

“Be Careful”

Sermon by Rev. Glenn Brumbaugh

Pentecost 20, Year B

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Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12 NIV / Mark 10:2-16 NSRV

When we think of this book, what is it that comes to mind?

Certainly common wisdom

would say the primary sacred writings of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The majority of those who follow those faiths

would agree that this book represents, in some fashion,

the divinely-inspired guidance

expressed by writers and scribes

throughout the history of these traditions,

But the bigger question is what do these scriptures mean to us?

Do we seem them as divinely-inspired, and if so,

what does that mean for our lives?

Throughout the centuries, these words have been interpreted in a multitude of ways

that reflect the great diversity and variety exhibited

in the style and content they contain.

There are epic stories, poetry, songs, and philosophical and ethical codes,

just to name of a few of the genres reflected.

Portions have served as the basis for religious and even civil law
at various times in various cultures.

These various documents assembled together
represent the literature styles relevant over the centuries,
covering a wide swath of historical periods and cultures.

Likewise the way people have chosen to apply them to their own lives
has been just as varied.

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But one commonality running through that interpretation is the belief that,
for the most part, these writings in some way give us a glimpse into who God is,
and what God's intentions are.

The first book contains stories to explain God's actions and intentions
in creating the universe, and the creatures contained in that creation.

Then we get to the creation of God's chosen people,
and God's rules to guide them in their lives as individuals,
And just as importantly, as a community.

These rules covered everything a society forming 2500 years ago
would need to know.

It tells them how to prepare their food safely,
how to fairly trade with one another and resolve disputes,
how to live lives of integrity and ethics,
what not to do and what not to wear

so they aren't confused with the pagans religions around them,
and most importantly, how to ensure everyone
in that male-dominated, patriarchal society was cared for.

These rules and laws served that culture well initially.

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The problem occurred, when over time,

they began to focus more on the written laws

while losing the original intention behind them.

As with any set of well-intentioned rules or laws,

those with power can use those edicts in ways

that deviate from their intended purpose,

to maintain and increase their own power and dominance.

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This is where we enter our Gospel lesson this morning.

Jesus is put on the spot to see which side of an argument

among two rabbinical schools he favors.

The topic in dispute is when a man may divorce his wife,

based on a phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1 which said

that a man could divorce

“because he has found her indecent in anything.”

The School of Shammai said that a man may not divorce his wife

unless he has found unchastity in her.

The School of Hillel, based on that same snippet of Deuteronomical law,
argued that he can divorce her if she in anyway displeased him,
or if he found one fairer than her.

This dispute is a classic example of using the law in ways
that completely lose sight of their original intent.

In the patriarchal culture when this was written,

which had not become anymore liberated in the 500 odd years

between then and the time of Christ,

women had no power or ability to sustain themselves on their own.

They were completely dependent on either their husbands,

male offspring, or their own birth families for their support.

As we learned this summer in our exploration of Ruth,

to lose those support systems put women in dire circumstances.

If a man divorced his wife, and she was not able to find a new husband

and had no family to care for her, she was destitute on the street.

Women couldn't operate businesses independently

and there was really no wage labor to speak of for women.

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As is the usual case for Jesus, he doesn't get involved

in the legal arguments of the Pharisees and Scribes.

Instead he, as the fulfillment of the Law, pulls them back to its original intent,

all the way back to the creation story in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.

Humans are created in God's image, and when they marry,
they cease to be individuals and become one flesh.

This reminds us that God recognized the value of not being alone,
to have companionship and support of a partner,
to be in community and not lead a solitary life.

As such, the commitment people made to live into God's intentions
was something to be taken very seriously.

The law had been twisted to allow men to have the power
to disregard that commitment lightly,
and to follow their lusts and desire
to the detriment not only of their spouse's well-being,
but their own integrity and wholeness as well.

Jesus reminds them, and us, that God's intentions
were for a compassionate and caring union of two people,
committed to each other's best interests.

He reinforces the seriousness of that commitment,
by reinforcing that the casual legal dismissal of a spouse for another,
was no better than cheating on another.

But this is a passage of scripture that needs to be handled very carefully.

Like with the Pharisees of Jesus' day, it can be all too easy to become legalistic
and lose sight of the intent of Christ's argument,
as well as the intent of the original laws in question.

God intended marriage to be a mutually beneficial and supportive union,
where both spouses complemented cared for each other.

Unfortunately, then as now, not all unions, were, as they say, "made in heaven."

Sometimes people marry who are not compatible,
whose union is fraught with strife and discord.

On occasion, one spouse or both can become abusive and hurtful.

This is not the companionship God intended.

Certainly there are those disputes and differences in a relationship
that have the capacity to be worked through, or overlooked.

That's just part of the nature of a committed relationship.

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There's a story of a married couple who On their 50th wedding anniversary,
summed up the reason for their long and happy marriage.

The husband said, "I have tried never to be selfish.

After all, there is no 'I' in the word 'marriage.'"

The wife said, "For my part, I have never corrected my husband's spelling."

But how tempted are we become legalistic like the Pharisees,

and unfortunately the Church in many cases,

and make Christ's argument legalistic, arbitrary law

and force people to suffer in unhealthy unions?

It's important to remember that bad relationships

don't just affect the two people involved.

The effects ripple out to the family as well.

Medical studies show that children of dysfunctional relationships
are 25-30 percent more likely to be ill,
and actually tend to have a shorter lifespan.

God sees the value in sharing one's journey with a partner

that makes one whole and complete.

What's important is that we value and honor that relationship when we find it.

We also need to realize that we are human,

and sometimes make errors in judgment

in making commitments to partners who are not the ones

to make us whole and of one flesh.

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It all gets back to how we view the contents of this book,

and how we see God's intentions and motivations in those words.

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Do we see them as portraying a loving, nurturing, grace-filled God,

reflected in Jesus, who want us to live full meaningful lives

of caring companionship and community?

Or do we see God reflected in scripture

as an enforcer of arbitrary laws and edicts, without grace or compassion?

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At the end of our gospel reading today,

Jesus instructs his followers that they should receive the kin-dom of God
as children, for the kin-dom belongs to such as these.

Do we let God guide and mentor us as children?

Or do we try to figure it out on our own?

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This book is full of wisdom and lessons to be learned,
lessons that take on new meaning in new situations.

We have the choice to make this just a book of static rules and laws,
or to dig a little deeper,
to discern the intent of the message to the audience it was written for
and try to translate that meaning to our context,
in this time and place.

A good question to ask ourselves is, what does my interpretation reveal about God?

Does it reveal a caring, nurturing celestial parent,
or a bitter, vengeful deity full of wrath and violence?

Is Christ reflected in our understanding,
or does his perspective just not fit into our take on things?

In our epistle reading today, we're told that Jesus is happy
to welcome us as brothers and sisters in that holy family
if we are willing to seek the loving guidance of God
which leads to lives of meaningful connections and compassion,
full of care for our brothers and sisters.

We are created in God's image, like Adam and Eve,

flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone.

As we prepare today to share in communion with our risen Savior,

let us seek the will and guidance of God, through scripture,

to being the compassionate, care-full children of God

that we are called to be. May it be so. Amen.