

Deuteronomy 20:10-20

When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you in forced labour. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here. But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God.

If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siege-works against the town that makes war with you, until it falls.

Matthew 5:43-48

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Intro

Today I may have gone too far onto the ice shelf for my own good. Peter Enns has prompted us to consider biblical studies and wisdom; what is the wisdom, I pondered, in biblical episodes of violence? As a declared pacifist pastor in a peace church tradition, I need to come to terms with violence. I will not do the topic justice, but I believe it is important to raise this violent reality of the bible as we grapple with biblical wisdom.

In many ways it makes perfect sense that there is violence in the Bible for there is violence in our world and violence within ourselves. Talking about God and wisdom is great (see the book page 275), but what does it mean to live wisdom in a violent world? Violent stories in the bible invites us to contemplate what those texts meant and what they might mean in the present.¹ So there is a dual task in the interpretative and application process: what did the text mean and what might they be prescribing in this time and place. While describing faith and the bible it is vital we live the bible, and live it the Jesus way. We are, after Christians.. It is my hope to cover three areas of violence within the biblical text and offer ways in which might lively wisely, Christian, in relation to them.

Case Study One: Violence Against Women

Last week Don made a genius stroke in having Anita read the portion of 1st Corinthians that women should be silent in church even as she was reading scripture in church. Well done, Don! But you didn't go far enough. The numbing reality is that the biblical text is more harsh than merely silencing women in the church. The situation is more dire.

A formative book for me has been Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*² which explores four biblical stories in which women are treated quite poorly. Hagar of Genesis fame, lesser known Tamar who was raped by her half brother Amnon, the unnamed woman at the conclusion of Judges who is gang raped and murdered, and the daughter of Jephthah. There were additional choices scholar Trible could have chosen, but these are the four upon which she settled. It is a devastating read which highlights some of the ways in which patriarchy shaped the bible and the stories that are there. Sandra Schneiders asks a very good question. "How is the justice-minded Christian to respond to a text that regards women as derivative and defective, that marginalizes, trivializes, and even demonizes women, that excludes women from full religious participation and legitimates male domination? Can such subject matter be appropriated by being assented to and thus allowed to structure the self-world of the reader? The answer has to be no. The

¹ Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 123.

² Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1984).

hermeneutical question is how we can understand the interpretive process by which the reader identifies and repudiates the morally unacceptable subject matter of the text without repudiating the text itself and its truth claims.”³ I love the bible. I love most of the stories. The challenge for me, and probably many of us, is coming to terms with the less savory biblical stories and passages.

I am grateful for the ways Phyllis Trible unpacked the particularly retched story of a rape of an unnamed woman in Judges 19. She notes that the editor of *Judges* highlights over and over again that “Every man did what was right in his own eyes”. This phrase appears so often throughout the book any reader or hearer could not miss it. It is as if to say, selfish behaviour in the personal / corporate / national stage is not only morally corrosive, but it diminishes the person / the tribe / the nation. The book chronicles a downward cycle of violence rooted in self serving behaviour and ideology. IT IS A DISASTER!. And maybe that is the point, Trible, notes. This is what happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Perhaps, she suggests, this is a negative example of the manner in which women should not be treated and a manner in which religious folk ought not to act. She is not alone in such conjectures.

Within the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible upon which our English bibles are based, the editors recognized this descent into chaos. In response to the violence against women present in *Judges*, they positioned the book of *Ruth* right after it (Trible, 84-85). We know Ruth, right? That mighty Moabite woman who took control of her own life? We know Ruth, right? A story in which famine and ethnic divisions and immigration are the horrific stage upon which God orchestrates, with Ruth’s willing assistance, the lineage of the person who would become King David. The bible is subversive sometimes.

Returning to last week... The scripture passage about women being silent in 1st Corinthians as well as an equally demeaning passage about women in 2nd Timothy, deserve further exploration or expulsion. Exploration is something I could do; expelling or finding the transformational meaning is something we do together. To points of application from the book of Judges.

To say “Saskatchewan first” or “Alberta first” or “me first” fits the Judges’ narrative all too well. When everyone does what is right in their own sight, we will have significant problems. How we relate to our partners, our families, our sibling Provinces, other countries—it matters. The biblical text is as much about the we as the me, and often times more so about the we. As Jesus once quoted, love your neighbour as yourself. Think about your neighbour.

