

## **Negotiating Texts**

Theology Thoughts: Part 4 “Negotiating Texts”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – October 15, 2023

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**Readings:** Acts 15:1-21; Matthew 5:38-42

**Reflection:** Psalm 40

**Greeting:** Make your ways known to me, Lord; Teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth. Because you are the God who saves me. I put my hope in you all day long! Praise the Lord!

**Prayer:** God, may your wisdom guide us on this day. May we grow in love and faithfulness as we learn and grow through understanding you. Help us to listen to your word and guide us in your ways. May you help us to slow down so that we may love our neighbor and may show our love for you. Grant us wisdom that we may learn the lesson you have for us today. Let us walk in your truth that we may share that truth with the world. We thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness. By your Spirit help us to help one another. We pray that you will continue to help us grow in mercy and grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 40

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord. Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. I have not hidden your saving help within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever. (Psalm 40:1-11 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 40, and we hear of God’s salvation. That God does not desire our sacrifices and burnt offerings. Instead, we are to seek God’s love and mercy with an open ear. That we are called to follow God in faithfulness. How have you experienced God’s love this

week? How have you shared God's mercy with those around you? In the week to come, how can you seek God as part of your daily life? How will you study God's word so that you can grow in wisdom? What are some ways that you can help others experience the hope that we find in Jesus? How can we share God's love with a broken world? How may we join together to share the comfort and care of Christ?

**Prayer:** Lord, we turn to you because of your steadfast love. We know that even when we struggle you are with us. May your Holy Spirit guide us in truth and light. Help us to share the peace and love of Christ each and every day. As we come before you this day, we bring to you the joys and concerns of our lives that we have shared aloud together. We also turn to you in prayer with the unspoken worries and celebrations of our hearts. Help us that we walk in your ways and seek the path of righteousness. May you be with us to strengthen us in our gladness and our sorrow. We pray that you will help us to grow in love through our laughter and our tears. As we learn more about you, Lord, may we grow closer to you. May your steadfast love and faithfulness guide us all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Our scripture readings for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Acts chapter 15, verses 1 through 21.

*Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses." The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked*

*favorably on the gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.' "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues." (Acts 15:1-21 NRSV\*)*

Our next reading for today comes from Matthew chapter 5, verses 38 through 42.

*"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42 NRSV\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Today's message is one that I think everyone struggles with but not everyone recognizes. Today we look at the way that we interact with the Bible. We negotiate with the text in almost everything that we do with the Bible. Some people are surprised to hear this. There is often this idea of "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." But it is never actually that simple. Because we have to interpret the Bible. The Bible itself gives us examples of the way that we negotiate with the texts. You might also just call this working through the text. But in the end, it is the way that we look at the text and how we decide it should be lived. We get an example of this in Acts. In our reading today, we see that an issue has come up between the Gentile believers and the more traditional Jewish believers. The Gentile believers are being told that they have to be circumcised. And if you've ever read through all of Paul's letters, you'll know Paul is so deeply opposed to this that it sounds like he will fight anyone to say circumcision is pointless for the Gentiles. The issue we run into is that circumcision is required under the law. So, the debate ends up being about which parts of scripture will apply to the Gentiles. Should the law be understood differently if they aren't part of the nation of Israel? If the Gentile believers are something new, they are starting to think that they may need to reinterpret the law in light of this. What happens with the council is that they listen to the lived experience of the Gentile believers. They listen to what they have to say. They listen to Paul. Peter speaks up to say that if they Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit, then they are the same as the Jewish believers by faith. If they are the same, why should they be given these hardships? They end up deciding that circumcision isn't required. The dietary restrictions aren't required. They come to an understanding of which parts still apply so that they can grow together in faith. They negotiate with the text to find a path forward for all people.

I know someone will say that it was God's plan, so it is fine. I wouldn't say that you are welcome to that interpretation, but you'd need to understand that it is your interpretation, and it is how you negotiate with the text. However, I would ask if you think God no longer has any plans. Because this is the problem that we run into with understanding how we interact with Scripture today. We hear Jesus directly contradict the law, and this isn't the only time. It's just one of the easiest places to highlight. Jesus says that we have heard that it should be an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Which is a direct quotation of the law. Jesus contradicts the law and says we should turn the other cheek and not seek retribution. Even though this is what the law calls for, we shouldn't do it. We can interpret that and negotiate away the contradiction by saying the law still applies but we are showing mercy. But that itself is negotiating with the contradiction. We work thought it to make sense of what is being said. But we need to be able to understand and admit that this is how we interpret the text. And that is not a bad thing. We have to interpret the Bible. In this case, we are now understanding one text through another and not looking at the text by itself. We negotiate with the text to figure out what the meaning is for us now. And we do this all the time. It isn't that we are just throwing parts out either. But we do decide which parts are more important to our theology and which aren't. Sometimes they just don't have relevance to how we live a life in Christ today.

