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“I Am Not Sure About A God....”
3. Whose Book Seems So Contradictory
(Or, "What's Cornbread Got to Do With the Bible?")

Matthew 5:17, 43-45 NRSV "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished....You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.'"

2 Timothy 3:16 NRSV (alt.) Every scripture inspired by God is also useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

It's one of the things that skeptics of Christianity so often say: how can Christianity be true when the Bible is so "contradictory"? If you Google the phrase "Is the Bible contradictory?" you will get a half a million hits and thousands of those hits are webpages devoted to cataloguing the apparent contradictions in the Bible. On the face of it, though, the critics have a point. You can indeed find through both Testaments assertions that seem at odds with each other. In fact, let me name just a handful: In the story of King David, God purportedly sent a prophet to threaten a famine if David did not do as God wanted; but one place in the Bible says it was to be a seven-year famine and another place says it was to be a three-year famine. When Ahaziah becomes King of Israel, was he twenty-two years old or forty-two? The Bible says both in different places. Did you know that the book of Genesis actually has two different instructions to Noah about how many pairs of animals to take on the Ark? The story we are most familiar with says one-pair per animal, but just one chapter later it's seven pairs. King Solomon apparently really liked his horses; one book in the Bible said he had four-thousand stalls in his barn, but another says he had forty-thousand. I would hate to have the job of cleaning either number of stables! Perhaps that's why the scripture also

tells us that King Solomon built a palace containing a lot of bathrooms – two thousand by one account, but over three thousand by another. The gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a colt, but Matthew tell us that he entered Jerusalem apparently rather acrobatically riding both a colt and a donkey at the same time. And when Jesus went to his death, the gospel of John says he carried his own cross while Matthew says he did not.

We could go on and on, and all those websites do, at great and persnickety length.¹ What do we do with the fact that indeed the Bible often does indeed seem to have contradictory facts? To begin to answer that question, let me go to what will seem a most unlikely subject: the history of cornbread in America. Recently, the Charlotte Observer newspaper published a fascinating story² whose opening question was why is there such a great divide between those who put sugar in their cornbread and those who don't. But then the story goes on to delve into a number of different interrelated facts that suggest that the burning issue of sugar-or-no-sugar is also related to the differences between African American and white recipes, whether cornmeal is water-ground or stone-ground, the economics of white cornmeal versus yellow cornmeal, and the difference in recipes depending on how influenced a particular area was by the colonial British. The article also noted that over four centuries, cooks both white and black had played, as all cooks do, with their recipes – adding this, subtracting that, mixing it this way or mixing it that way, cooking it on the stove or an oven, and so on and so on. The point? The recipes for how you make cornbread are not static, once-for-all things but are composed by cooks who are in a living ***conversation about and adaptation of the tradition*** handed down to them. That sentence is important so I'm going say it again: cornbread recipes, like all recipes, are not static, but are the product

¹To name just one: http://www.answering-christianity.com/101_bible_contradictions.htm

²<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/living/food-drink/article68763427.html>

of a conversation with and adaptation of the recipes handed on to them and which new cooks will in turn hand on.

My friends, that fact about cornbread is also the most important fact about how we should understand the Bible and its purported contradictions. The most important thing to remember about the Bible – and if you take but one thing from this sermon, make it this – is that the Bible is a four-thousand year old document whose origins goes back even further and which is the record of many different voices with many different “takes” on who God is and what God wants of humanity. **In short, the Bible is a long-running conversation**, not a book of computer source code, not a phone book (remember those?) where you run your fingers over the page to find a bit of information. And this also means that just as those cornbread cooks received, adapted, and handed on their recipes – sometimes disagreeing with the way previous cooks had done it! – so to the Bible is the record of many voices *who sometimes are in disagreement with one another*.

