Proper 25 Year A 2026

So another seminary story. I loved seminary. I relished the courses in theology, and New Testament, Hebrew Scripture, and Ethics, even Greek… But where we all really got tested; where the proverbial rubber met the road, was CPE, clinical pastoral education. My classmates and I were assigned to the various wards of St. David's hospital in Austin. For me it was twelve weeks in the neuro-intensive care unit. All the learning in the world paled in the face of being in the midst of people in a medical crisis. Every day I saw patients and their families in crisis, struggling in that disorienting landscape between illness and healing, between life and death. I learned, the hard way, that it is not how much we know; it is not a sound theology or philosophical erudition that makes for an effective pastor; it is simple presence. When words are hard to come by; when words fail, it is our presence that can make all the difference. So much of life is about presence. If nothing else, I learned that presence takes courage.

My supervisor was Sally Hinesey, the head chaplain at St. David's. Sally drove a motorcycle… not one of those fashionable European scooters. I mean a real motorcycle. Sally was a graduate of my seminary, but never was ordained. Instead she felt called to hospital chaplaincy as a layperson. Sally was in her sixties. She had a craggy face that had seen its fair share of life's hard lessons. Her

voice was kind, but coarse because of her smoking three packs of cigarettes a day since high school.

One morning Sally assigned me to see a man who was recovering from a head injury. “He’s a Mormon,” she said. She told me that she had a copy of the Book of Mormon in her office, and that I might want to give it a look before I made my visit. “There’s some crazy stuff in there,” she said. And then, with a wry smile she said, “I guess there’s some pretty crazy stuff in our bible too!”

And indeed there is: seas parting; burning bushes, flying chariots; demons inhabiting a herd of pigs; people walking on water; the dead being raised to life… and that’s all before we get to the book of Revelation. Yes, there’s some crazy stuff; and yet, we call the bible holy. It is our sacred book. We respect its authority. It’s a feast for the imagination. So, I want to talk about scripture this morning, what it is and what it is not. First of all, scripture is not history; and though there are some historical generalizations in scripture as context, scripture is more the stuff of legend. And scripture does not use the language of empirical facts; scripture uses the language of the imagination, the language of mystery. Scripture is not history; scripture is theology… theology that embraces human mythology… and that’s not to say that it isn’t true. Because it is mythology, it is all

the more true, true beyond rational thought. Mythology speaks of the deep truth of who we are in the presence of God. To read the imaginative stories of the bible literally is to undermine the greater truth that these writers seek to express. The life of faith is much more an art than it is a science. That is why the imagination exults in metaphor and symbol, because they demand engaged interpretation. Their meanings are evolving, as truth evolves. Truth is uncertain, but it teems with discovery. Many of the stories of scripture have their origins long before the emergence of Christianity. Stories of Virgin births, for example, existed among other religions of the Middle East. The motif of resurrection far preceded the New Testament account of Jesus's resurrection. These are stories that have endured the test of time, have found their way into the human heart generation after generation. My point is that we are to look with honesty and diligence to the deep truth that scripture presents to us. We can trust our sacred book, actually a library, not a book… We can trust sacred scripture because it is an ingenuous work of the imagination. I'm thinking of the poet Coleridge's premise that the imagination is one and the same as the Holy Spirit.

The irony of course, is that there are contradictions in scripture; there are differing points of view; evoking a rich tapestry of interpretation…The Speaker of the House of Representatives, famously told a reporter that if one wanted to

know his philosophy, then one should read the bible… O.K… But the question is: Who's interpretation? In Matthew's account of Jesus's conversations with the religious authorities of Jerusalem, he depicts devout Jews arguing over the correct interpretation of scripture. That's what devout Jews do. That's what people of faith do. The interpretation is never settled. Never has been. It goes on and on. Interpretation is the thing.

