

“The Bible as a tool of Oppression and how to counteract that”

I Cor. 5:9-13, Luke 15:1-7

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We are in our grab bag sermon series that we do every summer. Two weeks ago the topic pulled out of the grab bag said, “I want to hear a sermon about the Bible as a tool of Oppression and how to counteract that”. Why do you always give me the easy questions?

The truth is the important questions are the harder ones.

Many of us know the hard truth about people who use the Bible as a bludgeon rather than a life raft.

Many years ago a colleague wrote a book entitled, “Steps to recovery from Bible abuse”. This book was an attempt to counteract the fact that the Bible was too often used as a tool of oppression. And like an addict, we build walls and support systems around the falsehood that we are broken beyond repair. The Bible becomes an accomplice in this system, used and abused by people and institutions bent on keeping their own sense of power in place—often at the expense of the most vulnerable.

The Bible has been used to support slavery, manifest destiny, the subjugation of women, the stealing of land from Native Americans and a whole host of other forms of oppression. It can also be the source of hope, inspiration and the struggle for freedom and liberation. It all depends on where and how you look at it.

About 14 years ago, our year-long worship theme was called “Whose Faith is it Anyway?” We looked at Biblical contradictions. We found some of the Biblical words that have been used as tools of oppression and used the very Bible itself to counteract it. The fall’s focus was “whose Gospel is it anyway?” The soprano soloist closed the service with the song from Porgy and Bess, “it ain’t necessarily so the things that you’re liable to read in the Bible it ain’t necessarily so.” Sportin’ Life sang that to counteract the countless sermons preached that kept people in their place and docile because it was God’s will.

We remember that Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, “You have heard it said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. This was the Bible being used as a tool of oppression and violence and revenge. Jesus knew that this was a slippery slope. So he used a good portion of the fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel to lay out the Biblical case for oppression. But then he redeemed it and said, “But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer with violence.” He then gives three nonviolent alternatives to revenge—turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile and taking off the cloak. Jesus transformed the oppressive proscriptions with a challenge to redeem the Bible from itself.

A lot of it has to do with who controls the narrative. It’s no accident that the Reformation followed the invention of the printing press. Once people started reading the Bible for themselves, they started finding ways that the Bible had been used to oppress. The reformation was a way to liberate and redeem the Biblical world.

It’s true, the Bible is a story of a particular people trying to make their way in an inhospitable world. They do some despicable things in their quest to be holy. They kill, they steal land, they make insiders and outsiders. But that is not the whole story. There are challenges to this narrative. The prophetic literature in particular challenges the people to live into the better angels of their nature. It’s no accident that Jesus quotes the prophets more than any other scripture.

Consider that the Torah says that the priests of Levi need to take turns so that no one will be seen as the best priest. The Bible also says that neither priests nor kings should receive salaries or benefits, lest they do their work to get wealth instead of serving the people.

The jubilee year is designed to not only set slaves free and return land, it's a way to make sure that generational wealth does not destroy the community.

The Bible is full of stories and ideas that seek to respond to oppression. But sometimes, oppression seems to be the way people see it. Maybe we need to wrestle back control of the narrative.

I spent most of last weekend at the Pride Festival in Loring Park. It was wonderful to have nonstructured time to interact with people and seeing more than just their heads on a screen. We've confined ourselves to our own little virtual pods for the better part of the last year and a half. It was oddly redemptive to encounter new people, or people I hadn't seen in too long. Most people who stopped by the UBC booth were very friendly. Some wanted to take pictures in front of the Baptist signs. Some took selfies in front of us. We had to contend with the Atheist and Satanist booth a few down that were offering unbaptisms. We saw the ubiquitous couple with their suitcase full of bibles. I noticed the bullet-proof vests under their free Bibles yellow t-shirts. Perhaps proof that the Bible has been weaponized.

I also met someone who gave me a stack of books written from an evangelical perspective about how the Bible says nothing about homosexuality as we know it today. It was her crusade to get the truth across. She was a one-person illustration of how the Bible has been used as tool of oppression and how to counteract it. Her giving me those books and hoping we would use them was her subversive and hopeful addition to the movement.

The books look at the six or so verses that are used to oppress the Queer community. We call them the clobber passages. The Bible is much more clear about the danger of wealth—logging in at over 2,000 passages. But too much of the evangelical community focuses on these six passages as the clear perspective of God. But if you look at them closely, you'll find out that even biblical scholars can't agree about what they mean. The 'sexually immoral' in Paul's letter to the Corinthians could be referring to pedophiles. It could be referring to those who are having sex outside of marriage. It could be talking about those who practice idol worship. Or those who engage in temple prostitution. Unfortunately, some biblical versions translate that enigmatic word as homosexuals—even though that is not an ancient concept, but rather a 20th century Freudian term. It goes further and says that we are not to eat with them.

