

Claim & Proclaim
A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
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I.

I have a friend, Joe, who gives odd gifts for any occasion. One year, for Christmas, my wife and I both received shirts that said "Cheese Eater." Why? As Joe mentioned in his accompanying note, "I realized that the one thing all my friends have in common is that they consume mass quantities of cheese." I wore the shirt till it was threadbare.

On another occasion, Joe gave me a large ceramic bowl that he decorated himself. The message on the inside explains its purpose: "Ben's Big Bible Reading Bowl." Why that phrase? It's because I once made what I thought was an innocent and matter of fact comment to Joe: "I have not read all of the Bible." He thought it was hilarious that a Christian minister had not read all of the Bible.

And I have to admit to you today that I have still not read all of it, every word, cover to cover. I think I've read most of it by now, some books in their entirety - Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, First and Second Kings, the Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, many of the minor prophets like Micah and Jonah, the 4 Gospels, Acts, most of Paul's letters, and Revelation. And I have read parts of all the rest of the books. But no, I haven't read it cover-to-cover.

The reasons? Well, interestingly, it's never been required of me, neither by parents, nor Sunday School teachers, nor even my seminary professors. Frankly, another reason is because a lot of the Bible is boring. It's repetitive, arcane, and redundant. When given the choice to read scripture or something like Harry Potter or Catcher in the Rye (my favorite novel) or even Dostoevsky, I often let the Good Word stay put. In fact, most of my reading is of folks writing about the Bible - Anne Lamott, Walter Brueggemann, Karl Barth, Marcus Borg, articles in the Christian Century.

Finally, I don't understand reading the Bible as the same kind of activity as reading literature. It frankly doesn't work for me to read the Bible cover to cover. It doesn't make sense that way. It loses it's life. Rather, for me, the Bible is comes alive when read liturgically, that is, aloud in the midst of the gathered congregation, or sprinkled into a wedding prayer, or as part of a memorial service benediction.

The Bible lives when treated like a colorful ball of clay thrown into a circle of 5 year olds. What can you make of this? Don't forget to get your hands dirty.

The Bible is breathes when read contemplatively, a phrase or story or notion, beautiful or awful, planted in the heart, and ruminating in that cavern while

walking in a cathedral of golden leafed aspens - “The trees clap their hands.” The Bible is not so much read as wrestled with, much like Jacob wrestled with the stranger in the dark. He walked away from that encounter with a broken hip and a blessing. And a new name: Israel, which means, “wrestles with God.”

II.

The church is one inheritor of that holy limp, that good word, that new name. We’ve carried this sometimes boring, sometimes striking, sometimes violent, sometimes audacious text and with it, its elusive main character, Yahweh, who waits and plays and teases and cajoles and urges and redeems. Yahweh does this, sometimes behind, sometimes through, sometimes in spite of the text itself. If we stop and listen, we find that what we claim the text to be or to mean is not so important as realizing that we have already been claimed by clever Yahweh who reminds us what we mean, who we are to be.

So, does it matter which Bible we read? Some argue about which *version* of the Bible is the best. There is, of course, no final authoritative translation of the Bible. Variety is good and we shouldn’t fix on any one translation as the last word. But some translations are better than others. Translations belie an academic bias, others an ideological one. The King James Version of the Bible was claimed as authoritative for centuries. The most fundamentalist Christians were the last to give it up, in recent decades, when they finally accepted the historical fact that King James himself was a homosexual. Their ideological prejudice could not abide this historical fact, so they switched translations to avoid the association.

The Bible I would *like* to use it a beautiful, thick pulpit Bible that was given me for my ordination 8 years ago. It is red leather, with gold leaf. When I hold it, it feels authoritative and significant. It also feels cumbersome and formal, so the Bible I actually use is a shabby version of the first. It is also red leather, but the color has faded. The binding is starting to break away. The gold leaf is mostly faded and the thin pages have been damaged by spilt water, coffee, and pen ink. There are post-it notes throughout, underlined and highlighted phrases, and the page-marking ribbon is frayed and knotted. It’s not pretty, but it feels right. It feels used and loved, and it was given in love. My father, also a minister, gave this to me when I left for seminary. I didn’t know it at the time, but it was his working Bible. It was the one that felt right to him.

Would that we would pass on the Bible in this way, as a cherished, albeit battered, possession, from one generation to the next. We’re better off to not pass on some idealized version of it, binding intact and gold-leaf shining. We’re more honest passing along the torn, used pages, the post-its, the margin notes and the highlighting. For the character in its pages, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, “the elusive and irascible Yahweh,” is not an ideal to be domesticated by our modern sensibilities, but the real, free, loving, and living Creator of the

earth and universe, never to be fully understood but always to be trusted as the faithful and sovereign God.

