

POINTS TO PONDER

“The Bible has been used to condone and justify horrible acts of violence, the displacement of indigenous peoples, the assumed ethnic supremacy of one part of humanity over another, and even genocide. This is due not only to parts of it being misinterpreted, but also parts of it being interpreted accurately.

The Bible is not one book, but many books, written over many hundreds of years in various contexts. Parts of the Bible were written, indeed, to refute other parts of the Bible (e.g., Job, James, et al). We need to admit this, and its internal contradictions, else we become subject to trying to defend the indefensible; itself a lesson that the book of Job specifically tells us we should not do (cf., how God criticized Job’s friends for trying to justify a wrongful view of Job, and of God, based on scripture).

When the Bible promotes values that afflict any people based on their ethnicity, nationality, religious heritage, sexuality, or any other group identification, we must unreservedly condemn it in order to be faithful to our faith in the God of love, peace, and justice for all.

Within the Bible itself, we have prophets like Moses questioning and arguing with God, James refuting the teachings of Paul, and Jesus redefining or rejecting certain scriptures and adding to them. The characters of the Bible often are quick to point out where they believe the Bible has gotten it wrong. That is part of what it means to take the Bible seriously; to have the integrity to question when it is edifying, and when it is in error. Within scripture, we even have God described as relenting and repenting for wrongful acts. If this ethic of questioning is itself in the Bible, then how can it be wrong to do our own questioning?

Faithfulness is the willingness to not accept something as sacrosanct until you have evaluated it according to the values that God holds most dear. Faithlessness is declaring something to be absolutely and unquestioningly true no matter the context of when it was written, or the circumstances in which we try to apply it.

It is because we have committed bibliolatry, making the Bible into an idol, and not questioning its words, that we have, at least in part, strayed from the Word of God – that sacred representation of all that is good, right, and virtuous. The Bible, like all humanly written works, is culturally defined; and as all cultures have never been equivalent to the virtues and values of God, we must critically assess what is of God and what is of culture.

We must choose to serve that which is sacred (viz., love, peace, justice, etc.) or that which is cultural (e.g., self-interest, domination, and partiality). Both, though contradictory, are values depicted in the Bible, and of God. Which God we choose to follow reflects upon our own spirit and character. If we allow ourselves to believe that passages that see some people as superior to other people as being from God, we reveal ourselves to be bigots. If, however, we believe God created us all to be equal in worth, each created with God’s own image within us, then we reveal ourselves to be faithful to the divine values of unconditional love and compassion, universal peace and nonviolence, and egalitarian justice and worth.”

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 4/19/2023*

“We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or hate, to see or be seen.

Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do,
and we do it without questioning.

The task of learning to be free requires learning to hear them, to question them,
to pause and hear silence, to name them, and then become a story-teller.”

— *Rebecca Solnit, The Faraway Nearby*

“If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then

you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.”

— *Deuteronomy 30.16*

“The Promised Land narrative is a story that has told us.
It has provided a biblical rationale for violence and oppression that has spanned centuries.”

— *Katerina Friesen, "Trail of Death, Trail of Life"*

“The greatest temptations in life are not those in which clearly would have us to choose the evil over the good, but the ones in which, disguised as good, end up having us do evil.

Loving God and living by God’s virtues and values seem undeniably to be the good and right thing to do. But notice what is attached to this injunction: that if we do this, then we will be blessed in taking over the land of someone else.

That is not God talking, but people who justify their own domination over others in the name of God. No just and good God would ever have us to displace another people in order that we can live in their land. That is evil, not good.

But that it is couched in the pious sounding language of obeying and loving God makes it seem okay for one who is already predisposed to thinking that their welfare matters more than the welfare of others. But it is not okay. It is racism; it is treating others as our inferiors, not as our neighbors or as ourselves. That it is found in the Bible doesn’t make it any less racist. Indeed, it makes it all the more diabolical and sacrilegious. And not to admit this entices us to be as diabolical and sacrilegious in justifying racism.

Moreover, using religious language to legitimize stealing other people’s land is a self-justifying action that furthermore breaks the commandment to not take God’s name in vain; viz., to use God as an excuse to do injury to others. This is not only sacrilegious, but blasphemous. It is the sin against the Holy Spirit; which Jesus proclaimed as the only unforgivable sin.

Thinking you are superior to others and that it is alright to take their land and their lives so that you can be benefitted is never of God. Many, even in Biblical times, used God’s name to justify their heinous disregard for others; but does that really sound like what a God of all peoples, a God who is impartial and who loves everyone equally, would have us to do? Of course, not. We need to reject such moral rot of our spiritual ancestors who would have us to believe such things; who would portray God as justifying their prejudices, discrimination, and persecution of others. That is not loving. It is not peaceful. And it isn’t just.

If we abandon the three cardinal virtues attributed to God, the three character traits that most epitomize the Spirit of God, how can we expect to be acting in accordance with God’s will? In interpreting any Biblical passage, or anything in life, we should ask ourselves if what we entertain to do accords with loving others as ourselves, if it creates peace between us and them and others, and whether it upholds equity in justice between all beings. If it doesn’t do these things, it is not of God.

Some, of course, will argue illogically that, because they see themselves in the right and others in the wrong, that love, peace, and justice are being prospered because we, who we think know how to act rightly, will now be in control. That is bogus, and it always has been. Jesus didn’t buy into that temptation when granted power over all nations; and neither should we.

