

“Whose Bible Is It, Anyway?”

sermon by Stan Dotson for the Circle of Mercy, Oct 4, 2015,
based on Mt. 5:38-48

A couple of weeks ago I was leading music for a local Cooperative Baptist Fellowship pastors' conference, whose theme was how to appropriate the Bible faithfully in dealing with contemporary contentious issues. It was a day-long riff on what we mean when we say *the Word of God for the People of God* in today's world. I started them out with an old 60s Vacation Bible School song: *The B.I.B.L.E., yes that's the book for me...*

While I was leading that song, something started gnawing at the back of my mind, something about the assumptions at work in that little chorus. I began to hear a voice in my head saying that the Bible was written to a particular audience in a particular place and time, with a particular message, and I began wondering if it really could faithfully be appropriated, assimilated, and applied to any and every other place and time. Was it really meant to offer us a transcendent message, a universal ethic that can be co-opted by every culture across time and space?

Maybe so. It may be true, as world religion scholar Karen Armstrong wants us to believe, that the message of Jesus, like that of Moses or Mohammad or Mary Baker Eddy or Buddha or Zoroaster, *can* be appropriated, if we just distill it down to its essence. Jesus' words, like those of all the God-bearers, she claims, can all be boiled down to the golden rule, a Charter for Compassion as she calls it. The Sermon on the Mount as a TED Talk, a universal ethic extended to everyone in every context.

Maybe so. Or maybe not. Maybe the B.I.B.L.E. is *not* the book for me, given that I am not standing anywhere near where the original audience was standing, neither geographically, socially, politically, nor economically. But wait a minute, maybe *parts* of the B.I.B.L.E. *are* for me, aimed at folks standing where I stand. Some scholars argue that the entirety of the B.I.B.L.E. is one long ongoing dialogue or debate between two stances, between defenders of the privileged center and advocates for the underprivileged fringe, between a God of occupying empire and a God of occupied countryside, between the sanctified plunderers and the struggling to survive plundered. Some voices throughout the scriptures proclaimed that God is most at home seated on a high throne. Other scriptural voices prophesied that God is always to be found outside these power centers.

And here comes Jesus, who seemed to have opted for the latter voice, at least according to these communities which gathered around his teachings, like the Matthew community. The way they tell it, whenever Jesus quoted from this ancient scriptural dialogue, he preferred to cite Jonah over Ezra. He preferred Isaiah over Nehemiah. He preferred imagery of the good shepherd over the good king. And what about this central teaching of Jesus? This Sermon on the Mount? Which side is he on here? Who is he talking to? At least for these few minutes, let's have the courage to risk thinking that he was *not* talking to us. Let's stray away from the Charter for Compassion, and assume that this lengthy hilltop harangue *was not meant for us at all*. Imagine that we are *not* the people of God whom this particular Word of God is targeting.

Here's the deal: While Jesus might have been *sermonizing* from a mountain summit, he was socially *standing* on one of the lowest rungs of the ladder among an occupied people, a people oppressed and harassed, exploited and excluded. He was a homeless hobo of questionable birth, raised by a teenage girl and a handyman (some say the Greek word commonly translated "carpenter" more accurately refers to generic menial labor, like the Mexican mixing mortar for a block mason or the Guatemalan knocking on your door to see if you have any fix-it work to be done). The life that Jesus experienced was one of an ethnic minority on the distant margins of the greatest empire the world had ever known. But this homeless hobo of a handy man was different; he had a message, a vision of an alternative shepherding community, a commonwealth kindom shared by those like him, harassed and oppressed and exploited and excluded. To folks with some access to power it might have sounded downright delusional and dangerous, but that didn't stop Jesus from amassing a pretty decent following among the miserable poor.

His rant had a theme; it was all about *love*, about the implications of a radical love that would lead to new understandings of justice and mercy. In the middle of this message he says simply, *love your enemies*. Who is he referring to here? Who were these enemies of the harassed and exploited fringe people? Well, it must have been the people at the center, those who did the harassing, or those who benefited from the exploitation of cheap labor and plundered resources, those who enjoyed full citizenship rights and benefits at the expense of those who didn't. According to his examples, Jesus was talking about bullies who were entitled to wallop your right cheek for no good reason. He was referencing privileged folk who could compel you to carry their load, for no pay. He was speaking of predatory lenders who could sue the shirt off your back.