Many of you know that in 1999 I joined an organization called Soulforce. Soulforce uses nonviolent tactics to address the chasm that has been built between people because of homosexuality. Actually, it's probably more accurate to say that the chasm was a power play that used homosexuality as an excuse to gain more political power and money. People's devotion to the Bible made it a willing tool of oppression in their hands. Shouting "you're wrong" didn't seem to be making any difference. So we tried another tactic. Mel White, who preached my installation sermon at UBC 20 years ago, had been a ghost writer for Jerry Fallwell. He later came out of the closet, discovered the works of Gandhi and MLK and founded Soulforce on their principles. He formed an online community devoted to nonviolence and sought to help Jerry change his mind. He asked for an audience with his former colleague. He was largely ignored. So, he upped the ante. He said that 5000 people would protest at his church. That got Jerry's attention. He talked him down to 200 people, meeting with 200 of Jerry's kids. I was one of the 200 and all of us went through a 17-week course in nonviolence over the interwebs. And we made the commitment to make relationships across the chasm. Jerry was gearing for a fight. The truth is that we were ready for a fight too, but our tactics were different. 180 media outlets gathered for a big press conference at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. Jerry and his

marketers called it an anti-violence summit. He admitted that his words had been used to foment hate.

Mel said that the LGBTQ community had harshly judged the fundamentalists by thinking they all thought alike. Then the media was invited to leave so we could talk amongst ourselves. We gathered around tables of eight with four people from the Liberty community and four from Soulforce. We gave them booklets about our stories. We gave them little porcelain crosses. A Hawaiian friend gave them woven leis. And we listened and prayed together and made friendships. We had been promised a lunch, but the offer was rescinded based on today's scriptural injunction against eating with sinners. So we had bottled water and long lines to the bathroom.

Some of us met after church and heard some of the students decide to become subversive activists at Liberty University. I wrote about this encounter and it was published in this book entitled changing boundaries.

Jesus and Paul were in different contexts. Jesus had no problem whatsoever in sharing meals with sinners. After all, haven't we all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God? But he was getting pushback from scribes and Pharisees, otherwise known as religious authorities. Their charge was "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus then tells the parable of the lost sheep and encourages us to seek out the lost and welcome them back into the family. I saw a comic recently that had Jesus with a sheep on his shoulders. The sheep had a blue, white and pink coat, the same as the transgender flag. The crowd of righteous church people said, "he wasn't lost, we kicked him out." Jesus said, "I know and I am welcoming her back."

In 2002, three years after my first encounter with Jerry Falwell, we found that he had gone back on his word to soften his rhetoric, mischaracterizing our visit and continuing to engage in spiritual violence against our Queer siblings. So, I went back to Lynchburg. The few hundred of us did not get invited inside the church this time. They had security guards to prevent us from coming in. So, we lined up down the road, sang hymns and prayed for reconciliation. I think we surprised a few of the church workers who had their carts full of pastries and juice ready to welcome parishioners to the service. But their station was blocked. So there they were with plates of food and carafes of juice and coffee. So, not wanting it to go to waste, they started walking down the line, offering us food. We gladly accepted it. We were hot and hungry. And in spontaneous Christian empathy, they gave us the meal that had been denied us three years prior—perhaps living into a different and more Christian narrative of hope and redemption.

My friends, there will always be people who use and misuse the Bible. There is a great scene in the film "Saved." The story takes place within a very closed Christian school and its subculture. When the main character, Mary, dares to break with the norms, a trio of hyper-believers try to do an intervention and exorcism. When she breaks free of their grasp, the character played by Mandy Moore throws a Bible at her and says "I am filled with Christ's love." Mary responds, "This is not a weapon, you idiot."

My friends, the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression. It is up to us to find ways to also remember the stories in which we seek out the lost, share a meal with the hungry and create God's community here on earth. That liberating word is what we are all about and it is the hope that we share.

May we seek out the lost.

May we share a meal.

May we recognize our own blinders.

And may we remember that when we work against oppression, that Jesus is right beside us, cheering us on, rejoicing when we have found our way home. For the Bible is a lifeline for those who have been pushed aside. It's a tool of oppression for those who are threatened by another's liberation. Choose the better narrative.