When Jesus says, in our scripture for today, an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, that “You have heard that it was said... But I say to you....” he is not repudiating the principles of Judaism. Nor is he, as too many people have tragically wanted to claim, rejecting his own Jewish people. No, what he is doing is what the writers of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, had constantly done and which was faithfully recorded in the scripture: they are having a conversation, even arguments sometimes, with the tradition in **the service of that tradition**, in the hopes of making it better. With cornbread, you argue with the tradition of recipes handed on to you for the sake of making tastier cornbread. And, likewise, what Jesus is doing is arguing with the Biblical tradition for the sake of making the gracious love of God for each and all even more fully known. When Jesus responds the way he does, he is participating in the conversation in the same way that the Bible records the very different points of view of

the Book of Ruth, on the one hand, and the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah on the other. Perhaps you remember: After the Hebrew people returned from their exile in Babylon, Nehemiah and Ezra wanted to “purify” the people and they issued edicts that no “foreigners” could immigrate to the land and, in fact, those who were already there must be deported. They even demanded that Jewish men who were married to non-Jews divorce their wives and send them away. Yes, that’s in the Bible. But so is the Book of Ruth which is a **counter-argument** to Ezra and Nehemiah for it is the story of God’s faithfulness and love and care being beautifully demonstrated precisely by a foreigner! Both points of view are in the Bible. Are these “contradictory”? No. Only in the shallowest sense. They are much better understood as two parts of an ongoing conversation which the compilers of the Bible had the courage to leave in so that we too could learn from that conversation and participate in that tradition – and now have the opportunity ourselves to decide whether we will be more like Ezra and Nehemiah, operating out of fear and wanting to “purify” society or whether we will be more like the story of Ruth, recognizing that God works in and through **all** kinds of people.

Many of us have probably seen on a bumper sticker or have had slung at us the over-simple slogan *“The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”* Do you begin to see why such a point of view simply doesn’t do justice to this marvelous, complex, tradition-infused book? And, of course, the understanding that I’m offering here is just not something you can reduce to a bumper sticker or slogan. In conversations with those who would say such things, you do not need to feel guilty or somehow inadequate because you don’t have a slogan or you don’t think that it’s so very simple. Because it’s not. Which leads me to a second point: In addition to pointing out that the Bible is the record of a conversation not just a book of rules, the Bible is also the conversational record of a **growing understanding of the universality of God’s grace**. What do I mean? Well, the trajectory of the development of cornbread recipes is towards better

and better tasting cornbread, right? (You probably wouldn't want to eat 17th century campfire cornbread whose recipe included ashes from the campfire). The trajectory of the Bible is an ever-clearer witness to God's not being simply the God of one tribe or one group and that God does not wish evil and hurt on anyone – for God is the loving creator of everyone. We will take up some particular issues in that regard later in this series. But for now, let me just point to just one example of how the conversation recorded in the totality of the Bible moves towards an ever-widening the circle of grace.

There are some harsh passages in the Bible about women.³ 1 Timothy tells women that they are to be “submissive” (a passage, by the way that in the hands of too many male clergy has had the awful effect of telling women that it is their “Godly duty” to put up with physical violence). In one of his letters, Paul famously says that in church women should be silent and submissive and are not permitted speak; to do so, Paul says in 1 Corinthians, is in fact “shameful.”⁴ But these are not the only witnesses in the Bible by any means; there is a whole other side to the conversation. There are powerful women portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and there are also powerful women of faith in the New Testament. Even Paul himself seems to be of two minds about this, depending on whom he is writing to and what their situation is. In his very last letter, the mature Paul seems to have decided which way the conversation needs to go in order to advance: He greets several folks at the end of that letter including “Priscilla,” whom he names as a fellow minister or servant along with him. What's more in that

³I have found the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell's *"The Good Book: Reading the Bible With Heart and Mind. A study guide to Peter Gomes' great work created for the thinking Christian,"* to be most helpful in thinking about this issue and look forward to how it will be a help in future sermons in this series.

⁴However, Barbara Blaisdell helpfully notes that “Paul had actually addressed the question of women speaking in the church earlier in 1 Corinthians.... Only the question in chapter 11 is not whether women should speak or not – that seems to be accepted as a given – but rather a question of wardrobe. Should women wear modest head coverings, as was the practice of the day, or did freedom in Christ mean that they were also liberated from this custom? Paul writes, “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head...” (11:5) Paul seems perfectly comfortable with women speaking in church if they get the wardrobe right. A woman preacher is fine-as long as she wears a hat!” From email correspondence June 17, 2016.

same mature letter to the Romans, Paul also singles out for praise a woman by the name of “Junia,” and calls her a fellow Apostle along with him! In other words, to use a phrase made sadly and tragically apt this week, Paul decided that “love wins” – and that the attitude he expressed when he said “there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, but all are one in Christ” is the attitude that is truest to a God of universal love for each and all, a God of ever-widening inclusion, not of exclusion.

