

“The Bible, Violence and God”  
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 15:25-32  
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I. Scripture Reading

The story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is the story of the foolish arrogance of a young man who demands his inheritance from his father, squanders it, and hopes to come home to work as a hired hand on his father’s farm. It is also the story of the father’s costly love that that first gives the inheritance, and then welcomes his youngest son home as a son. And it is also the story of the oldest son, who must wrestle with his father’s demonstration of costly love. I’ll be reading about the father and the older son at the end of the story.

Read Luke 15:25-32.

II. Introduction

There is violence in the Bible, and it is troubling for many people. Violence is troubling because it’s in conflict with other revelations about God. It’s troubling because it’s in conflict with other passages in the Bible. And it’s in conflict with the way of Jesus and his followers. There are ancient stories of God destroying people. There are stories of God’s people destroying whole populations. There are stories of Bible heroes acting in ways of violence. How are we to understand these stories?

I was looking at my library in my study this past week. I’ve added books to it for 35 years. And as looked at it, I noticed a couple things:

#1-There are different books collected over different periods and interests in my life. In seminary I got a lot of commentaries and theological books to help me learn about ministry, theology and the Bible. When I wanted to try to improve my preaching I read some collections of sermons by preachers I admire. When I had time and a curiosity, I read about science and theology. When I felt the need to grow spiritually I read books on spiritual disciplines. All the books were purchased in the context of my life; the questions I was asking, the places I wanted to grow, the demands of seminary and pastorate, and the wonderings about my experiences and relationship with God. The books have different historical contexts.

#2-The books show a meandering journey and growth. Some of the books that were important to me 20 years ago I haven’t looked at in years. I few newer books I’ve read and reread a number of times. Through learning and experience I don’t spend much time in ministry basics anymore. Rather with that foundation I’m more interested

in the complexities, changes, and shades of gray in ministry and theology. And as I've shared with Jeanne, I don't think I'm as good as I used to be in memorizing Greek, Hebrew and historical lists of facts. But I think I'm better at wondering about theological questions. And as I've gotten older and look at my books, it seems, perhaps, I'm more patient, more humble, and more comfortable with uncertainty. I think I've grown.

Often we're tempted to treat the Bible like a dictionary. We think of it as a book of theological and historical facts. We want to treat all the entries the same. We want to just look things up and get an answer.

Rather I think it's truer and more interesting to consider the Bible as a library. And as a library, like my library, we see that the Bible:

#1-Has different books written and collected in specific contexts over time;

#2-There is growth and maturity in this historical account of people's experiences with God.

The Bible is a library. I think this will help us think about the Bible, violence and God.

### III. Theological Reflections

A. The Bible is a collection of different books written and collected in specific contexts over time. The Bible was not written in a bubble. Rather it is the stories of people living in real history reflecting on their experiences with God. As such it is subject to the ways and understandings of life and God at the time. Ancient Israel during the reign of David in 1000 BCE was different from Jerusalem in Jesus' day, and that was different than John Calvin's Geneva in the 16<sup>th</sup> C, and our context in the 21<sup>st</sup> C Shenango Valley. We all are subject to understandings of our times. Cell phones, airplanes and computers would make little sense to our ancestors 200 years ago. So it also is with understandings of God.

And the Bible is also about the purposes of God in real history. In short, God has to play the hand God is dealt. When violence and war are a part of the culture it becomes the context for the work of God in the world. When it's attack or be attacked, fight back or be killed, my god against your god, survive or be destroyed, that's the context of God's purposes moving forward through centuries in real history. Faith is the work of the people and the work of God in the real world. Therefore it should not surprise us that there are stories of violence, abuse and slavery. It's the accommodation of God to the real world situation of people.

When I was at Whitworth College I spent a month working as an assistant hospital chaplain in two Catholic hospitals. The Catholic priest, Father Jay, was a friend. Before I started he suggested I get a couple black shirts with a collar. I said I thought I would just wear a shirt and tie. But what I discovered was that numerous

times a day I had to explain who I was and why I was there to patients, families and hospital staff. My authority to share pastoral care was questioned. So, after a few days, I bought the black shirts with collar, and things changed dramatically. The black shirt and collar gave me instant identity. I talked with patients, reviewed charts, talked with staff and went in and out of the emergency room without question. People even called me “father,” and I usually just let that go. I accommodated the way of my ministry to fit the context. So does God. The ways and purposes of God in the world are accommodated to fit the understands and contexts in real history.

