again for when the MRI is finally over.

Scripture in the MRI: Part III: The New Testament

Jesus is a great moral/religious teacher. That’s not all he is, but he’s certainly that. And as such, he says things that are simple and memorable on the one hand, but also deep and profound on the other.

“Shallow enough for children to frolic in, but deep enough for hippopotami”—that’s what St Jerome said about the Gospel of John, but it’s really true for all of Scripture, and certainly for Jesus’ sayings.

That's why we can teach these sayings to children, *and* theologians can spend their entire lives pondering them. And it's why these sayings have stayed with so many people their entire lives, acquiring deeper and more profound meaning all the while.

And it's also why these sayings come to mind when we're in tight places, like the MRI. Again, if you have your favorites, recall those too. Listen now for God's word:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.—Matthew 7

Little children, I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.—John 13

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves”—Matthew 10

And this last one's from Paul who doesn't always have Jesus' gift for being both pithy and profound, but in a few cases he does:

Speak the truth in love, for we are members of one another.—Ephesians 4.

Sermon: Speaking the Truth in Love in Trying Times: The Role of the Church

So let's see: where were we?

Oh, yes: last Sunday, I was telling you about the Monday before that, when I was sitting outside at Starbucks, trying to soak in the spring sunshine and get started on my sermon, which was going to be on Acts Chapter 10, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the early church.

You remember: I had my iPad, my iced coffee, my scone, and my Bible commentaries, all spread out around me, with my face turned up to sun: “Come on, Holy Spirit, *speak to me!*.”

Only there's this guy, two tables over, pronouncing on the political issues of our day—*loudly* pronouncing, on all the political issues of our day, and he won't shut up; and worse still, he's just plain wrong—well, let's just say that he and I are not of the same mind on the issues of our day.

How can I possibly hear the Holy Spirit speaking when he's going on—and on and on—like that?

“How long O Lord, how long? May his name be blotted out, his memory cut off from the earth.”

But then it occurs to me that maybe the Holy Spirit is speaking to me—“Be still and know that I am God.”

You remember: there's this verse in Acts 10, verse 34, where Peter quotes the Old Testament and says, "Now I see 'God shows no partiality, 'but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God."

And this means that God looks past the externals—the differences that divide us (the chief difference, the great divide, in Peter's day, being between Jew and Gentile)—God looks past all those external differences and sees the human heart. And so Peter realizes that the Gentiles must be included in the church as Gentiles, because they too have been given the Holy Spirit, because Jesus Christ is Lord of all and our peace.

Which means that I—that we—also have to look past all those things that divide us, and love all people, even those who are just plain wr— . . .with whom we are not of the same mind.

"Little children, I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you." But then . . . I left you hanging.

Because I said that not all words, not all beliefs, not all convictions, and certainly not all actions, are equally pleasing, or even acceptable, to God.

And God cares—cares very much, more than anything, in fact—about what he sees in our hearts, especially when it comes to the things that matter most: justice, integrity, and kindness; how we treat the least among us—the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst.

We know that; all of Scripture attests to it: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?: So if we are to love one another, we must speak the truth to one another—in love, because we are members of one another.

To remain suspiciously and dismissively silent, simply to write off people we disagree with as "those people," that is to take our human-made differences and make them absolute, to make idols out of those differences so that they, and not God, rule our lives. (The human mind, John Calvin said, is a factory of idols). And that is to deny that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and that He is our peace.

And you can tell it's idolatry precisely because it gets ridiculous: more and more, it's not even the big, important issues (like say, immigration) that truly divide us, although we may pay lip-service to those.

No, more and more, it's what James Madison in the Federalist papers, called the "frivolous and fanciful distinctions," like whether you drive a Prius or a pick-up truck, buy your organic produce at Whole Foods or your camo at Bass Pro Shops.

So how do we—how can we—speak the truth in love, in our (to borrow the cliché) "increasingly polarized times"? How do I do it at Starbuck's?

That's where I left you hanging last Sunday, saying I'd come back to it this Sunday . . . And now all of a sudden it is this Sunday, and . . . well, hang on just a little longer.

Because it's hard. Hard because we have to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. And that's not easy.

We must be innocent as doves, because we know that:

God has given us humans great gifts of mind and heart, thought and feeling, imagination and intelligence, and especially words—the gift of language—to bring us together so that we can share a world, make a world—God's world, with one another and with God.

But also we must be wise as serpents because we know that:

The very things that should bring us together can—and do, when misused—drive us apart. Words can wound, and yes, even kill.

And those inventions of our human imagination and intelligence?—same thing. Do you remember—fifteen, twenty years ago, when the internet and social media first came on the scene? But do you remember all the stuff—all the stuff and nonsense—that was said back then?

“This is a huge opportunity to get everyone in the world connected, to give everyone a voice and to help transform society for the future. We are making the world more transparent. We are extending people's capacity to build and maintain relationships. And when you do that, the system usually ends up in a really good place.”

That (and those are all direct quotations), from Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook.

“The power of sin makes a simple triumph of love impossible—that from Reinhold Niebuhr, Reformed theologian and ethicist who did not live to see the internet or social media but knew a thing or two about our fallen world.