We need only ask ourselves whether, if the roles were reversed and they did the same thing to us, with the same justifications, as we plan to do to them, whether we would think it was loving, peaceful, and just. Clearly, their stealing our land, killing our family and friends, and ruling over any who survive by enslaving them or banishing them to a reservation would not, under any circumstances, be seen as loving, peaceful,

and just. Would we not look with disdain on any who justified that kind of behavior against us by claiming that their God told them to do so? Would we not see the obvious lie in that?

That our European ancestor deceived themselves by their own lack of empathy in doing such things to indigenous peoples reveals it was not God, but their own gain, that they treasured most. We need to take a different course; one in which indigenous peoples are revered as much as ourselves."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 4/19/2023

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

— Deuteronomy 30.19

"If heaven and earth are to be our judge, then let us live with the noblest virtues and values of heaven and earth; and, likewise, refute any lesser virtues and values by those who say they speak on behalf of heaven and earth. Live by the conscience within you that strives for the most sacred dimensions of reality, not the conscience that tells you to do what will promise you longevity of life. And never think that if you do the right thing and act by good ways that you will be rewarded in life. Most likely, you won't. Most likely, you will be persecuted for it.

To do good and live rightly may bring you as much misery as happiness, and may actually reduce your years of living rather than add to them. How old was Jesus or Martin Luther King, Jr. when they died? Neither reached their 40th birthday. So don't be ethical because you think you will be rewarded with longer or more prosperous life. Live ethically because it is the right thing to do. To be good in order to get a reward or avoid a punishment is not ethical at all; it is prudence. Being ethical means we do something for its own sake; that we do it because it is good to do good.

Don't worry about blessings and curses. Pay no heed to those who claim you'll get one or the other based on whether you agree or disagree with them. Give no one that kind of power over you; for any who would try to coerce you in this way is more interested in what you can do for them and not in your actually doing what is right. Simply live rightly – whether or not you are rewarded for doing so. Integrity is eternal; character is infinite – not in the eyes of the world, but in our own, and in God's."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 4/19/2023

Our world is both better (more inclusive, less discriminatory) and worse (think corporate consolidation, ecological devastation, the surveillance state) than the world of fifty years ago. The ways in which it is better happened because people made demands and then acted to realize them. It was not inevitable that Native Americans, women, gays, lesbians, and transgender people would gain rights and respect. The better part of our present happened because of enormous efforts, sometimes over decades or, as with the vote for women, nearly a century of effort and social transformation.

— Rebecca Solnit

"The Lord your God himself will cross over before you.
He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them....
Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them,
because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."

— Deuteronomy 31.3ab, 6

"Among the most detrimental stories we have bought into is that the Bible is always true, and that it should be used as a basis for our behavior. The fact is that much of the Bible contradicts itself, and that there are abominable passages in it which should go against the conscience of any compassionate person. If we believe the story that God justifies genocide of any peoples, as told to us in the Bible, then we abandon the very values and principles in which we rightly speak of God. We have to choose between a loving God, and a wrathful God...a God of compassion, and a God of ruthlessness...a God who would only act non-violently, and a God who uses force, coercion, and violence to accomplish other ends. What story we

choose to tell reveals more about us than it does about God. And what story we refuse to tell, or only tell to criticize, also reveals who we are.”

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 4/21/2017

“I cannot believe in a God who would destroy other people on my behalf. That sounds more like a demon than a God. I refuse to believe in a God who would have me to displace people in order that I might possess their land myself. That sounds more like a Nazi or MAGA God than a just God.

But make no mistake, it is we, not God, who is judged by the way we portray God. If we see God as partial, unjust, and willing to dispossess other peoples, even commit genocide against them, then it is our belief in such a God that condemns us as ruthless and atrocious. God remains God.

How we imagine God to be either indicts us or ennobles us. Like Job, I will only believe in a God who is just, loving, and peaceful; not one who places me over anyone, or condones injustice of any kind towards anyone – including myself (cf., Job 13.7-10). Like James, I will testify that it is our actions, not our proclaimed intentions or beliefs, by which we are to be judged (cf., James 2.14-18). And like Jesus, I will not be swayed by self-righteous ones who give Jesus or God all the praise (cf., Matthew 7.21-23), but don’t actually love others as they love themselves.

Our faith should be too important for us to credulously accept values that are counter to God’s character. Our trust in those values is too sacred to permit our blind acceptance of anyone’s, or even the Bible’s own, authority to accept that what they say is in accordance with those values without testing whether what is said actually is in accordance with those values. Blind obedience is not faithfulness. Rather we are to use the God-given intelligence we have to discern whether what others say is true of God and is true of God’s virtues and values.

And this is how our own character is judged. We can tell what a person’s character is by the God they claim to believe in, how they arrived at that determination, and in the way they consequently act in accordance to that God’s assessment of their behavior. As Jesus said, we know them by their fruits.”

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 4/19/2023

“Costly discipleship is painful. Jesus says it will cause splits with our family, for many of us, splits with the stories we’ve grown up hearing and telling that are only partly true. He says that it means we will have to give up our possessions. Note that Jesus, the new Joshua, does not say we will “take possession” of the land and its bounty. No, costly discipleship means we loosen our grip on what we consider our birthright, our inheritance. It’s easy to say, “we weren’t the ones who took Native lands, that’s the past, that wasn’t us, so we don’t have any responsibility today.” *It’s harder to admit that our inheritance includes milk and honey that was never rightfully ours.* And to recognize that resources extracted from Indigenous communities today often pad our own mutual funds and investments through corporate profits. That kind of truth-telling paves the way for costly discipleship.”

— Katerina Friesen, “Trail of Death, Trail of Life”