

## Prelude to Personal Theology Hermeneutic

During the Great Reformation “authority” was taken from kings (the divine right of kings) and given over to scripture (*sola scriptura, scriptura sola*). This scriptural authority reigned supreme for several centuries, but has gradually been diminished by the role of science (Darwin and evolution), and social change (the challenge to and “end of slavery”). A final nail in the coffin of the authority of scripture is being driven by the issues surrounding LGBT and Q and the concurrent issue of same-sex marriage.

As people of faith the scriptures still have a place within our moral discernment, but they do not speak with the same unquestioned authority that they spoke with in the time immediately following the Great Reformation. Progressive Christians seek to take scripture seriously, without taking it literally.

Therefore, it is appropriate that today we ask: “How do we read the scriptures?” This is a fundamental question which must be answered by a pastor seeking to be relevant within today’s world. To say that one is a Christian simply will not suffice in today’s world. There is a vast gulf within the tradition on how to read our “sacred texts”. They cover a continuum, ranging from a fundamental (literal) reading on one end to what Marcus Borg calls an “*historical metaphorical*” reading on the other. These different ways of reading scripture lead to vastly different theological approaches to faith and life. Yet for all Christians the scriptures remain an important source in trying to determine right and wrong. All reading of scripture is an interpretation. Therefore, it is important that one is clear about the question, “How do we read the scriptures?”

Simply pulling passages out of context to support this or that concept, a practice called “*proof texting*” is no longer an adequate or an appropriate methodology. This practice has led to a situation where no matter what the issue, proponents on both sides can and do appeal to the scriptures for support. This leads to opponents quoting competing passages, pulled out of context, with little regard for interpreting the text as a whole – either within its original ancient context or within its modern interpretive process. How we approach life is dependent upon how we read the scriptures as a

whole, our hermeneutical approach, and not upon how many passages we can marshal for our defense. The issue is about interpreting the entire text of the scriptures in a consistent manner, rather than finding a lone passage to shore up a particular position.

So, how do I, as your pastor, read the scriptures? As an answer I offer you this paper, and the five books which are its' basis, to clearly lay out my theological principles for how I "read the scriptures" in determining what I preach, what I teach and how I approach the lessons and issues of life.

## Part One: An Introduction

Marcus Borg in ***Speaking Christian*** summarizes the two competing methods of reading and interpreting the scriptures in this way:

*"These two visions of Christianity - one emphasizing the next world and what we must believe and do in order to get there, the other emphasizing God's passion for the transformation of this world - are very different. Yet they use the same language and share the same sacred scripture, the same bible. What separates them is how the shared language is understood - whether within the framework of heaven-and-hell Christianity or within the framework of God's passion for transformation in this world."*<sup>1</sup>

Walter Brueggemann in ***Journey to the Common Good*** argues that from the very beginning there was within the scriptures both a call to be a covenant community and a continuing subversion of that call. Ched Myers in ***Sabbath Economics*** shows how that covenant community (the way of God) was to be an alternative community to the way of the world (the way of the Pharaoh).

John Dominic Crossan in ***God and Empire*** deals with the implications of reading Jesus through the framework of God's passion for the transformation of this world by contrasting two ways to peace, Caesar's way and Jesus' way. Finally, Walter Wink in ***The Powers That Be***

suggests ways in which we continue the contemporary struggle for justice through naming and engaging the existing powers.

These five authors articulate a theological rationale that is consistent with a prophetic reading and interpretation of scripture. This serves as a sound foundation for my personal hermeneutic.

## **Part Two: Call and Resistance**

From the time of the covenant at Sinai Israel establishes a tribal confederacy, resisting for almost three hundred years the imperial monarchical systems of its neighbors and of Pharaoh's Egypt. Resisting both their present and their past; resisting both the lure of domination and the temptation to return to the non-responsibility of slavery.

But, as Walter Brueggemann points out there is a growing resistance to the idea of being a covenant community, as an alternative to the domination system of the world. It is "... *a powerful counternarrative in the biblical tradition that resists the claims of exodus-Sinai-Deuteronomy.*"<sup>(2)</sup>

This counternarrative comes through the development of *holiness* which establishes a hierarchy of status within the community making some members more worthy of God's gifts than others. In this hierarchy lie the seeds of privilege and power. Eventually the tribal confederacy grows weary of being an alternative to the way of the world and gives in to the desire to be like the rest of the world, desiring a king to rule over them. The concept of *holiness* and the hierarchy it establishes will be exploited by the monarchy as it returns to the way of the empire.

Solomon becomes the epitome of the way of kings. He excels in gaining wealth and power and wisdom. His exploits and accomplishments are championed by the biblical chroniclers, and reflected in the teaching of the church as a model of pious faithfulness. While Solomon may have been a patron of the arts, gathering wisdom from around the world, we might better understand his wisdom gathering as "intelligence gathering".