The Roman empire promoted all this and more. It did what all empires do; it plundered and pilfered and promoted a peace based on all its accomplishments. The ordinary citizens of the empire didn't have much say in what was required to keep the peace and the prosperity, they simply enjoyed its fruits. For all I know the majority of them could have been decent people. Now, if we want to go back and follow the course of Karen Armstrong and the Charter for Compassion crowd, there's no doubt that the imperial citizenry could have benefitted from a message of transforming love. Their society had its fair share of bandits and abusers and bullies. There were sure to be plenty of enemies within the boundaries of imperial beneficence. The first century was a contentious time for the empire; Matthew's fringe community witnessed numerous imperial civil wars, with various factions competing for the right to determine what the peace of Rome was to look like, how to define social justice. The plebs and peasants and urban poor, the priests and prison guards, all were currying favor and clamoring for some morsel of patronage that would secure their ability to survive in the complex web of mutual aid and charity. Enmity and conflict abounded. I'm sure it would have benefitted everybody if they had just learned to get along, to try a little kindness, to show a bit of love to one another across these lines of hostility. If the Caesars and Senators and Centurions had just signed on to the Charter for Compassion! But for today's message, I want to leave those transcendent and transferable implications of Jesus' teachings and their applications to this community of imperial beneficiaries to someone else. I want instead to focus on the scandal of particularity of Jesus' teachings, and pursue the possibility that he wasn't speaking at all to the imperial forces who had their boots on the necks of the marginalized, but was instead addressing those whose necks felt the boot-leather.

What did those masses of dispossessed and alienated folks gathered around Jesus on the hilltop hear him hollering out? *Love your enemies*. I don't know for sure why he said that. It's possible that it was a calculated attempt to *save the necks* of his fringe community, to create some social capital that would keep them from being slaughtered wholesale, as was likely to happen if the emperor got wind there was someone threatening his rule and disturbing his peace. I can imagine Jesus saying: *Love your enemies, for that's the best maneuver to stay alive until we can figure this thing out*. Or, it could be that *love your enemies* was mandated because love was the defining core value of the new community, regardless of consequences. I can hear him saying: *Love, no matter what, because that's what children of God do. That's our DNA. It may wind up getting us killed, but no matter, not even the threat of death can defeat the power of love*. Or, it may be that Jesus had an idea that this love of enemies really could be a subversive strategy for sabotaging the world system, empire and all; he might have

been betting his life that this kind of love could indeed undo the powers of violence and transform the imperial values of domination into something new, something just and creative and life-giving.

I don't know what was in Jesus' mind. He didn't give many examples in his ministry to flesh out what he was talking about. There was that Roman centurion whose slave, probably an indentured sex worker, was dying. Jesus loved that occupying soldier, no questions asked. He blessed him, affirmed his faith, and healed his young slave. Jesus loved an enemy. But still, that doesn't really tell me much about what all was behind his teaching. No matter; as I said, he wasn't talking to me, anyhow. I have virtually nothing in common with Jesus and the crowd he was talking to. I did not have a questionable birth. I was not raised by a teenage girl and a handyman. I am neither a religious nor an ethnic minority. I am not a homeless hobo. And by the standards of the 2/3 world, I am neither harassed nor oppressed nor exploited nor excluded. Now I know that oppression and exploitation and exclusion exists within our empire, but still, we are citizens, entitled to all the rights and benefits of the greatest empire the world has ever known, and if for some reason we don't get them, then we have every right to hit the streets and shout and struggle until we do. And while we may not be out there directly exploiting and plundering the rest of the world, we all benefit from the many ways our nation has and continues to act like empires act. We consume our cheap bananas and coffee and chocolate and wear our cheap shirts and pants and tennis shoes, and we communicate on our cheap cell phones because of the thousand ways our empire has plundered and looted resources and exploited cheap labor around the world. Compared to many in the world, we do enjoy the relative peace of Rome, tragic gun violence and police brutality notwithstanding.

This gospel lesson has some bad news and some good news for us imperial citizens. Here's the bad news: Insofar as Jesus is situated on the fringes with no access to our benefits, we *are* the face of the enemy to him and to his crowd, whether we've actively harassed and oppressed them or not. Jesus' message was not directed to us, nor to any of the deeply conflicted and strife-filled empires like ours. You can even argue that by co-opting Jesus' message and converting it into a transcendent compassion ethic for all, we have indeed plundered the Sermon on the Mount and looted its message to make it our own, so that people like me can sing the B.I.B.L.E. and really believe that it's the book for me, so that we can believe that we are the people of God, the intended audience of this holy word. Don't get me wrong, I know that among the citizenry of our empire there's plenty of conflict that needs resolving, plenty of banditry and abuse and bullying, plenty of enmity caused by injustice and exploitation. So I fully support the

Charter for Compassion; I applaud all the efforts at making our empire a more suitable place for everyone to live. I just don't think that was Jesus' particular message here in Matthew's gospel.