We can easily get hung up on this and it can become a stumbling block. But I can give some easier examples. I am not overly concerned with the way the tent of meeting was constructed for my day-to-day life. I don't think I've ever quoted a genealogy when trying to figure out how to be kind to someone. It isn't that I want them taken out of the Bible. They just don't have much meaning for my theology. There are laws that I have never followed and don't think are important. When I was growing a beard, I trimmed it. I wear clothing made of mixed fabrics. I really enjoy bacon. I've never thought someone getting a tattoo was going against God's will. Yet there are laws about all of those things in the Bible. What about the Sabbath? The law says to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. But when is the Sabbath? Is the Sabbath on Saturday or Sunday? When does the day begin? Does the day begin at midnight, does the day begin at sundown, or does the day begin at sunrise? We might start wondering if that actually matters. And that itself is beginning to negotiate with the text. Maybe we decide keeping the idea of the Sabbath is the important part and not so much what day and when days begin and end. If you are strictly observing those laws, then you have to decide when a day begins and ends and also which day the Sabbath is. If we aren't strictly observing those laws, are we saying that the Bible doesn't matter? Not at all! We are saying that the concept of a day of rest is more important than the dogma of which day. Which day may not be as relevant for our theology if we believe the Sabbath was made to make sure we rest. Personally, I take a Sabbath on a day that isn't Saturday or Sunday because in many ways I am working on those days. All of that is how I interpret Scripture as part of how I live. It is a part of my theology.

We can get into quite the debate over which laws still matter and which parts are contradictory. We can get into discussions about which laws still matter, because some laws

may just not be relevant to us today. We negotiate with the text to figure out what the Bible means for us today for how we live a life in Christ. We may decide that certain sections teach us lessons about how people lived and what their relationship with God was like. But their importance might end there if it is not still relevant to us today. We might even disagree with Scripture. I know I do. And this shocks people when I say it. What kind of pastor disagrees with the Bible? I can give you an example. I don't think I should be allowed to sell my children into slavery. As a matter of fact, I think slavery is wrong. But the Bible gives us rules for slavery including rules regarding selling your daughter into slavery. I think kidnapping is wrong, but we get instances in the Bible of the Israelites deciding that kidnapping people is the right course of action. I disagree with them. However, we run into two extreme responses at this point. The first extreme is to say that I'm wrong for disagreeing with the Bible. What they are really saying is that they don't think I should be able to interpret the Bible and understand it differently than they do. They think they have the only right way to understand the Bible and if you disagree it is because you're destined for Hell. This kind of dogmatic view is still an interpretation, it just masquerades as "reading the plain text." The opposite of this view is that if there are any contradictions within the Bible, we toss the entire thing. That we cannot learn anything from the Bible if there are any parts that don't work together. I think both ideas are foolish, because they attempt to make their interpretation the only interpretation. I read the Bible as a history of our interactions with God. It is a record of how we have tried to understand and follow the divine.

This can land us in difficult situations. It can be at the center of debate. Some are still being debated and fought over today. And it all comes down to the way that we are willing to work within the Bible to frame our theology. I think one fallacy we can have is that the Bible is clear and concise on every issue and that it speaks with one voice and never contradicts itself. But our reading from Acts reminds us that the early church debated about how to interpret the law. Our reading from Matthew shows that our understanding of Scripture can change. Jesus teaches that mercy and grace are better than judgement, even if it means not enforcing the law. We see this again in John, when Jesus speaks against stoning the woman caught in adultery. He interprets the law in a way that highlights grace instead of punishment, even though it means not enforcing the law. Christ believes we can be better. Because while it may not enforce the law, what Jesus taught brings us closer to God's love and God's justice. Can this be confusing? Sure. The Bible was used to both defend and denounce slavery in the Civil War. It has been used to support and denounce women in ministry. We have an endless number of issues in which both sides of an argument can use Scripture to back their claims, because of how they negotiate with the text.

And this is what makes negotiating with the texts so difficult. Because we have to admit the way that we read the Bible changes what it says and that not everyone will read it the same way. When I read the Bible, I interpret through the core of my theology by asking if this helps me to love God and to love my neighbor. I then ask if there is something I can put into practice based on this reading. If I can't then it might have a little less importance for me. And that is

OK. Maybe texts will change in importance as my experience changes. Some may never be relevant. I don't ever plan on owning slaves, which means there are rules about slavery I won't be putting into practice. But I can learn from those lessons. There are things I can learn from every part of the Bible. But it doesn't always mean that I can put it into direct action. Because even in our reflection for today, the Psalmist notes that God does not desire sacrifice and burnt offerings even though those are required under the law. Even there they begin to wonder what it is God truly desires. This happens throughout Scripture. Prophets speak against those who are supposed to be leading Israel. Christ gets into disagreements with the Pharisees and the legal experts because they read Scripture differently. We see it in the early church with the people who felt that circumcision should still be upheld for everyone and those who felt that the Gentile believers should be free from those rules and restrictions. And they learn that new times call for new understanding. And this takes discernment, it takes wisdom. So, I would encourage each of you to think about what matters most at the center of your theology, and how that impacts the way you read Scripture. And I want you to think about what it is that's at the heart of your faith and begin to understand how that impacts the way you read the Bible so that you can grow closer to God. As we explore those things we grow in wisdom because we seek God's help in understanding what it is God's word is for us today. And may we all explore Scripture with an open heart and an open mind, ready to learn, read ready to grow, and ready to change. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Our Current Series – Theology Thoughts**

Our current series is going to be a collection of theology thoughts from Pastor Cameron. Each week we will explore different aspects of how we live our faith. We will be looking at faith, prayer, works, forgiveness, scripture, and more. The more we learn about God, the more we grow in faith and love.

Next Week: Way We Pray – Our next message will look at what we pray, why we pray, and the ways that we pray.

### **Prayer List**

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown
Marsha Overton	Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox
Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuiness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	

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