



The Bible Tells Me So?

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Brookside Community Church
Pentecost 7B – July 8, 2018
Mark 6:1-13



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When the Bible is turned into a tool to justify violence, faithfulness to God requires us to reread it, contest it, or even resist portions of it.

Avoiding Landmines: The Thurman Method

“Well, the Bible says...” What a phrase!

Haven't you heard that phrase used before? I have. I guess I've used it too. But I'll be honest, when I'm not the one using it, I get ready because I'm pretty sure I'm not going to like anything that comes next.

On that day when Jesus began to preach in the synagogue, I wonder if he began with something like the phrase “The Bible says...” Whatever he said, the crowd responded, “Where did this man get all this? Where did this kind of wisdom come from?” My guess is, one of the things that made Jesus's teaching seem so wise was his unique relationship to the sacred scriptures. In my own holy imagination, I think Jesus approached it with honesty, expecting to need to wrestle with it, to find in it a way to address the needs of the people in their own moment. From how the gospels portray Jesus' use of scripture, we can infer that Jesus was able to wrestle with the text, even leave out portions of it, in order to fit his own agenda. For instance, the gospel of Luke tells how Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll (61:1-2) about the day of the Lord's favor and completely skipped over the portion about God's vengeance. Today, we might think this was disingenuous. Was Jesus “cherry picking?” Was Jesus ignoring what the Bible says?

“The Bible says...”

This is a phrase we all know. We've said it, we've taught it, and we've likely had it repeated to us. “The Bible says...” or, maybe we sing it: “The Bible tells me so.” This phrase gives the impression that the Bible is easy to read, that it is clear, that it unequivocally, univocally expresses a unified perspective on a particular issue. But the Bible is *not* easy to read, it is often not very clear, it contains many voices that express diverse perspectives on any number of issues, and most of the time it has nothing at all to do with the issues we are wrestling with today. And it is important for people of faith to know that, and to name it.

Like me, I'm sure you've encountered those folks who have memorized portions of the Bible and can quote specific verses to support their opinion on any number of positions they take. Often, however, when you get down to it, most of these folks have not read much of the books they quote from. But they are bold and find comfort in the belief that their opinions are “biblical.” They leave the rest of us with a few options. Most of us just clam up because we're incapable of providing a well thought out response. Some of us don't let it get to us; we're capable of ignoring these kind of encounters. Still, we are left uneasy about our own relationships to the Bible. We wishing we knew it better. Others of us, especially those who have been at the blunt end of the violence done by the misuse of biblical texts, either decide to just throw the whole thing out, religion and all, or we come to a healthy agreement that the Bible—at least a good deal of it—cannot be trusted.

One of the convictions at the core of this series about inclusion is a repentant acknowledgment that the Bible has been used as a tool of exclusion. Rather than ignoring it, I want to help us as a community learn to do more than that. I want us to engage it. I want us to be able to disarm it.

One way to disarm scripture is what is commonly called by its critics *cherry picking*. Cherry picking, the critics claim, is an intellectually dishonest approach to reading scripture because this is when you take what you like and you leave what you don't. As we've already seen, Jesus was even guilty of it. This characterization is partially true, in that it acknowledges that there are segments of scripture that are unacceptable—at least in the way they have been used. Rather than calling it cherry picking, I would call it the *avoiding the landmines*. I am fully aware of how dangerous and violent the image of landmines is. I don't use it lightly. Cherry picking assumes we are picking and choosing based on our preferences; the image of landmines reminds us that what is at stake is far more costly than our own preference—sometimes, we're actually dealing with the choice between life or death. When someone quotes a passage of scripture to justify violence against whole segments of humanity, the results can often be very deadly! My point is that if we are not careful with the way we read scripture, we will find that the body of Christ may actually lose body parts.

I also call this the Thurman Method, after Howard Thurman's grandmother. Here is a quote from the introduction to his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

During much of my boyhood I was cared for by my grandmother, who was born a slave and lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida. My regular chore was to do all of the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write. Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.

When I was older and was half through college, I chanced to be spending a few days at home near the end of summer vacation. With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters..., as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."¹

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 19-20.

Thurman's grandmother was not just picking and choosing what she liked and didn't like. She was practicing spiritual safety. She didn't need to go through seminary, or get an advanced degree in biblical interpretation to learn how to argue the correct interpretation of these passages. She only knew that in order to safeguard her relationship to "her Maker," she had to promise not to read that part of the Bible!

