

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:18-25  
May 15, 2011

South Plains

### The Strange, New World of Scripture

The subject over lunch was sexuality. Sex is a difficult thing to talk about for many people, especially in church. Thankfully, we were not in church, but in a New York City restaurant renewing an old friendship that had begun in church before we moved to different parts of the country. My friend is gay. So far as I know, he is not active in church, although he respects those who are. When the conversation turned to the church's attitude toward same-sex relationships, I said something to the effect that the larger problem was adultery or any intimate relationship outside marriage. I expected him to counter with arguments from science, sociology, or the need for equal treatment. Instead he replied, "I understand your position because that's what the Bible says." I was shocked that although he did not agree with me, he was quite willing to acknowledge the authority of the Bible for Christians.

His comment caught me up short because for so many Christians, the Bible does not have much authority. It's not that we disregard what scripture says. Perhaps I should say we regard highly those parts of the Bible that support our opinions and we disregard those parts we disagree with. The twenty-first century is not the first century to pick and choose from scripture. But there are probably more people in the Western world today totally

unacquainted with what the Bible says than history has seen for a thousand years.

One reason for this state of affairs in the church is the strangeness of the world described in texts like our two readings for today. For example, 1 Peter and the rest of scripture often speak of slavery as if it were the most natural thing in the world, implicitly endorsing the master's right to own and dominate the slave.

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh (1 Peter 2:18).

Of course we can dismiss that passage by repeating the lie that slavery doesn't exist anymore. I'll say more about 21<sup>st</sup> century slavery in a minute. If, however, we dismiss 1 Peter 2:18 out of hand, we completely miss scripture's engagement with an important aspect of suffering.

The Acts reading is even more problematic. The verse printed in the bulletin could serve as a proof text for Karl Marx and of socialism. In 1875, Marx wrote, "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need." That's a radical idea. But, if we dismiss Acts 2:45 as a communist ideal irrelevant to America, we are dismissing a piece of God's economics. Indeed, some of the most effective and enduring forms of Christianity have hewed as closely as possible to the radical example of the church in Acts, holding their possessions in

common, selling their property, and giving away the proceeds to those with the most needs. When Christian communities have taken these verses seriously, people have often drawn closer to Jesus Christ and performed valuable service in Christ's name, despite the obvious problems with human nature.

My point is that the world of the Bible is strange enough to put us off completely unless we look and listen hard to what the text is saying. When we fail to do the hard work of listening carefully to the word of God and interpreting scripture faithfully, we also fail to reap the benefits. The Protestant Reformation is the prime example of how paying attention to scripture rescues the church from trouble and revives the faith of her people. Think with me for a few minutes about how this can work today. I believe the strange, new world of scripture can empower God's church when first, we listen to its content, when second, we listen to its context, and when third, we listen to what it is saying to us today.

For example, when we listen to the content of what 1 Peter is saying we have to be careful because our passage addresses two unpopular issues, slavery and suffering. On the one hand, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference;" and on the other hand, "If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval." At first glance it sounds like the message is, "Suck it up. Slavery is OK even though it hurts. Just take your beatings because God approves."

That is a deadly interpretation that has been used too often to cover brutality against slaves and women.

But, think about the context, the circumstances when First Peter was written. Many people attracted to Christianity in the early years were household slaves. From the perspective of America today, we expect oppressed people to rebel and to call on America to support a more democratic society. That was not likely to happen in the Roman Empire. First Peter addresses the most pressing need of those slaves, namely how to understand their suffering. The letter does not say suffering is good or that slavery is right. It says that when the innocent suffer they are identifying with the suffering of Jesus who, like slaves, did not deserve his pain.

That may seem small comfort in our culture where we expect and demand instant relief from pain. What First Peter offers is an alternative when instant relief is not going to happen. Jesus Christ is our model for suffering with dignity:

When he was abused, he did not return abuse;  
when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he  
entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

(1 Peter 2:23)

Sometimes the best we can do is entrust ourselves to God's care and keeping. When we trust God, the promise of Easter is ours. That's a promise many people need today when they face the intractable disabilities of birth defects, or terminal disease, not to

mention the stigma of long term unemployment, foreclosure of one's home, and outright poverty. The context of scripture makes a difference not only in our understanding, but more importantly in what it offers to us today.

I do want to say a word about modern slavery. Over 12 million people in the world today can be classified as working in involuntary servitude (Engaging Business: Addressing Forced Labour, Feb 2008 Conference). Most, but not all, are in Asia. Whether it involves women and children forced into the sex trade, immigrant workers imprisoned in a factory, or in rarer cases, migrant farm workers in this country, over 12 million slaves are at work today. If nothing else, the text from First Peter can remind us of one of the great injustices that keeps the world economy humming smoothly.

What about the proto-socialism promoted in the book of Acts? Here the strangeness of the Bible has nothing to do with changing historical circumstances. What is strange to us is the ability of the resurrection to change people. Something about the fearful possessiveness of human nature has been replaced with generous trust. Anxiety about the future has given way to joyful expectation. Social distinctions that make fellowship awkward have lost their force. In the exuberance of experiencing the resurrected Christ, the church has been set free.

Just because that freedom does not last forever, we don't lose it completely. In fact, South Plains will catch a glimpse of that freedom in our own fellowship from time to time. That same generous trust in God's providence will prompt extraordinary gifts. A sense of joyful expectation has often marked our work together over the past year. The power of the resurrection pushes friendships eagerly across the social barriers and distinctions that can inhibit us. The new context is the knowledge of Christ's resurrection and the faith that our resurrection is renewed each Easter season. Indeed, each time the first day of the week rolls around we have a reminder that today we celebrate the resurrection again.

The authority of scripture in the lives of Christians functions a little like the authority of your best friend. We may not do what our best friend tells us to do every time, but we take his or her advice seriously. We pay close attention to their example, not because we want to imitate them, but because we genuinely respect their decisions and because we know we can learn from the path they have chosen. After all, our best friends inspire us.

On the other hand, while our friends confirm what is best in us, it's often only strangers who can challenge us to become more. The strange, new world of the Bible has the wonderful ability to do both by the power of the resurrection.