Solomon becomes the biblical model for a global perspective on the common good; this is, however, a perspective that smacks of *privilege, entitlement, and exploitation*, all in the name of God. This perspective, reminiscent of Pharaoh, takes on a powerful life in Jerusalem under Solomon. This largely nullifies the covenant vision of Sinai. Solomon's increased wealth and power and knowledge is at the expense of the people who now labor to satisfy the demands of the monarchy and its appetite for world dominance. Once again the people are in servitude to the elite few. In the end, the domination system is alive and well. It's as though exodus never happened.

Against this backdrop of domination, the prophets voice their opposition citing God's call to be a covenant people. Against the triad of Solomon's "wealth, power, and wisdom" the prophets invoke God's passion for steadfast love (*hesed*), justice (*mishpat*), and righteousness (*tsedaqah*).

Yahweh's steadfast love calls for distributive justice. In covenantal tradition the particular subject of Yahweh's justice is the triad "widow, orphan, immigrant," those without leverage or muscle to sustain their own legitimate place in society. It is righteousness that differentiates between charity and justice. Charity masks the real need for justice. Charity aids the individual but does little to correct systemic imbalances. It is this righteousness that demands that we challenge systemic injustice.

### **Part Three: The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics**

The foundational story of the Hebrew people is the story of The Exodus, the journey from slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt to covenant community under Yahweh at Sinai. The issue for this community, following liberation from Egypt, is "how shall we live?"

Shall we continue to live under the ways of Egypt or shall we follow an alternative way? Shall we continue to follow the way of the world or shall we follow the way of God? Shall we continue to live in a way characterized by the accumulation of wealth and power by the few or shall we follow a way where all have enough? Shall we continue to live in a world of

discrepancy between rich and poor or shall we live in a world in which all share from God's abundance. Shall we continue to live in a lifestyle that leads to slavery for all or shall we follow a lifestyle that leads to community for everyone?

Ched Myers calls God's alternative way Sabbath Economics. Sabbath is all about re-centering human life on being rather than on doing. It is grounded in the gift of God's abundant creation, which is sufficient and sustainable. Economics means literally, the management of the household. So Sabbath Economics is a way of life that leads to the full participation of all in an economy of sustainability and sufficiency. Practicing Sabbath Economics is the personal and political struggle to embody the culture of gift (creation and manna) in the midst of a culture of accumulation (wealth and power).

At its root, Sabbath Economics is about gifts and about grace. It is about the grace of receiving that which the creator gives freely to all, and the responsibility to not take too much or to mistake the gift for a possession. Sabbath Economics is built upon three axioms:

- (1) The world as created by God is abundant with enough for everyone provided that both individuals and communities restrain their appetite and live within appropriate limits;
- (2) The disparities in wealth are not part of the natural order. They are a result of human greed, which must be mitigated through distributive justice; and
- (3) The prophets call us to such strategies of redistribution.

The way of Sabbath Economics unfolds in the manna story where God rains down bread from heaven, a metaphor for the earth's fertility and ability to provide for all of our needs. The people are instructed how to gather this "bread". They are to gather as much as they need, no more and no less. They are to keep the gift circulating - it is intended for daily use and not for hoarding or accumulation. They are to keep the Sabbath tradition, which in part limits human activity.

Within Torah, the Sabbath Day of rest expands into the principle of "the remainder", which establishes the right of the poor to participate in the gifts

of God. At every harvest, the borders of the fields are left unpicked so that the poor and sojourners may share in God's gifts of abundance.

The concept of seventh day becomes the idea of seventh year, when debts are to be forgiven. And the cycle of seven years leads to Jubilee with its practice not only of debt forgiveness, but also of the return of foreclosed lands, and release from slavery.

This is followed by the Year of the Lord's Favor, a celebration of a renewed creation and a radical societal transformation. These practices of just distribution and redistribution ensure that there will be no permanent disparity in wealth and power within the covenant community.

Within the prophetic community, the prophets continue to uplift Sabbath Economics and pronounce judgment on rulers who favor the Economy of Empire. This prophetic call supports the purpose of Sabbath Economics to sustain the common good, by placing limits on the economic activity of the wealthy while working to ensure the full participation of the poor in the gifts of God.

#### **Part Four: God and Empire**

We believe that Jesus was a devotee of Sabbath Economics. His message and life centered on the ruling style of God. His call to discipleship was an invitation to participate with God and to return to the covenant practices of hesed, mishpat, and tzedakah. To be a disciple is to work for the common good.