Secondly, humility is in order. We are all conditioned by the time and place in which we live. The biblical authors were doing their best even as we do, and

³ Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 175.

we all come up short at some point. I am a living fossil of patriarchy, a theologically minded friend kindly noted of me. Even though I view myself as a progressive minded male, I have much to learn when it comes to the gender and identity questions before us in these days. We need to listen well, discern the deeper direction of God's intent revealed in Jesus, and support each other in living it. Humility, respecting others, is a good way forward. Reflection and confession are not a bad idea.

Some religious traditions invite us to examine each day at the close of day. We reflect on the grace of the day. We make note of the transgressions of the day. This is not a trite humility. It is a daily reckoning of who we have or have not been in the world. The benefits of being male, in my case, needs to be a part of that reflection.

Finally, how did Jesus treat the women of his life and world? Generally much better than our society treats the women of our world. We should pay attention to that reality.

Case Study Two: Genocide

Interpersonal violence is bad. It is really bad. Genocide takes this to a systemic level. And guess what, it is in our bibles. Yeah! Lucky pacifist pastor Patrick who gets to untangle this mess of Holy Scripture.

In Deuteronomy 20 we have rules for war which make war less odious. I can appreciate the bit about offering peace and not cutting down the fruit bearing trees. The other parts about execution and taking women as booty, however, cause me to wonder if this is one of those passages we just need to eliminate. O.K. back to the formula that both Peter Enns and Sandra Schneiders recommend: biblical study and interpretation for our time. Read, Patrick. Reflect Patrick.

Both Peter Enns, in an earlier book of his, as well as John Bright join with those who suggest that no such genocide which appears in *Joshua* actually happened. John Bright even went so far to state that, "there is every reason to believe that large elements of that population...made common cause with the Israelites and rendered them willing assistance" (John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 142). If such a wide spread massacre happened, the historical and sociological documents across the ancient near east would reflect this. This is not the case. So why are these stories a part of our sacred scriptures? Application, application, application.

There was a sincere intent within biblical writings to keep God's people separate from those things which might lead the people of God astray. Every person doing what is right in their own sight is a part of that. The hedges which Jesus describes, that exceed the Torah, is a part of this concern. We don't physically eliminate the competing value systems, but we find ways of hedging their influence. In the absence of a actual massacre, this makes sense to me.

Secondly, we have an invitation from Jesus to live with patience. From Matthew 5 we heard earlier that the sun rises on the evil and good, that the rain falls on the righteous and unrighteous. We are all God's people, so let us abide well among our neighbours. Let us live honourably. Let us give testimony to a good path by living and speaking generously and compassionately. Let us be patient as God continues God's work among others and within us.

Still, though, we have the burden of a text describing holy war in our sacred scriptures. This is a problem for me, and maybe even was a problem for Jesus. Susanne sent me a clever image which is good provisions for a precarious journey onto an ice shelf.

Genocide is biblical.

Loving your enemy is biblical.

BUT ONLY ONE IS CHRISTLIKE.

Slavery is biblical.

Chainbreaking is biblical.

BUT ONLY ONE IS CHRISTLIKE.

Patriarchy is biblical.

Counter-cultural elevation of women is biblical.

BUT ONLY ONE IS CHRISTLIKE.

Retributive violence is biblical.

Grace-filled restoration is biblical.

BUT ONLY ONE IS CHRISTLIKE.

Segregation is biblical.

Unity is biblical.

BUT ONLY ONE IS CHRISTLIKE.

Christ transforms, not the Bible.

Be wary of those who know one but not the other.

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We understand gender inequalities as well as ethnic differences through the lens of Jesus, at least that is what I take from the clip. The manner in which Jesus interpreted and lived his scriptures is the manner in which we invited to interpret and live our scriptures.

A have left the big fish for the last: Did God kill Jesus? Domestic violence is terrible. Genocide is terrible. And now we need to acknowledge infanticide within the biblical text—the killing of one’s own child. There are several biblical examples of this (see Abraham and Isaac, Jephtha’s daughter, stoning the children in Exodus). There is a pervasive and pernicious theory of God’s reconciling love which, according to the theory, necessitates God’s sense of justice being satisfied in the death of Jesus. I want to go this direction, but I do not want to tax the faithful. I will return to this topic at an appropriate time. The short version, in my biblically studies mind, is that the crucifixion narrative undoes these other biblical stories. That, however, is a tale for another day.

The implications, though, for how we might live? Be gentle with your children if you are a parent or step-parent. Be gentle with you clients if you are a business person. Be gentle with your students, your patients, your parishioners. The support and care we offer might be that which allows them to sacrifice much for the common good. Maybe. God willing. Amen.

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