In her case, too much violence had been done in God's name to merely let the "Bible say" just anything. It was clear that Mrs. Thurman loved the Bible. But she knew that rather than hearing what the Bible says, it was better to just let portions of the Bible remain silent.

Kwok Pui-lan, in her book on imagining God in postcolonial contexts, tells a similar story about an early-twentieth-century Chinese woman who could barely read. Even so, she "used a pin to cut from the Bible verses where Paul instructed women to be submissive and remain silent in the church."² Pui-lan's argument is that, by discovering their own sense of interpretive agency, oppressed women have learned to rescue the Bible from hands of the colonial officials, missionaries, and educators who have misused it. Instead, these faithful women have turned these problematic portions of the Bible "into a site of contestation and resistance for [their] own freedom."³

In other words, when the Bible is turned into a tool to justify violence, faithfulness to God might require removing landmines, even if that means contesting and resisting portions of it.

From the "Bible says..." to "I interpret the Bible as..."

"The Bible says..."

There is, however, another way for people of faith to respond. To get at it, I want to help us practice an experiment I have seen and done a number of times that I have learned from a number of faithful biblical scholars before me. My guess is that the same thing will happen now as has happened before.

Look at the Bible there in the center of the room. Now listen. Put your ears close to it if you must. Can we focus our ears enough beyond the other noises, tune out the other voices in our heads? It is open, let's listen for a minute to hear what it says...

Ok. Now, if my prediction is correct, we have all just experienced an important collective truth that we should all name. *The Bible doesn't actually say anything!* The Bible doesn't speak.

I know what you're thinking. What we mean when we say "The Bible says..." is that when someone looks at the black ink on the white pages of this book, they are able to come to a particular meaning

² Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 77

³ Quoted in Laura Nasrallah and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, "Beyond the Heroic Paul: Toward a Feminist and Decolonizing Approach to the Letters of Paul," in *Paul and Postcolonialism*, ed. Christopher Stanley (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), pp. 162.

and that everyone should be able to agree. But my point is that the Bible actually isn't doing that work. The reader is the one that does everything.

Reading is always an act of interpretation. And if only a few of us read it, and we ascribe too much authority to what "the Bible says..." then reading the Bible becomes a political act.

There is a Quaker saying that I would love if all of you could learn to make it your own: "The water always tastes of the pipes." The Bible doesn't say anything, readers who read the Bible say things.

Some of us read with more intention than others. Some of us don't read it at all. But the Bible doesn't do the work, we do. So next time, when someone says, "The Bible says..." I hope you'll not fall into the trap of saying, "But the Bible also says..." Instead, I hope we can all move to a place that says, "When I read the Bible, I interpret it to mean..."

Then, we're rightly putting the agency on ourselves, rather than using the Bible or God as a placeholder to authorize our own opinions.

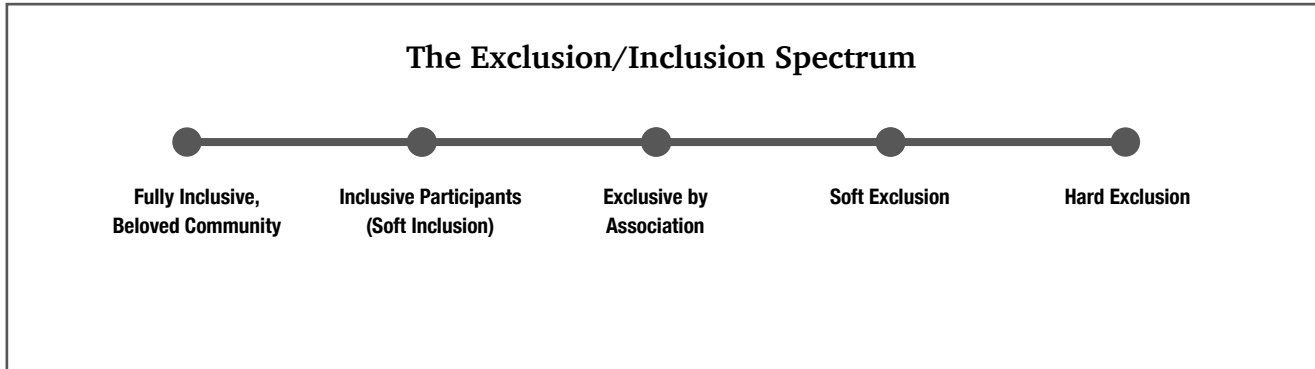
As we go forward in our study, I'm going to make certain assertions. I will tell you that there was no word in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek for "homosexual" or "homosexuality." Of course, there could not have been, since these words were invented near the end of the 19th century. That's when psychoanalysts invented the term because they began to discover and understand the diversity of human sexuality. I'm going to be showing you where some of the landmines are and helping you learn how to reread some of the passages. But in the end, the most important thing I will ever say to you about the Bible is that the Bible only says what people interpret it to say. That's why it is so important that you actually read it for yourselves. When the Bible is turned into a tool to justify violence, faithfulness to God requires that we reread it. At times, we may need to contest it, even resist portions of it. And if our spiritual safety, or the spiritual safety of others is at stake, it might be more faithful just to say in response, "You know, the Bible doesn't say anything!"