The kingdom (ruling style) of God can best be understood in contrast to the kingdoms of this world, with the epitome of worldly kingdoms being the Roman Empire and the way of Caesar.

Caesar, having brought the Pax Romana into existence in 32 BCE, was proclaimed Divine, Lord, Son of God, God, God from God, Redeemer, Liberator, Supreme Pontiff, and Savior of the World. Having defeated Marc Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium, he transformed the Roman

Republic into the Roman Empire based upon four kinds of power: military; economic; political; and ideological. The ideological/theological basis of Caesar's empire can best be summed up in the quatrain: Religion - War - Victory – Peace. In a shorthand notation this would be dubbed “Peace through Victory”.

Subsequently, in the Christian Scriptures, the titles given to Caesar are all applied to Jesus of Nazareth. It was the early church's way of saying “Jesus is Lord!” Obviously, if Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. Jesus' ministry, which resulted in his being hailed as Lord, was founded on the quatrain: Religion -- Non-violence – Justice – Peace. In a shorthand notation this would be dubbed “Peace through Justice”.

In his life and ministry Jesus rejected both the role of the expected Davidic Messiah and of the Temple State of Judah. Instead, he followed in the tradition of the covenant community and the role of the prophets. In his rejection of the role of Davidic Messiah Jesus rejected the political violence and the power of coercion. In his rejection of the temple state he rejected the economic violence resulting from the Holiness and the Debt code.

In his life actions and teachings we see in Jesus a passion for the transformation of this world through the means of neighborliness and compassion. Jesus ministry consisted of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, a political and religious metaphor which envisions what this world would be like if God were king and the domination systems were not.

*The only question, of course, was whether peace on earth was to be established as Augustus' peace through victory, or Jesus' peace through justice.<sup>3</sup>*

## **Part Five: The Powers That Be**

Walter Wink invites us to consider that organizations, corporations, and nations all have spiritual dimensions. These are the powers and principalities of our world. His primary premises are the powers are good, the powers are fallen, and the powers must be redeemed. The question is

how do we redeem the powers?

The most ancient and insidious myth of our time, is what Wink calls the myth of redemptive violence. He says: *“It enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, and that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world”*.<sup>4</sup>

This takes us back to the choice between Caesar’s peace through victory and Jesus’ peace through justice.

Jesus taught his followers to respond to evil in a non-violent way. Within this context non- violence does not mean passivity. Quite the contrary is true. It is not a quietest, passive acceptance of all that the powers and principalities seek to do. It is instead an active resistance to the status quo, but a resistance that is grounded in the way of God

Jesus’ teachings call for an aggressive response to the fallen powers of this world through a practice that included a rejection of domination, the embracing of equality and the common good, and the inclusion of those whom the powers have marginalized.

Just as Brueggemann maintains that there is no way into the promised new way except through an exodus from the old way, so Wink maintains that there is no way into the kingdom except through dying to the old ways. Wink says that the ego must be totally reoriented with God at the center.

*“...In the suffering of the poor God was screaming ... at all of us and at our institutions and social systems that cause and perpetuate hunger, poverty, and inequality. We end then with the divine cry ringing in our ears, exhorting us to engage these mighty powers....”*<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

And so I have come full circle. I choose to read scripture in the following ways:

1. I choose to read scripture in terms of the transformation of this world and not in terms of heaven and hell;
2. I choose to read it in terms of the common good espoused by the prophetic movement, as alternative and response to the domination system;
3. I choose to read it as a disparate collection of works by individual authors, all of which do not have equal theological value;
4. I choose to read it in terms of Sabbath Economics grounded in covenant relationship, centering myself in God's way;
5. I choose to read it in terms of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed even though we exist within the kingdom of this world, choosing to work for peace through justice and not peace through victory; and
6. Last but not least, I choose to read scripture as a call to action, an invitation to be in relationship with God and to enter into the story, engaging the principalities and powers of the modern domination system wherever I might find them.

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Glossary:

**Hessed** – Steadfast love is to stand in solidarity with, to honor commitments, to be reliable toward all partners

**Mishpat** – Justice in the Hebrew Scriptures concerns distribution in order to make sure all members of the community have access to resources and goods for the sake of a viable life of dignity.

**Tsedaqah** – Righteousness concerns active intervention in social affairs, taking an initiative to intervene effectively in order to re-habilitate society, to respond to social grievance, and to correct every humanity-diminishing activity

Endnotes:

1. Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian* (New York, NY. Harper Collins; 2011) p. 233
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville KY. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 44
3. John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire* (New York, N.Y. Harper Collins; 2008) p.108
4. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York, NT: Galilee Doubleday; 2003) p. 42
5. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*, (New York, NT: Galilee Doubleday; 2003) p. 199 [a quote from Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Hunger for Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980) p. vii]