To be as wise as the serpent we must recognize that our powers of communication—and especially the powers of our new media—can be used to deepen our divisions, enervate our relationships, and obscure the truth to the extent that we stop caring about it—even stop believing in it—altogether. And so our hearts become hardened.

Again, we must be innocent as doves because we know that:

God gives us particular relationships—love and care for particular people, places, and things—yes, as gifts in themselves, but also so that we learn a more expansive, even universal, love in and from them.

This is why Martin Luther called family life “a school for character.” Because it’s in those particular relationships that we learn what it means to love and be loved, and that’s what we take into our lives and out into the world.

“And *just* who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asks Jesus, wanting to know where his particular relationships and the obligations that go with them, end. And by the time Jesus in a few deft strokes (both simple and profound), finishes the Story of the Good Samaritan, it’s clear that “neighbor” has expanded to include anyone in need, which is to say, everyone in one way or another.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—simple and memorable, yet deep and profound.

First, it presupposes that others are ultimately like you and therefore worthy of the same treatment as you: God shows no partiality; Jesus is Lord of all.

Second, it presupposes that we exercise sympathetic moral imagination, that we put ourselves in another person’s shoes, and imagine what it would feel like—what it would be like—for them, which is what we try to teach our children from the very first, and of course, takes us our entire lives to learn.

But also we must be wise as serpents because we know that:

Our particular loves and our more expansive universal concern can each become compartmentalized, isolated, and thereby more and more counterfeit. If our relationship is based solely, or even primarily, on our shared hatred of “those people,” then do we really love each other? OR

If we profess a grand, universal love for all humankind, but treat the people closest to us like dirt, then do we really love humanity? (Charles Dickens calls this “telescopic philanthropy”—“I love humanity, it’s just people I can’t stand”)

And so our hearts become hardened.

Again, we must be innocent as doves because we know that:

If there’s one place we can use our gifts to bring us closer to God and one another—

If there’s one place where we can practice particular relationships of care in a way that leads us to a more expansive, universal love, even for people very different from ourselves; if there’s one place we can learn to do unto others as we would have them do unto us; to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God; and to speak the truth in love; if there’s one place we can, and should be able to do all this, it’s the church.

But we must also be wise as serpents, because we know that:

Churches, rather than transcending and even healing our divisions can be riven by them and come more and more to reflect them.

“People sort themselves—whether consciously or not—into congregations with politically simpatico members, through a self-reinforcing process,” so that a congregation or even an entire denomination becomes thoroughly identified with a “particular politician or political party or an identifiable set of political positions” . . .

So wrote the political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell in their book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* in which they warned that American churches were in danger of becoming “political echo chambers.” The twelve years since they published those words have proven them nothing if not prophetic.

But I have to tell you, if that were to happen to Westminster it would break my heart.

I want Westminster to be a church where what we have in common—that is, a God who shows no partiality, Jesus Christ who is Lord of all and our peace, our friendship in Christ—*that* is what defines us.

But I also want Westminster to be a place where we can speak, and act on, the truth in love, including when it comes to the important issues of our day. Because although they are not of ultimate importance, they do matter, because how we live our lives and our hearts matter—to God.

And I also want Westminster to be a place where we can laugh about frivolous and fanciful things that divide us.

So you want to pick me up in your Prius or your pick-up truck? Fine—doesn’t matter. To go to Whole Foods or Bass Pro Shop? Well, let’s go to both because, you know, they’re only a few miles apart on 675.

Laughter helps but it’s still hard: hard because our day presents us with unique challenges in the face of which we must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

But be strong and have courage, do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you.

And yes at times, these can seem like dark, even hopeless days:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

I have a plan for you, says the LORD, to give you a future with hope.

Those are good words to have when we find ourselves—as we do now—in a tight place.

Thanks be to G—Oh, Starbucks? I forgot to tell what happened at Starbucks!?

Well you have to understand that, in addition to pronouncing on the political issues of our day, this guy also spent some time talking about his church, in particular, his pastor:

“Oh, he’s a good guy, nice enough, but he won’t come out and say what really needs to be said, so when he’s in the back there, you know greeting people at the end of the service [the guy’s talking even louder now] I make a point of telling him what he got wrong and just what he should have said instead.” And with that, he brings his finger down emphatically on Starbucks’ wrought-iron table

And you also have to understand that, sitting there, I’m not exactly incognito. I mean I have my Ipad open to a Bible app, two bible-ish looking commentaries next to me, and, oh yes, several times now, I’ve lifted my hands and face to the sun saying “Come on, Holy Spirit, *spea*k to *me*!” I mean, if I’m not a pastor, what am I?

So they’re winding up their conversation (finally!), and as they’re getting up to go and about to pass my table, I’m thinking, “Oh no! he’s going to stop, and he’s going to say something about the books, then he’s going to ask me what I do, and then he’s going to tell me what I really need to say, and how I should say it.

“Please, Lord, no!”

So I’m sort of half looking at him, trying not to make direct and full eye contact, but not quite looking away.

But he doesn’t stop, just slows down, looks down at me, gives me a half smile and slight approving nod.

So I look up at him, full eye contact now, “Blessings on your day,” I say, and give him a little wave.

Full smile now. “Thanks, you too.”

OK, it wasn’t much, but for our present trying times, it’s a start. To everything there is a season.

It’s a start: and it was then that I knew I had a sermon—or two.

O Lord open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

