

**READING THE BIBLE
AGAIN FOR THE FIRST
TIME:
EPILOGUE**

Sunday, August 31, 2008

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Matthew 22: 34-40
The Great Relationship

Now that the Olympics are over, our nation's preoccupation has shifted from athletics to politics. Last week the Democratic Party held its convention in Denver. This week the Republican Party will hold its convention in the Twin Cities.

Both parties will make strong and compelling arguments in favor of their policies and their platforms and their candidates. And both parties will make strong and compelling arguments attacking, belittling, and condemning the policies and platforms and candidates of the opposing party.

It isn't always pretty, but that is the way the political process works here in America. By the time elections roll around, we will all be weary of the campaign rhetoric, political debates, requests for campaign contributions, yard signs, and television commercials.

People in both political parties will say outrageous things about their opponents and will do their best to convince us that our country would be better off if everyone agreed with their positions. But the truth is we need both parties to be a great nation. Each party has an important piece of the truth and if the tension between those competing truths is ever lost, the welfare of our nation will be in peril.

Republicans know that the strength of our nation lies with the individual and that each person's dignity, freedom, ability and responsibility must be honored. Democrats know that our individual welfare is tied to the common welfare and that we must continually work to expand opportunities for every American.

Those two truths often lead to some very different policy priorities and political agendas, but both are true and both are essential to the welfare of our nation. Much as we sometimes hate to admit it, we need the contributions of Republicans and Democrats to remain a great country.

But today we seem to find it more difficult to live in the tension between competing truths. We want things to be one way or the other; either/or, not both/and. Civil discourse is becoming a lost art in our culture. Instead of listening to people who have a different perspective, we attack them and tear them down.

Sometimes in our desire for certainty, people of faith want to know exactly what the Bible tells us about how we are to live and what we are supposed to do in order to be faithful to God. We would like to believe that there is one definitive and unambiguous answer that everyone who reads the Bible will find and understand and embrace.

And there are no shortage of churches that provide strong and compelling arguments for their theological perspective, their interpretation of scripture and their understanding of what it means to live a faithful life.

Some churches recognize that faith is deeply personal and is rooted in each individual's relationship with God. Their primary preoccupation is with leading people to believe the right things about who Jesus is and what he came to do. They love to quote passages like John 3:16 that reminds us: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life." Other churches recognize that the Christian faith is communal and is rooted in the loving relationships

that bind our lives together. Their concern is with ministries of compassion and social justice and they love to quote passages like Micah 6:8 “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.”

Over the two thousand years of its history, the church has struggled to hold in tension all of these competing truths. We tend to band together into congregations and denominations with others who share our perspective and often attack and belittle and condemn those who hold a different perspective. Our mission is often to convince everyone to come over to our side because we know the truth about who God is and how God wants us to live our lives.

But during these past few months as we have walked through our overview of the bible using Marcus Borg’s book, “Reading the Bible Again for the First Time,” we have found that the Bible does not speak with one voice. Many different authors have contributed their voices to telling the story of our faith, and even though they all testify to their experiences of the same God, each voice has a different truth to reveal about God. Each person tells their story from their own unique perspective and each one’s experience of God is a little different than the others.

Queen Esther’s experience of God was very different than that of the immigrant widow from Moab named Ruth. Moses, the great liberator who led the Israelites through the wilderness of the Sinai had a very different understanding of the life that God was calling him to lead than did Joshua, the great conqueror who led the Israelites in battle as they took possession of the Promised Land. Sarah, the mother of Israel, responded to God in a way that was very different than the response of Mary, the mother of our Savior. The priorities of Paul, the great evangelist who carried the

gospel to the gentiles, were very different than the priorities of Peter, the appointed head of the apostolic community. Even the same voice of Jesus sounds different in the stories that Mark tells in his gospel than it does in the stories that John tells in his.

Long ago when church leaders were making decisions about which writings to include in the collection of books that today we call “the Bible”, the decision was made to include all the different voices we hear in the Bible without trying to make them all sound alike. Each voice helps us comprehend a different truth about God and about what it means to live

Every time we open our Bibles it is like setting out on a journey of faith. The stories we read take us to different places with different traveling companions who have different lessons to share with us along the journey. And each time we open our Bibles, we begin the journey from a different starting place determined by the particular circumstances of our own personal lives and the world around us. The familiar words of the Twenty Third Psalm take us one place when we recite them while standing beside an open grave surrounded by grieving family members burying someone we love. But the same words take us to a very different place when we recite them on a relaxing vacation while standing on a tranquil lakeshore, surrounded by the beauty of nature. The exact same words hold very different meanings to us depending on circumstances of our lives.

Today our passage from Matthew’s seems like an appropriate text for concluding our overview of the Bible. A lawyer wanted to know which one commandment was the greatest. Of all the commandments, which one is the most important one to keep? Which one trumps all the others? Which one is most certainly, absolutely, universally true?

The answer that Jesus gave is often referred to as “the great commandment,” but it isn’t really a commandment at all. It isn’t a rule that can be obeyed. It isn’t a task that can be completed. It isn’t a mission that can ever be accomplished. It is a relationship. Jesus said the thing we must all always do is love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and strength and minds...and we must love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Everything else...all the laws and the prophets, depend on these two loving relationships.

That is really what the bible is about. It is not a reference source that we can turn to and look up God’s perspective on any current social or political issue we are struggling with at the moment. It isn’t a uniform code of conduct. It isn’t the source book of orthodox doctrines. It is the most trusted resource we have for guiding us on the journey of faith that never ends but always leads into deeper levels of love for God and neighbor. Amen.