And now, my friends, it is our turn. Just as the cook is invited into the long-running conversation about how to prepare cornbread, and is invited to recognize what is good about that tradition and make it his or her own but also adding to that tradition in the interest of tastiness – so too are you and I always and ever-invited into the conversation that is the essence of this sacred book. And true conversations are never about sound-bites and slogans, true conversations are not the ones where you are not really listening but simply waiting to contradict your conversation partner. No, the best conversations are the ones that advance your understanding, advance your ability to act honorably and justly in the world as you bring to bear on the tradition your own mind, and heart, and deepest beliefs about what is good and right and just.

Our second scripture this morning from Timothy is usually translated “Every scripture is inspired and useful for teaching....” But I believe that the alternate New Revised Standard Translation that we read is much, much more true to the trajectory of the Bible; hear it again: “Every scripture **inspired by God** is also useful for teaching....” Do you hear the profound difference? In the second one we are invited into conversation and the discernment about what is truly of God and what isn’t. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, put it this way: “Just like the cradle is not the baby, the Bible is not the word of God but it **contains** the word of God.” And so the Bible’s conversation challenges us to ask ourselves if Psalm 137's statement “How blessed will

be the one who grabs your babies and smashes them on a rock!” (NET Translation⁵) is truly inspired, truly reflective of the love of God for each and all, or does it reflect the writer’s anger at being enslaved and deported to Babylon? When the Book of Leviticus offers tips about selling your daughter into slavery (Leviticus 21:7), is this truly inspired of God, does it truly contain the Christ of unconditional love, or might it best be seen as an early part of a conversation in which a primitive people engaged in acts which we rightly now abhor?

Yes, the Bible is a marvelous, sometimes soaring, sometimes wonderfully comforting book. But it also has in it, as part of a four-thousand-year-old conversation items which are not “inspired,” which do not “contain the Christ,” in Luther’s words. But it also has within its pages the very principles by which those less-than-worthy characterizations are transcended by an even more inclusive understanding of the love of God for each and all and the demand for justice God has for each and all. This, I believe, is the touchstone for evaluating **any** Biblical passage as either truly inspired of God or not. Or as my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, so eloquently puts it: “...the God that arises out of the **best of the Bible** comes through compellingly as a God of love and justice and liberation and healing and hope.”⁶

It is indeed our turn to add to the conversation. For as we have seen so horrifically in the last week, there continue to be those who would cite a handful of Biblical passages from a very different place and time and culture, citing them as if they were all-purpose Chinese fortune cookies,⁷ to say odious things like those murdered and maimed in Orlando had it coming for they violated “God’s Word” [sic]. One Sacramento pastor even praised the killer and called for celebrations and the killing of

⁵<http://biblehub.com/net/psalms/137.htm>

⁶Barbara Blaisdell, “The Good Book....,” p. 53. Emphasis mine.

⁷The metaphor is Barbara Blaisdell’s, *ibid.*, p. 11.

more gay and lesbian folks.⁸ But let us be clear, we have a choice: we can side with Ruth over Ezra and Nehemiah in favor of the increasingly widening circle of God's unconditional love, or we can deem some folks as less worthy of God's love and therefore less to be mourned when they are slaughtered, and less to be loved when they are in our midst. Does the Bible contain contradictions? Yes it does – but they are the contradictions that are part of a conversation that shows the ever-expanding awareness that God is a God of unconditional love for all people and a God of justice for all people. You can't fit that on a bumper sticker. But you can offer your own witness that the Bible is ultimately a testimony to a God who indeed is love for all, and to the Son God sent who, as John 3:17 says, came into the world "not to condemn the world but that the whole world" – ***the whole world!*** – "might be saved through Him." May it be so. Amen.

⁸<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/06/14/pastor-refuses-to-mourn-orlando-victims-the-tragedy-is-that-more-of-them-didnt-die/>