
Two Corinthians – and the Spirit of the Lord

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Epiphany 3 – Year C

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. ...They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly. ... He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ...Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. Nehemiah 8:1,2,3,7-8

Apparently, a particular Bible verse has been in the news lately. This news has been reported, however, not for what the verse actually says, but for how someone referenced it. Somebody this past week referred to a Bible verse as “Two Corinthians, 3:17,” instead of the conventional American way of “Second Corinthians, 3:17.”

No big deal. He wasn’t wrong. In many styles, “Two Corinthians” is an acceptable way to refer to Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. But has anyone actually ever read it, or given its sense?

When I think of two Corinthians, I think of this joke. “Two Corinthians walk into a bar. One gets drunk and the other goes hungry” (*attributed to Bruce Alderman*). Ha! It’s a joke! You will not get the joke unless you have actually read Paul’s Second letter to the Corinthians!

Has anyone actually ever read Two Corinthians, 3:17? It says this: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. [Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom!]” (2 Corinthians 3:17). People who quote such verses from the Bible really ought to know what they mean.

They need Ezra and his troop, whose story is our Old Testament reading today. The people are gathered at the Water Gate in the city of Jerusalem, in order to hear readings from the Book of the Law of Moses. But it is up to Ezra, and others, to make sense of the readings. The people need interpreters and explainers. The law, the scriptures, the Bible, need accurate teachers of it. So Nehemiah 8:8 declares that Ezra and his assistants “gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

Maybe you remember the story of the young fool, who thought he knew what the authority of the Bible meant. It meant that all of the Bible is the literal and inerrant Word of God, no matter what culture or context. He could turn to any page for guidance. So, he thought, “I’ll just turn to any page in the Bible and point to a verse and do what it says!” The first verse he turned to was Matthew 27:5. It said, “Judas went out and hanged himself.”

“Wait a minute!” he cried out. “This could not be right. I’ll try again.” He opened the book and let the pages fall again. This time his fingers came to Luke 10:37. It said, “Go thou and do likewise.”

“No!” He tried a third time. This time, the Bible, the holy Word of God, opened to John 13:27: “What you must do, do quickly.”

The Bible does not come out well when it is interpreted by folks who do not use their heads. Like someone once said (including William Sloane Coffin), “The Bible is something like a mirror. If an ass looks in, you cannot expect an apostle to look out.”

But sometimes the Bible does not come out well even when people do use their heads!

When Henry the Eighth, for instance, struggled to have an heir to the throne of England, he thought his wife’s miscarriages were a result of God’s judgment. After all, that wife (Catherine of Aragon) had been, first, his brother’s wife! When his brother had died, Henry had married his deceased brother’s wife, Catherine. Folks had used the Bible to justify that marriage.

It is right there at Deuteronomy 25:5: “If brethren dwell together and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry unto a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him as wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her.” (That is certainly a scriptural injunction if I have ever heard one.)

But when Catherine did not have a male child, Henry began to sense that another section of scripture took precedence. Maybe Leviticus 20:21 was correct. Leviticus 20:21 says that “if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; and they shall be childless.” Maybe, thought Henry, that was why he was childless. Which Bible verse should take precedence?

You know, as well as I, how often certain verses of the Bible have been used to justify bad arguments, especially pertaining to issues that embarrass us now. Slavery, for instance. The Bible was used at one time to justify the continuation of slavery. Consider Ephesians 6:5: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ.” It took a long time for folks to raise up other verses from the same Bible, passages whose principles show slavery as a travesty. The Bible needed wiser interpreters.

The Bible has also been used to deny women leadership roles in the Church. First Corinthians 14, verse 34 clearly says, “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, *as the law also says*” (emphasis mine). It took a long time before we relied more on another verse, Galatians 3:28: “In Christ there is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free.”

If we believe that all scripture is equally valid, we might end up believing that women are subordinate to men, that slaves ought always to obey their masters, that we should not eat shellfish and lobster and shrimp.

No. Bible interpretation is a careful and sacred art. It is not served well by absolutists and simplistic sensationalists. The Bible is truly inspired! But inspiration does not mean inerrancy; and inspiration does not mean literalism. The Bible needs teachers and interpreters, just as the law needed Ezra.

Here’s an idea: how about Jesus? Let’s use Jesus as an example of how to interpret scripture. Well, it turns out that Jesus was not afraid to claim that some scriptures are more valuable than others. At one point in his ministry, someone asked him what the greatest commandment of all is.

Jesus did not demur! He did not say, “Well, you know all the scriptures are all equally important.” He didn’t say that! He gave the guy an answer! He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus was not afraid to declare that some scriptures are greater than others.

Jesus also interpreted scripture by adding to it! Adding his own truth and power! He said things like, “You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” In fact, that was scriptural. But Jesus claimed a more progressive interpretation. “But I say unto you,” he said, “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:38).

And then there is this gospel story, the gospel we just heard for today, from Luke chapter four. Apparently, Jesus was familiar, quite familiar, with the scriptures. It was his custom, his habit, his practice, to attend synagogue—to go where they actually read the Bible! (Like all of you are doing this morning, here at church!) The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus was filled with the Spirit when he returned to his hometown, to the synagogue. When they handed him the scroll of the prophets that day, he found one particular passage, from the Book of the prophet Isaiah, and he quoted it as the lesson for

the day.

That quotation, from Isaiah chapter sixty-one, is where it all began. Recounted today, this gospel story is where Jesus begins his public ministry. Jesus deliberately uses one scripture as the basis, the foundation, the mission statement, for his public ministry.

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:18–21)

“Today,” said Jesus, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus is the ultimate way of interpreting scripture. He actually fulfills the life-giving power of the Bible. He acts it out. He lives the liberating power of God.

This week, if you want to know what Two Corinthians 3:17 means, look at Jesus. Two Corinthians 3:17 says that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. There is freedom!

That is why Jesus, repeating Isaiah, said that where the Spirit of the Lord is, good news will be brought to the poor, release will be proclaimed to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. And then, Jesus went out and fulfilled those very words. That was the evidence. The Spirit of the Lord really was with Jesus.

If we want to know how to interpret the Bible, then, we listen to Jesus. And we listen to Ezra and his assistants. And we listen to the prophets. And we continue to listen to people who have spent their lives trying to interpret the marvelous word of God, the Word of God. The Word of God is about freedom, release, good news. The Word of God always frees people. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty!” — Two Corinthians 3:17.

AMEN.

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