B. There is growth and maturity in the biblical account of people’s experiences with God. There is progress in understanding and belief. Imagine learning subtraction in first grade, and the rule; “you can’t subtract a larger number from a smaller number.”  $4 - 2 = 2$ . That makes sense. But then in sixth grade you study negative numbers, and hear the statement, “this is how to subtract larger numbers from smaller numbers.”  $2 - 4 = -2$ . Now wait a minute! How do you put those two statements together? Was the teaching in first grade a lie? Or maybe the sixth grade teaching is from the liberal wing of the “math world,” which doubts the absolute truth of the earlier teaching? The truth is, of course, that the first grade teaching was appropriate for first graders, as they couldn’t understand the complications of advancing math. And the sixth grade teaching was appropriate for those who have mastered the basics. And after that can come algebra, geometry, calculus and more. The point is; there is growth and maturity in understanding built on previous understandings.

Now, what if the same thing is true in the Bible (and in our own theological understandings.....but that is another sermon)? What if the Bible is a progressive account of people’s experiences and reflections about God over a significant period of time, and over that time there has been growth? And what if the basics had to be learned before more advanced theology? I think that is the case. The ancient understandings that God was one god among many gods (polytheism) gave way to the God of the ancient Hebrews being the only God, which gave way to the one God desiring to be the God of all people. And the laws directing the ancient Hebrews in how to be the people of God led to the prophets calls for justice, which then led to Jesus’ summarizing all the law as.....love. And violent expressions of commitment to God matured to Jesus’ practice of commitment as love, and Paul’s words of overcoming evil with good.

Standing back, we can see that the Bible as a library is a story of maturing and growing as people of God. In our reading from Jeremiah 31 this morning, we hear the prophet refer to this growth as a new covenant, a new relationship with God that comes from the heart. In a time of great distress, Jeremiah looks into the future with hope. And in the passage from the prodigal son in Luke 15, we see the father inviting his older son to a deeper understanding of the father’s love. In telling the story we see Jesus

inviting people who know  $4 - 2 = 2$ , to the deeper math of God's grace. There is growth and maturity in the story of the Bible, from stories of violence to stories of love, the cross and resurrection.

#### IV. Conclusion

The Bible is a library. It is a collection of different books over time in which people reflect on their experiences with God in real life. And in that revelation of God over time we see a maturity and growth in understanding and belief. Acts of violence become less. And as I was looking at my library and seeing the different colors of the books I was reminded of something else.

Post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat developed a way of painting called "pointillism." This is Seurat's famous painting, "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," (1884). (Show painting on digital projection) Normally colors would be mixed either on a palette or on the canvas. But in this style of painting Seurat put tiny dots of solid colors of paint on a canvas, like green and yellow. (Show close up of "A Sunday Afternoon...") In this close up we can see the solid points of paint. The viewer's eyes and brain then put the solid points of paint together to form the picture. (Show the whole "A Sunday Afternoon...." on digital projection again, and leave on until after the sermon) The result is that the viewer is actively involved in experiencing the painting, and there is vividness to the painting. To experience this, the viewer needs to stand back from the painting in the gallery, and see the whole thing. Standing close you can see the dots of paint. But when you stand back you see the whole painting.

The words, verses and stories in the Bible are points of paint. You can look at them close and see the colors. And when we get close we see that some of the colors are violent. But when you stand back and see the whole painting of scripture you see something else. Yes, there are violent points of paint, but they are not the whole painting. The whole painting of the Bible, when you stand back and see, is.....love; self-giving love. "God is love." (I John 4:8) "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16-17) "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:29-31) God's big picture in the Bible is love. Stand back and see it. It's that beautiful.

(\*The basic idea of the Bible as a library, subtraction, and Seurant's pointillism in the illustrations above come from Brian McLaren's book, A New Kind of Christianity, pp. 78-107)