

Lutherans and the Bible - Part 6

This is the final week of our looking at how Lutherans interpret the Bible. The information being shared comes from a variety of resources including The Book of Faith and a video series entitled How Lutherans Interpret the Bible by the Reverend Doctor Mark Allan Powell. The topics include:

1. Word of God
2. What Lutherans Say About the Bible
3. Where the Bible Comes From
4. Interpreting the Bible in Context
5. Determining Right From Wrong
6. The Many Meanings of the Bible

The first 5 weeks we talked about the Bible being the written Word of God and it tells us what God wants to say to us. We focused on what Lutherans say about the Bible; that Christ is the ultimate word of God; that the Bible draws us to Jesus - to peace, love and hope; the 5 principles used when studying Scripture; that we interpret the Bible based on the historical and literary context; and the "binding and loosing" of Scripture and the Law.

This week we conclude our discussion with a look at the many meanings of the Bible. We remember that the Bible is the living word in that it continues to speak God's word for us today and that this living word does not say the same thing to everyone. The same passage may comfort the afflicted yet afflict the comfortable.

One of the ways in which the Bible is interpreted is based on social location. Every human has a social location - age, race, gender, career, marital status, income, education, etc.

Stories are interpreted differently by readers who have a different social location. For example, women interpret stories differently than men. Using the movie Thelma and Louise, one critic described the movie as: a pair of gutsy, independent women who discover the strength of sisterhood during a joy-riding escape from the laws of men. Another critic described the movie as: female friends who leave responsibilities and family behind to become criminals and fugitives. These are 2 different perspectives of the film written by people who had different social locations (one a woman and one a man). The same is true of the Bible.

Let's look at the parable of the Prodigal. Why does this young man end up hungry in a pigpen? Americans will most likely answer the question by saying that it is because he squandered his inheritance. He was an irresponsible kid who blows what his father spent years saving for him. East Africans however would most likely answer the question by saying that it is because no one would give him anything to eat. It is a story about a society who does not care for the poor or for the alien among them. They would say that immigrants don't know how to live in a foreign land and often lose all their money - so this story is not about a sinful boy but a sinful society since the Bible tells us how we are to care for the poor and the immigrant. The reason for the difference has to do with social location. In a capitalistic country like America the prevailing thought is - you are not to squander what you are given. In a country like Africa, hospitality is critical. And this story does say both of these things and more. It is important for us to discover all of these different meanings; not just the way it speaks to us but also how it speaks to others. Then we understand how the Bible is God's living word to all.

We also interpret the Bible through empathy (empathically). Different people will identify with different characters in a story and understand things from that perspective. That is the reason we cry when we hear different stories. If we look at the story of the Good Samaritan, Tanzanians may tend to see themselves as the man robbed and left beaten to the point of death and the question they might ask is - from whom would I accept help? And so they would understand this story as meaning those who have been beaten cannot afford the luxury of prejudice and that they need to accept help from anyone who brings it, seeing that all goodness is a gift of God. Therefore anyone who will help me is my neighbor. American readers tend to empathize with the person walking down the road and so identify themselves as either the Levite, the Priest or the Samaritan and would ask the question - would I or wouldn't I help the beaten man in the ditch and why? And so they would tend to understand this parable as meaning that help is to be given to everyone (including our enemies), seeing that all are children of God. Therefore, all are our neighbors.

Lutherans understand that Lutherans don't always interpret the Bible the same way as other Lutherans and Lutherans know that they are not the

only ones that interpret the Bible. We understand and pray that the Holy Spirit lead us to new discoveries and that we are part of one holy, catholic (universal) apostolic church. We are only a part of something that is much bigger. So this week, when you read the Bible, ask a few of these questions to help you understand different meanings being conveyed in the Scripture passages. Ask: What does this mean to me?; How might I hear the story differently?; What if I was one of the disciples?; What if my social location was different (if I was a person of color or non-color, if I was rich or poor; if I was an immigrant, citizen or natural born citizen).

Blessings as you open the Bible this week and encounter Christ. Make sure you let Pastor Maryanne know if you discovered anything new in your reading this week.