

“LETTING GOD’S STORY HAVE ITS WAY WITH US”

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The parable of the Dishonest Judge is fascinating but also strange. We come to church expecting moral improvement, or a spiritual pick-me-up, right? Then we hear this story of a sleazy judge who can’t even stand God and despises people? That’s odd. Is this crooked magistrate someone we’re meant to emulate? we ask.

And what about the irksome widow lurking all over his courtroom, harassing him? She begs this no-account judge for justice, constantly harassing him until, finally, beaten down by her pleas, he relents. He gives her justice to make her shut-up. Not exactly ennobling, is it? What is the meaning? Is it about judges and politics? About prayer? Or could it be about our faith? The story begs for an interpretation.

Let’s be honest. Reading the Bible or hearing the Bible read can be challenging. The Bible is very old. The newest parts are 2,000 years old. Nothing in the Bible was written in English. All parts of Scripture arose in cultures very different from our own. It’s like trying to read Homer or Dostoevksy. You need a running start to get inside of them, to appreciate their greatness, to allow them to have their way.

We shall return to this parable. But for now let’s shift to 2 Timothy’s more panoramic view of scripture. When I read I & II Timothy, I can hear the parallel talks Gary and I share. No, we’re not of their stature but our circumstances are similar. Paul, equipping young Timothy for strenuous demands of ministry, in the course of his general counsel, lifts up the Bible as basic equipment for Timothy. For Paul, the Bible has utility like a Swiss army knife: reproof, correction, inspiration.

As Paul commends the Bible to Timothy, it gain a lofty claim no other book can enjoy, a unique authority that rang true 2,000 years ago, and remains true today. It seems too mild to say the Bible enjoys a privileged place in our common life. Much as Jesus Christ is the center of our efforts, the Bible is the centerpiece of it. We don’t worship the Bible, for that is idolatry. But we revere it as we let its story become our story, a re-narration of our lives scooped up into the God movement.

New Testament scholar Dan Via noted that reading the parables--like today’s, for example--is like looking through a window. We peer through the plate glass and see into another world we never would have seen without its compelling stories. Yet sometimes, says Via, peering through the window to see a whole new world beyond us, we also see our own reflection simultaneously within the plate glass.

The Bible generally and the parables specifically function as both window and mirror. That might confuse us but we can also sense how wonderful it is. Maybe we like what we see through the window but don’t like the reflection of ourselves. That means the parable has gotten us. It has imparted a deepened awareness of

how our lives look differently in God's eyes than we'd imagined. It has imparted an improved, truer perspective on the true and living God than the God we like to invent for ourselves. Clearly, the Bible cares less about affirming us as we are than giving us a more truthful version of the self than we ever dreamt possible. If we are disappointed in the Bible, it's because it doesn't give us what we expect.

It gives us something bigger and better. The Bible is much more than history or good literature or moral principles. Frederick Buechner said reading the Bible as good literature is about like reading *Moby Dick* to learn how to hunt whales. Don't miss the point of this Book of books, so much more than information about God.

Scripture wants to alter your view of reality, change you, transform you, even commandeer your life. We hear it in how Paul counselled Timothy. The goal of Scripture is to make you into a different person than you could be never having heard it. Scripture wants to say something to you you'll never hear anywhere else. Scripture wants to transform your humanity into the shape of Jesus Christ.

That is why the Bible is such a centerpiece here in our Congregational churches. Here going to church amounts to lifetime training in how to hear Scripture read and preached, and how to interpret and live scripture in our daily life with Christ. Did you ever notice the hush as I open the Bible to read before it gets preached? The room becomes quiet and attentive. We block out all of the distractions. We assume the posture of open listening. We expect an encounter with God's Word.

The parable I read today reminds us, it can be a strange word sometimes. That is why you have people like me or Gary called by the church for 2,000 years now to interpret and proclaim the Word, to summon helpful analogies and metaphors, illustrations and more familiar connections—like *Moby Dick*—to illumine the word.

The Bible is much more than information, even potentially useful information. The Bible is God's way of addressing you. It is God's personal address to each and every one of us here. Karl Barth once said the first question we ask the Bible is not, "What can I do to understand this text?" Rather, the first question is always, "How is God calling me to change through this text? How is this and every text a summons, a calling, an open-hearted and full-throated bid to my transformation?"

Notice how Paul tells Timothy that Scripture is not only inspired by God, it is also useful. *Useful*. Not useful so much for helping me get what I imagine I want for my life to turn out well. Useful for what God hopes that I will become so that I can do my part in God's greater work of redeeming and healing the broken world. Which is, by the way, the reason you were born into and place upon this world.

People get intimidated because the sweep of Bible is so vast and we only know a little of it. People get intimidated because we see other students of the Bible who know more. Realize that neither of those things is ultimately the decisive thing.

What really matters is cultivating a humble willingness to let Scripture penetrate your soul; that you are open to hearing your name called as you read Scripture; that when you see a dark figure in a story, you wonder if that could be you, and don't immediately flip to your enemies, reflexively casting them as the bad guys. What matters is letting God speak to you, touch you and give you an assignment.

Preaching the Word, as I have, in season and out of season for decades now, what gives me the greatest joy is seeing how you more often than you would guess understand the Bible better than I do; without your having studied Hebrew or Greek; without your having shelves of thick, massive academic commentaries. I can't tell you how humbling I find that, to have people like you to preach to, for whom the Word of God is living, because you trust Christ to speak to you here.

Before I close, back to our opening impenetrable walnut conundrum of a parable. Did you ever sit there, watching a football game, cracking whole walnuts by hand? Then you find the one in the bag that is more like Ft. Knox than a walnut. You don't need fancy levers or specially crafted picks to pry it open and enjoy it. What I do is just grab another shell, and pry at the weak spot, and then, bingo!

What I mean is when the Bible stumps you, the best help to open inscrutable texts are other parts of Scripture. When the walnut won't yield, grab another shell and pry it open. The shell I grab for our hard opening parable is Luke 11.11-13. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake? Or if he asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who're evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give."

This logic is lesser to greater, an ancient rhetorical device. If this irksome widow is granted her need, how much more will your need be honored, offering it with purity and humility. If a sleazy judge grants the cause of this widow, how much more will our gracious God consider and grant our sincerely felt needs. It's a contrast parable, humorously saying, if the hopelessly jaded and annoying can work it out, consider God's eagerness to grant your cause. Just pray for it, ask God.

If you say, that is too much work, it's not worth it. I say you are unwilling to meet God halfway. Don't be a consumer, who always expects everything easy and convenient. Be the disciple who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, above all. The Bible isn't about your agenda of problem-solving. The Bible would escort you to that mysterious realm of truth and love where God has seen all and saved all. Because the Bible wants to give us something better than we want, it is worth it. Amen.