And that's why, in our tradition, we have the habit of saying, "God still speaks!"

My prayer for us this morning is that we may be a people who don't just know what the Bible says and doesn't say. May we be a people who are willing to hear the voice of the still speaking God.
—Amen

Reflection Worksheet

Part 1: The Spectrum of Exclusion



Definitions

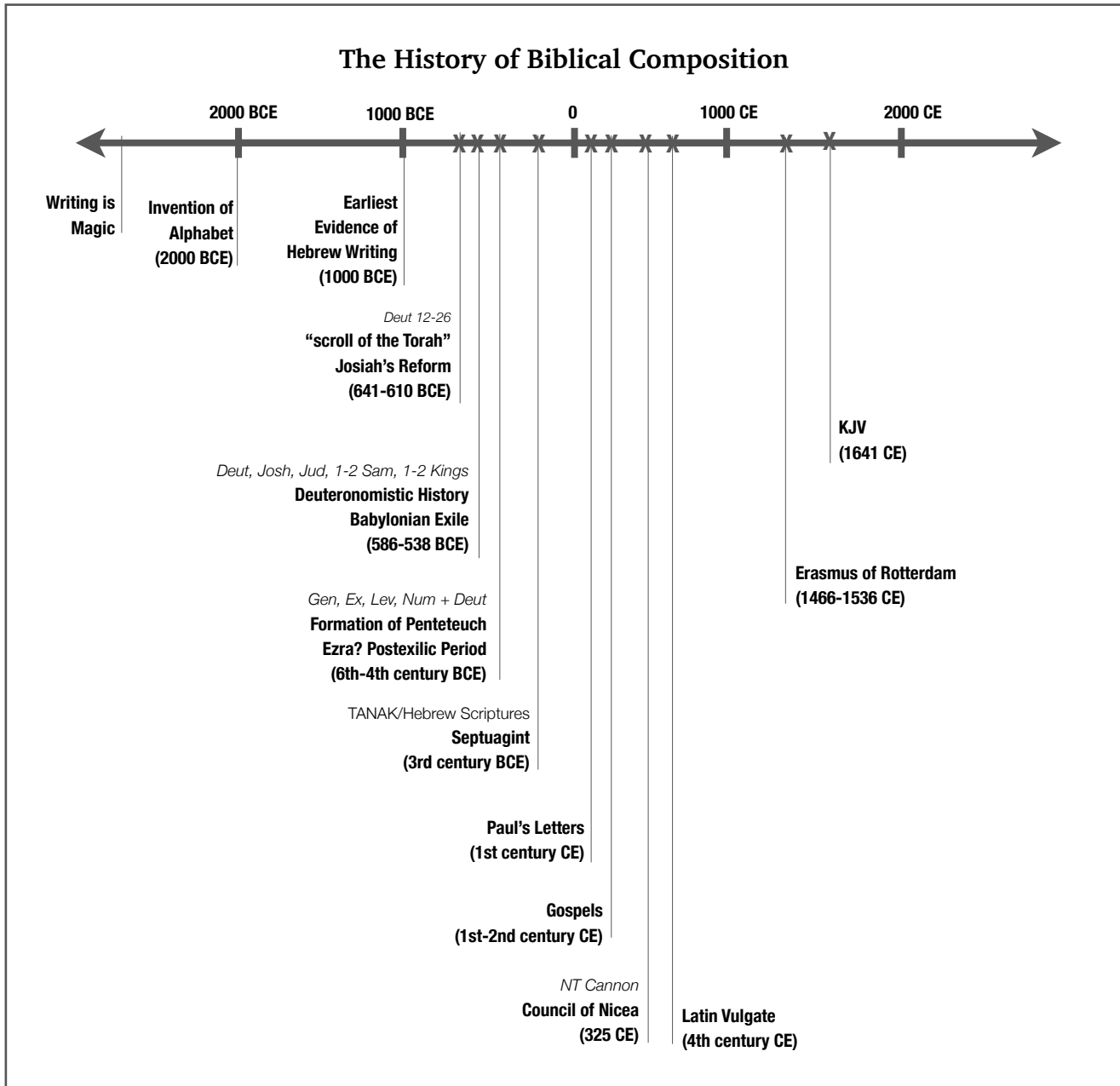
- **Hard Exclusion:** All forms of outright, active exclusion and hate groups, including white supremacy, religious intolerance, misogyny, etc.
- **Soft Exclusion:** Those who are uncomfortable affirming or interacting with people who are excluded from the dominant society. They are operating from a place of social privilege with an active fear of the “the other”: xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, etc.
- **Exclusive by Association:** Those who are uncomfortable being inclusive out of fear of being excluded by the dominant community.
- **Inclusive Participants (Soft Inclusion):** Those who want to be inclusive, but still continue to operate within an exclusivist framework. They may claim to be inclusive, but they do not actively participate in changing the situation because they want to continue to benefit from being at a place of privilege inside an exclusivist environment.
- **Fully Inclusive, Beloved Community:** Those who not only welcome difference but fully affirm it, celebrate it, and even seek after it. Here, inclusion is coupled with an expectation of learning new ways of thinking, new languages, new practices, and other ways to overcome our oppressive, exclusive tendencies.