So what about that good news? I have come to believe that if the Sermon on the Mount is going to be good news to me and folks like me, it's not going to come to us *directly*. As citizens and full members of the enemy community, the good news comes to us *indirectly*, whenever Jesus' fringe followers, those who have been plundered and exploited by our nation, whenever they have occasion to love us, whenever they take his words to heart and bet their lives that it's worth the risk to love. We *are* there in the Sermon on the Mount, all right, but instead of being the target audience of his mandates for action, we are the *recipients* of that action. When Jesus told his followers to love their enemies, he was naming us as potential beneficiaries of the grace and mercy of God, via the very people living and struggling to survive beneath our boots.

My year in Cuba was one of good news, I might dare say it was a year of salvation, precisely because we were loved. I don't mean the kind of love that makes you feel all warm and fuzzy inside; I'm talking about love that gets you *all shook up* (apologies to Elvis). We received radical and disorienting love from a people whose country was first plundered and looted and exploited by my country for 150 years, and then they have had my country's boot on their neck for another 50 plus years. When their apostle of Independence, José Martí, lived in exile in our country he famously said he was living in the belly of the monster. I came to understand this past year what it feels like to be loved by a people who are harassed and oppressed, exploited and plundered by the monstrosity of our culture and body politic. They loved us lavishly. Unconditionally. And their love was transforming.

I am still feeling disoriented by the love of Paco and Lila, Lázaro and Tamara, Orestes and Wanda, Elaine and Yivi, Dianelis and Mariaelaine, Sila and Cheo, Idael and Rudiel, Margot and Maricela, Kenny and Waldemar. The list could go on and on. Incredible love.

If Jesus did have a subversive inkling that this strategy of love would shake up the imperial world, I can personally testify that he was right. Albeit gracious and merciful, it was also perturbing and unnerving; it was a love that shook my world and challenged my core assumptions. I can still feel the earth moving under my feet; I still feel the sky tumbling down. You see, I've long felt like I was among the good liberals, the progressives, standing with the good guys supporting all the right causes, but the love I

received in Cuba has opened my eyes to all the ways we can fool ourselves into thinking that *our* privileged hands and feet are the hands and feet of Jesus to the world, that *we* with our sometimes unconscious assumptions of power are the people of God, that the B.I.B.L.E *is our* book, subject to our sophisticated interpretations.

I am now convinced that in order for any of us who enjoy the entitlements of empire citizenship to become the people of God, we have to encounter the fringe folks who lack all our benefits of citizenship, and give them an occasion to love us, with a love that will knock us off our Damascus Road high horses and cause us to question our deepest presumptions and begin unraveling our DNA of privilege. So here's the invitation: Do whatever you can to find the fringes, go to the margins, and put yourself in the place where you can be loved. A warning: It's a whole lot more challenging to *be loved* by fringe folks than to love them, it's a whole lot harder to *receive mercy* than to show compassion. But it's so worth the effort, and I recommend Cuba; it's as good a place as any to start, if you want to be changed. But it's not the only place. Many of you have lived among all sorts of marginalized folk and have been loved. So many of Nancy's stories speak of the ways prisoners, those who have been stripped of citizenship rights by their actions and the community's reactions, how they sometimes find the grace to love their enemies. Rachel Jamieson spoke eloquently a few weeks ago about how some African young people loved and challenged and transformed her. I'll bet the Palestinians are lavishly loving Rachel Rasmussen and rocking her world, causing her to reexamine who she is. And I'll bet the undocumented women in our own community are fiercely loving Suzanne Walker-Wilson and others who are entering their world.

As I said, this is a disorienting love, and I'm still feeling jolted, so I haven't yet settled on any pat answers on what all this means, but I'm on the journey. I know I want to stay in relation with non-citizens of the empire, those within and without our borders, those who are part of the non-imperial kingdom and commonwealth of God. For they represent my best chance to meet Jesus; they are my best shot to encounter *the Word of God among the people of God*. Thanks be to God. Amen.