As we gather together as one among thousands of Christian churches on this, our Sabbath day, let us ponder that we, who were many, are now one because of this text. We gather to worship none other than the main character hiding in these pages. Yahweh lives not only there, but also hidden in the pages of our own lives. The mystery is that these often boring, arcane, violent stories about people who lived thousands of years ago are *our* stories and continue to interpret *us*. While ancient, they provide the new words we so long for. While removed from our context, they recontextualize our own situation so that we can begin to imagine alternatives to the crushing givens of modern (postmodern) life - the given of war, the given of poverty, the given of emptiness, the given of broken relationships, the given of violence, the given of death.

And quite often, the most riveting alternatives come not from the pithy proverbs or sentimental episodes that we all know and think we understand. The Bible presents itself to us, mostly, as a “strange, new world” to us (Karl Barth). When I hear this phrase, I think “Narnia” and what C.S. Lewis was trying to convey. Because the biblical text, unlike the text of modern entertainment, speaks in tones that often bore, offend, or confuse, we begin to wonder whether we just might be hearing a voice that is trustworthy, refusing to bend to our desires, which are already so conditioned by the consumer culture in which we live.

III.

One such an offensive and confusing text is the one I once called “the worst parable ever.” The Good Samaritan has hospitals named after him, but not the Dishonest Manager. I have to laugh thinking of the juxtaposition of the reading of this parable, including verse 9, “And I tell you make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth,” with our response, “This is the Good News in Christ. Thanks be to God.”

Some of you may have scriptures that follow you around. They come up in the most uncanny places. This parable is one of those for me. I first learned of it in a course on preaching the parables with Peter Gomes, chaplain of Harvard University. He seemed almost giddy as he assigned us the most obscure and difficult parables he could find. “I’ll be curious to hear what you’ve come up with.”

I read the parable of the unjust manager and thought, “What the...” How did this make it into the Gospel? I felt embarrassed for the Bible to have included such an unhelpful story that honors dishonesty and shrewdness. I tried to dismiss it alá the Jesus Seminar: “This must have been a later addition attributed to Jesus.” I tried to imagine a sermon that would simply dismantle

the parable, explaining why it certainly did not fit with the rest of Jesus' message and then proclaiming, "The Good News is that you can now ignore this half of the 16th chapter of Luke." I imagined myself undertaking the modern Jeffersonian task of cutting out all of the offensive or unfitting passages from the New Testament. Maybe I could then move on to the Old Testament. No one should have to deal with Eve being framed, Noah getting drunk, or Joseph selling out to Pharaoh.

When all was said and done, I just preached on the parable. I can't remember what I said, but I know that I was initially surprised to find how exciting, revealing, and humbling it was to force myself to face and engage with a text I once despised.

I uncovered an aspect of difficult truth-telling in a text I had judged to be closed, simple, direct, and pedantic. I found myself in the midst of a story that could very well be a real-life situation. It starts "There was a rich man." It seems his property manager blows it - either he deliberately extorts money or he simply mismanages it. We don't know which is the case. I think it's the latter because the rich property owner gives him one final duty, to go and make a reckoning of debts.

The property manager is freaking out at the loss of his job. What am I going to do? He can't imagine the two obvious options - begging or manual labor. Then he gets an idea. He goes to the those indebted to the rich man, asks them how much they owe, then tells them to reduce the amount, in one case by fifty bottles of olive oil, in the other, by 20 containers of wheat. We don't know, is the amount reduced the interest due the rich man or is it the commission of the property manager? Again, I think it's the latter, because, listen what happens next: "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." At this point, the intratextual interpretations begin with "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

What is the good news? I can't say definitively. While we have figured out how to gain material things, we spend relatively little time learning how to gain what is really important. While we spend hours numbing ourselves with internet or television, we spend little time enriching ourselves with our ancient, difficult, beautiful, and potentially world-changing text. If we were to apply to our common life as a people of faith the same energy and shrewdness we apply to school, business, and accumulation of things, we would introduce the world to new alternatives of reality.

The modern church has largely squandered the property entrusted to it. We've been content to allow ourselves and others to interpret the Bible narrowly, thereby limiting the freedom of the elusive, and yet steadfastly faithful, Yahweh. We've discarded the difficult texts in favor of the easy ones, which

we've used to justify what we already believe. The world longs for an alternative vision of the world, but we've already bought into the dominant version and ignore the biblical passages that suggest we do otherwise.

We've forgotten that, through the text, Jesus addresses us as the Children of Light, that is, as friends. We've forgotten the truth uttered by John Robinson in 1620 as our forbears left Europe for America: "God has yet more light and truth to break forth from [God's] Holy Word." Yet more light and truth to claim. Yet more light and truth to proclaim. Claim and proclaim, not to exclude, but to extend an ever more extravagant welcome. Claim and proclaim, not naively or arrogantly, but with humility and wonder. Claim and proclaim, not to reinforce a biased ideology but to reclaim a creative and positive witness of new possibilities. The Good Word is always a new word. The new word is always God's word. Amen.