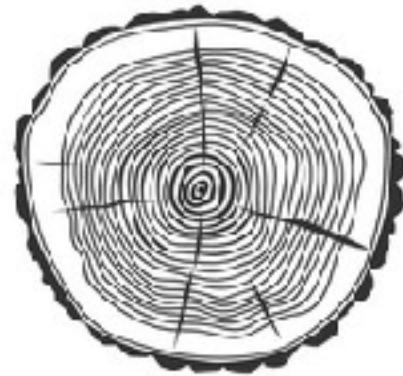
Questions for Conversation and Reflection

- 1) *In the story about Barbara Dane's experience, which character do you most easily identify with (the worker, the pharmacist, or the child)?*
- 2) *Do you find it easy or difficult to identify with the excluded person in Barbara Dane's story?*
- 3) *Where on the Exclusion Spectrum do you see yourself? Where do you see your congregation?*
- 4) *Take some time to reflect on the things that make inclusion scary?*

Reflection Worksheet

Part 2: The Bible is the People's Book





Questions for Conversation and Reflection

- 1) Does the the analogy of the Bible as being like a tree make sense to you?
- 2) How do you understand the sentence: “The religion that generated the Bible foreshadows the religions that were generated by the Bible?”
- 3) The Bible has a communal history of being read, revised, explained, and debated. This is not just true of the authors of the Bible and those who follow them, but is demonstrated in many ways within the biblical text. In your opinion, does this discredit or revive the Bible as a tool for faithful living?
- 4) Knowing that the Bible has been used as a tool for exclusion and violence, what are some ways we can undo this, work to disarm it, and ensure this doesn’t happen among us?

Reflection Worksheet

Part 3: The Bible Says So?

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

- 1) *Do you agree or disagree with Pastor Michael's claim that "when the Bible is turned into a tool to justify violence, faithfulness to God might require removing landmines?"*
- 2) *What is at stake in choosing to avoid biblical landmines in relation to the LGBTQAI+ community?*
- 3) *When someone begins a debate with the phrase "The Bible says...", what are some possible responses?*
- 4) *Have you ever heard the claim that the words "homosexual" or "homosexuality" were not in the Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic languages, and that these words were not invented until the 19th century? Do you find this statement surprising? Is it helpful in making the case for inclusion?*
- 5) *Repeating the question from last week: Knowing that the Bible has been used as a tool for exclusion and violence, what are some ways we can undo this, work to disarm it, and ensure this doesn't happen among us?*