

"The Bible: Using the Bible the Way Jesus Did"  
John 5:39-47

As we journey through the Bible, it is important to be aware that all of our interpretations of it are often limited by our own perspectives, experiences, and context. None of us approach the Bible without our own filters of reality. This applies to everything in life and not just to reading the Bible. Have you ever wondered why others who experience the same events interpret them so differently than you? In a TED talk, Isaac Lidsky, talks about seeing reality as poetry: It is what we make of it. Lidsky appreciates sight because he lost his sight as a teenager: "What you see impacts how you feel," he says, "and the way you feel can literally change what you see." He continues by looking to the science: "Numerous studies demonstrate this. If you are asked to estimate the walking speed of a man in a video, for example, your answer will be different if you're told to think about cheetahs or turtles. A hill appears steeper if you've just exercised, and a landmark appears farther away if you're wearing a heavy backpack. You create your own reality, and you believe it." He also gives the example of fear and how it impacts our ability to see. He says, "Your fears distort your reality. Under the warped logic of fear, anything is better than the uncertain. Fear fills the void at all costs, passing off what you dread for what you know, offering up the worst in place of the ambiguous, substituting assumption for reason. Psychologists have a great term for it: awfulizing."

Knowing these human tendencies and limitations helps us to see that we need God's guidance to stay open and to be willing to expand our understanding of reality. We also need others who are different from us to help us get a greater picture of reality. One of the powerful impediments to our growth and transformation is when we get stuck in our limited experiences and views. That is why it is important for us to follow Jesus' way of engaging the scriptures.

In our Bible story for today we hear Jesus challenging the misconceptions of the religious leaders about their interpretation of the scriptures. He had healed a man who was paralyzed and blind, but he did it on the Sabbath. This was supposed to be a day of rest and such a healing violated the religious leaders' strict adherence to complete rest on the Sabbath. Imagine if you saw someone suffering and then getting healed. You would imagine that everyone would be rejoicing, but in real life when such healing gets in the way of our certainties, our belief systems, and the status quo, we often react badly. It is easy to vilify biblical characters because we have the advantage of hindsight. It is much harder to see as God sees when we are in the midst of a situation.

Jesus challenged the religious people of his day to see him as one who was continuing and fulfilling the prophecies of old about justice, healing, and love. They missed the truth of Jesus' ministry because their certainties blinded them. Their biases, fears, and personal interests prevented them from seeing reality as it was. Healing and love should have trumped their religious rules because ultimately that is the point of such practices. Yet, when the status quo of what we know is threatened, we tend to hold on more tightly to what we know, even if it is not serving us anymore. The same can be true of reading

the Bible. We have to be careful as to use the Bible to only interpret it through our preexisting ideas that don't ask much of us in terms of change and transformation.

I would like to share with you some of the ways Jesus used the scriptures of his day. My hope is by keeping these ways in perspective, we can allow God to speak to us more freely through the Bible. These points are from Richard Rohr's book *What Do We Do with the Bible?*:

- Jesus talks much more out of his own experience of God and humanity: One's own personal experience of the Spirit is so essential to faith.
- Jesus often uses what appear to be non-Jewish or non-canonical sources. His bandwidth of authority and attention is much wider than *sola Scriptura*.
- Jesus himself wrote nothing that persists. He did not appear to want us to rely on his exact formulations. He knew the danger and legalism of "by the book" people.
- Jesus appears to ignore most of his own Bible, yet it clearly formed his whole consciousness. If we look at what he ignores, it includes any passages that appear to legitimate violence, imperialism, exclusion, purity, and dietary laws...Jesus is a Biblically formed non-Bible quoter, who gets the deeper stream, the spirit, that trajectory of his Jewish history and never settles for mere surface readings.
- He openly disagrees with Scriptures that emphasize non-essentials and "mere human commandments."
- He consistently and openly flaunts seemingly sacred taboos like not working on the Sabbath, meeting with women, eating with sinners and non-Jews, not touching lepers, and purity codes in general.
- He reduced the 613 clear Biblical commandments down to two: love of God and love of neighbor.
- He feels free to reinterpret the Law in service of love.
- He consistently broadens the group toward greater inclusivity. Well over sixty percent of Jesus' stories make the outsider the hero of the story, while criticizing the insider.
- Jesus never punishes or shames any wrong-doers; he only puts them back on their own conscience and tells them to take responsibility for their own actions.

So based on the list above, if we are to use the Bible the way Jesus did, Richard Rohr invites us to follow these simple steps:

- Offer a prayer for guidance from the Holy spirit before you make your interpretation of an important text...Pray as long as it takes to get to this inner intellectual freedom and detachment.
- Once you have attained some honest degree of intellectual and emotional freedom, try to move to a position of detachment from your own will and its goals, needs, and desires. This might take some time, but without such freedom from your own control needs, you will invariably make a text say what you need and want it to say.
- Then you must listen for a deeper voice than your own, which you will know because it will never shame or frighten you, but rather strengthen you, even when it is challenging you...God does not ask and expect you to do anything new until God has first made it desirable and possible for you to do it.

- If the interpretation leads your True Self to experience any or several of the fruits of the Spirit, as they are listed in Galatians 5:22-23 --love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control --I think you can trust this interpretation is from the Spirit, from the deeper stream of wisdom.
- If you sense any negative or punitive emotions like morose delight, feelings of superiority, self satisfaction, arrogant dualistic certitude, desire for revenge, need for victory, or any spirit of dismissal or exclusion, you must trust this is not the Jesus hermeneutic (interpretation) at work, but your own ego still steering the ship. Watch, especially, for any subtle feelings of righteousness.
- Finally, remember the temptations of Jesus in the desert (see Matthew 4:3-10). Three temptations to the misuse of power are listed --economic, religious, and political. Even Jesus must face these subtle disguises before he begins any public ministry.

I wish there was an easier path for interpreting scripture as I often wish there is an easier path for transformation. We do not easily find our way to live the way God has intended without the pattern which Rohr presented of three steps forward and two steps back. Only grace is powerful enough to help us on the way!

We will end with a Lectio Divina reading of our Bible verse for this week. I will read the text three times. The first time, you are invited to listen to a word or a phrase that shimmers for you. The second time, you are invited to pay attention to your feelings around your word or phrase. The third time, the invitation is to listen to a message from God for you right now. I will give you some silence between each of the readings.

“O God, you are my God --for you I long! For you my body yearns; for you my soul thirsts, like a land parched, lifeless, and without water.” Psalm 63:2  
Amen.