

Good Morning,

Please be seated.

Let us pray

"Dear Lord, my mind is cluttered and I do not know which path to take. Please clear away my confusion. Send your Holy Spirit to show me the next right step. Give me wisdom and peace so I can see your will. In Jesus' name, Amen."

As I've mentioned in prior sermons, one of my great frustrations with scripture has been its confusing and often contradicting nature.

I'd imagine dealing with that frustration has been the focus of many fellow critical thinkers.

Unconfusing the God inspired words from the Men inspired agendas is challenging at best.

Given that challenge, the proposition that scripture can in any literal form be acted on with the authority of God seems unreasonable.

What do I mean by that.

Let's start with a generic example "The bible says you can't do blank. And if you do blank, something bad will happen to you."

Someone literally interpreting the bible may then say "In God's name I have to act out and be that something bad."

Taking that example one step farther, that confusion can end in tragedy when nefarious actors cherry pick those literal words to do evil things in God's name and fool the faithful to support their endeavor.

Therin lies the problem, the justification to act out, executing in God's name, is as likely to be inspired by an Earthly agenda as it is a divine one — a dangerous confusion.

And that's the conundrum — sorting out the word of God from the agenda of men

Finding Clarity in the Confusion.

Let's start with Romans.

I think it characterizes starkly the frustration native to that confusion.

Roman says:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want,

but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Now as we just heard X read so we know there's a bit more of this but I think you get the point. Paul is having a hard time.

I'll jump to the end and what I think is the point here.

Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

He's articulating his conundrum. He knows what's right but does what's wrong and can't figure out how to do what's right.

That sounds like a yoke of confusion.

Now we know, Paul was a scholar of scripture but that's not where he turned to escape his yoke.

He acknowledges the answer was in Christ.

These points are taken a step further quite pointedly in the gospel. Jesus directly calls out the confused state of the people.

He Says:

"To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

*'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.'*

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

And the gospel finishes with an answer aligned with Paul's conclusion that the answer to confusion is in Christ — but much more prescriptively by adding.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

We get more here. A step in addressing the confusion discussed in Romans and the first part of the gospel.

The call to abandon our yoke and take up Christ's yoke.

Can we infer that Christ's call to abandon our yoke — confusion — can be resolved by taking up his yoke.

What is Christ's yoke?

Before getting to that I want to point to a connection that I think is important. The context here implies directly that with his yoke will come rest.

Does rest imply Clarity — a respite from the burden of confusion.

Back now to “the what” of the yoke. He says, *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.”*

And what has been the essence of Christ's lessons?

I believe a good place to start that discussion is with the Collect.

“O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord,”

The two commandments “Love God and Love thy neighbor”

This simple proposition is peppered quite consistently throughout scripture as well the guiding documents of other faiths.

It's the unitary focus of our confessional.

What we remind ourselves of as we celebrate the Eucharist.

“We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

Of all the thousands do's and don'ts in scripture, those two commandments are called out.

Why the focus again and again?

Can we make the leap of faith that it's the central imperative, the top of the pyramid?

And that is, as I've mentioned in a prior sermon, the proposition that everything written or believed from which we derive action should be guided through the lens of those two commandments.

Could that be the yoke?

<Pause>

A Jehovah Witness story

One day after the last of my morning client calls, I saw two older gentlemen carrying bibles and pamphlets coming up to our house.

Now, I've tangled with them before and normally would have presented the usual friendly face conjoined with a polite brushoff.

But I got the calling to have a discussion with them and exercise some of the faith threads I was planning for today's sermon.

I started with telling them that I don't believe the bible in its entirety to be the literal word of God.

Rather, I believe that all scripture should be contextualized within the two-commandment rationale we discussed earlier.

They were both taken aback but I could sense them licking their chops at the challenge of saving this heretic.

Now, having some laymen's familiarity with their faith, I knew my stake in the ground would be where they would start.

We went back and forth on my perspective on the two commandments and its role in governing how we act out in accordance with scripture.

Their initial reaction to my approach was that I was elevating my own mind as an authority over scripture.

I acknowledged, I could see that as a risk but offered a twofold response.

First, that risk is the baseline. Every word in every bible has been produced by an interpreting or translating human's mind.

Second, each one of us actually only have two artifacts given directly from God — our heart and brain — why would they be less reliable.

We went on, them quoting me scripture, me responding to my call to action from the two-commandment perspective.

They quoted Matthew 24: 6-8

You will hear of wars and reports of wars; see that you are not alarmed, for these things must happen, but it will not yet be the end.*

7^c Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be famines and earthquakes from place to place.

8 All these are the beginning of the labor pains.*

And :13-14

13- But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved.

14^f And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come.*

As expected, they put great focus on currency in ‘observing the signs’ and the ‘end’ noting that my approach put at risk my place in the kingdom.

They pointed to our tumultuous times congruent with current events as validation and justification for the urgency of literal adherence.

I couldn’t help but point out there’s scant been a five-year period in human history where all the signs have not been manifest.

But I digress — what was the response to Matthew through the lens of the two commandments?

First thing that came to me is its overwhelming presentness. Love God and Thy neighbor NOW is the imperative of the kingdom.

Serve the poor, comfort the sick, welcome the foreigner....etc — Right Now.

Next, there’s no time out in the message. Fr. Manny’s ending prayer at all our services.

“You do not have much, so be swift to be kind.”

His implication is clear.

I or we can ‘end’ at any time. That’s urgency enough with or without the threat of apocalypse.

The last leg of our conversation focused on that aspect of the kingdom and it being a place after the end vs being in the present.

I brought up the 13th verse in today’s psalm

*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom;
your dominion endures throughout all ages.*

And spoke particularly to ‘everlasting’ and ‘all ages’.

We tussled on what in this context does ‘everlasting’ and ‘all ages’ mean.

They stuck with the kingdom beginning and lasting for all ages after the end.

I chose to take those words as confirmation of its presentness. Meaning its always been with us and will always be available to us.

We ended our conversation with prayer in graceful impasse.

No convincing happened but as Leah mentioned in her sermon some months ago, be comfortable with doing our part and having the grace to let the Lord finish the work.

But we did open a door on the nature of the kingdom and the direct predicate of observing the two commandments — carrying the yoke of Christ — as the pathway from confusion to its clarity.

I'll explain further but first want to set the stage by visiting Zacheriah.

*Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,*

*humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

*He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;*

*and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;*

I'm struck with the notion of the humble foal riding conqueror alone defeating the military of nations and establishing dominion.

He has no army or armaments, so what gives him the power to do this.

Fortunately, we have examples in history of cases where those armed only with justice have faced down oppressive powerful regimes to victory.

Momentous things like Ghandi's movement against the British Empire, MLK and the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the ending of Apartheid in South Africa.

But also efforts very close to us — our support of Afghan refugee families in the face of a regime that can at any moment leverage enormous power in violence and retaliation against us.

The common thread in these enterprises has been service to others in opposition to oppression of the powerful from a stance of little earthly material power.

How does that thread inform the nature of the kingdom

Can we postulate that it's that service, the very thing that we've been taught grants us access to the kingdom is also the power.

A power where we can't explain the mechanisms of its inner workings but can observe the outcomes it brings of blessing, succor, freedom, and peace.

I don't think that its then a stretch to say it's in living the two commandments — carrying the yoke of Christ — that we not only live in the kingdom but also harness its great power.

A power that history has shown us can bring about enormous positive change in our world and bring us closer to the kingdom in our here and now.

Amen