Reading scripture requires a critical eye. We take into account the world behind the text, that is, what is going on in the world within which scripture is being written. For example, all four Gospels were written within twenty five years of the razing of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. That is decisive and vital context. And then, as best one can, one must acknowledge the agenda of the writer. Matthew has some profound disagreements with Mark; he is much more vocal about the oppressive presence of empire. Luke has disagreements too; Luke includes stories not present in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark; and then John's Gospel is an entirely different philosophy all together. Nowhere in the synoptic Gospels is there a claim that Jesus is God; remarkably contrary to the central claim of Jesus's divinity in John's Gospel … And then perhaps most importantly, we bring our own context to the interpretive enterprise; our knowledge gleaned over the centuries; post Renaissance, post Enlightenment; we bring our

experience as citizens of the so-called post-modern world to bear. It is our imagination that leads us into the revelations of scripture. The imagination has an insatiable hunger for the truth; and the imagination wants to find that truth in mystery. I'll say it again, the truth of scripture is felt more than understood. We can't know the truth of scripture; we can only experience it.

Of course, God speaks to us in other ways as well… in Literature and art; in nature, within and through the human community. God is unscrupulous in God's self-disclosure. If we are honest and vulnerable and persistent, we will apprehend the truth when we see it, or perhaps, when we feel it.

So, all of that brings us to today's Gospel reading in Matthew. Over the last Chapter, Matthew has levelled a no holds barred critique of the occupying empire. We heard the parable of the King who wished to throw a wedding party for his son… His friends decline to come and even abuse the slaves bearing the king's invitation. The king in retribution burns their city… and undeterred, he invites the peasants to the gala, only to bind one and cast him out into the street for not wearing the proper dress. The king acts as kings act, with coercion and violence. And that story is followed by the story of the coin engraved with the image of Caesar, with Jesus rejecting the legitimacy of the empire, and instead

proclaiming the sovereignty of God… and an alternative way of life; a life in a kingdom of equals, in which power and abundance are shared for the good of the whole.

In today's reading Jesus is confronted by a lawyer. Not the kind of lawyer familiar to us. A lawyer in New Testament literature is a card carrying theologian. So here Jesus is challenged by a biblical expert as to the proper interpretation of scripture. Now, this passage follows the conversation in Matthew where the scribes ask Jesus about the woman who marries seven brothers. It was Hebrew law that if a woman is widowed, then her late husband's brother is duty bound to marry her. The example given by the scribes is a wife married to a man with seven brothers, and their question to Jesus is to which brother will she be married in heaven. It's a ridiculous scenario and an interpretive nightmare which Jesus artfully dodges, but suffice it to say, Matthew is making the point that we can get bogged down in the letter of the law. Sometimes, we can't see the forest for the trees. So in our passage today which follows, Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest… There are some 650 commandments in the Torah, so to choose one as the greatest, would cause division and undermine Jesus's authority… So he dodges again the question, and in a moment of imaginative reverie and clarity he gives them the big picture… Amid the ambiguity and contradictions, and infinite

interpretations of scripture, he cuts to the chase… When all of our best efforts in trying to figure out who God is; what God wants…What is the essence of God's word? When those questions fail, then Jesus says to know this… That the essence of the vast sweep of sacred scripture , my sisters and brothers, comes down to this: We are to Love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds… and we do that by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves… And who is our neighbor? The better question is, who is not our neighbor?

At the second Vatican Council in 1962 an astounding proposition was made: That God has a preferential option for the poor and the disenfranchised. It was no small controversy. It followed on Jesus's teaching that until we embrace with care the marginalized of our world then we are all the lesser for it; that until all are welcomed at God's table of plenty; until all have dignity, then the human community is broken. We are to Love the world into wholeness. All of the symbols, all of the metaphors of biblical speculation point to our being present to the world as Love. Words often fail; presence is the thing. The gift we bear as people of faith, as humans, is the Love of God, by our presence. Every detail of scripture has to be interpreted in that light. The former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry said, more than once, that if it's not about Love, then it's not about God. Would that our world leaders embrace that simple

admonition. The false gods of success, of wealth and power would have us think otherwise. We are to give ourselves over to the dignity and well-being of our neighbor, even our enemies. In truth, only governments have enemies. Enemies are a construct of empire. For us, all people, all people, are our brothers and sisters, all of whom having the right to well-being, peace, justice and dignity. How do we know this is true? The imagination, God's invincible Spirit over the sweep of history has told us so. Maybe it is time we listen.