



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

This past February, Love Wins, our LGBTQ+ and allies group, hosted two great events under the masterful direction of Father Chris. The first was a Bible study called, "What Does the Bible Really Say?" Where Ken Wilson, who's an evangelical pastor, shared the biblical interpretations and misinterpretations of what have been called the clobber passages. These are the passages in scripture that the church and people have misused to claim that God is against same-gender relationships.

Now, Pastor Ken did a masterful job revealing the nuances that a literal reading of these biblical passages will always miss. And he showed how these passages have nothing to do with the kind of covenantal relationships people can have today, but there were those who wondered if it's just another liberal pastor who's trying to explain why the Bible should not be considered the authoritative word of God.

The second event hosted by Love Wins was a movie about translating the Bible from Greek to English called 1946. That was the first year that two words in a list of vices in 1 Corinthians 6 that previously were so difficult to translate to know what their meaning was, so that as long as there were English translations, which started in 1611 of the Bible, they were translated for over 300 years as effeminate or abusers of humans. But then in 1946, just less than 80 years ago, these two words were translated erroneously and catastrophically as one word, homosexual.

And thus people, including the documentary director's own father, who happens to be a pastor in a non-denominational Bible church, would say with extreme certitude that the Bible, the word of God is the truth. It needs to be obeyed. And so he turns to his own daughter on camera. She's the director of the documentary, and she is in a loving relationship with a female, and he says right to her face, sweetie, what you're doing is contrary to the word of God.

And then last week someone told me that being a cradle Episcopalian, he was never made to read the Bible. It's not required in our tradition. You don't have to be well versed in scripture, to which some of us breathe a sigh of relief, right? And others may grumble. But this wonderful soul decided that it was time for him to read the Bible and he was going to do it during Lent. And he said to me, you know, I've really enjoyed reading the Bible. Who knew? Indeed.

All of this got me thinking about the role of scripture in our lives. What is the purpose of the Bible? What authority does it have in your life and what authority should it have over all lives? What are God's expectations when it comes to the scriptures? What do we mean when we say the Bible's, the word of the Lord? If the Bible tells me so, what does that really mean?

I am hoping that no matter your relationship to the Bible, whether you're like me and you read it often, and you actually turn to the scriptures for comfort, for solace, for guidance, and sometimes for a little push to go in the right direction of the goodness of life and away from evil. Or whether you're like my dear friend, Nancy, who when I asked her why she never read the Bible said, I'm waiting for the movie. No matter what role the Bible plays in your life, it is a vital question for all of us, one of life and death, I dare say, to understand what role it plays in terms of authority, given that churches and Christians all over the country believe that the Bible is evidence that God condemns and punishes people who live in a certain way, who when they do things pronounced as sin in the Bible, they will severely be punished by God if they do not repent and change their ways.

Because as much as I love, love, love the Bible, I am that person who when stuck on that proverbial desert island, what am I going to bring? I'm going to bring the scriptures because it has changed the way I look at the world. It helps shape my thoughts, my decisions, and it is how I understand and love my God. Even despite that, there is some weird stuff in the Bible. And I don't feel the need to ever say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and should be obeyed, and every word in it is true, because frankly, it is not.

Case in point: Corinthians 14:34-35. St. Paul says, "Women should be silent in the churches for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there's something they want to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

Now you tell me, is it true? Or what about this? In our Old Testament text from the Book of Numbers, there's a story about the Israelites who have been wandering in the wilderness now for almost 40 years. I mean, after having lived a horrible experience of being slaves in Egypt, and then all of a sudden being abruptly let go, having to gather all this stuff and run out of Egypt, only to be pursued by the Egyptians.

And they get to the Red Sea and they turn around and they're either going to be killed by the Egyptians in a massacre or they're going to drown in the Red Sea. And then all of a sudden God parts the Red Sea. And so they're running across the Red Sea hoping that wall of water doesn't come in and drown on them. They get to the other side, they look around, and the Red Sea goes down on all of those Egyptians, killing them and drowning them all, which has to be traumatic.

And then they're stuck in a wilderness and they have to live in tents and figure out how to make do with what they have. And they have no food. And then God sends something called manna, which is supposed to be this bread provided from Heaven, but it's tasteless, and they loathe it for 40 years. And finally, finally they get to the place where the Promised Land is right across and they can get to it as long as they can cross through the land of Edom.

And so Moses goes and talks to the King of Edom and says, may we please cross through your land? We won't have even a drink of water. We won't touch anything. And the King of Edom says, I will draw a sword if you try to cross through my land. So they, the Israelites, after 40 years of waiting to get to the Promised Land, have to go around Edom. And it turns out that the land around Edom is some of the worst land in the area. It is basically a barren desert that has these epic sandstorms, and it's the time of a brutal heat. So guess what the people do. They grumble. They grumble against Moses. They grumble against God. The scripture says, "They say to Moses and to God, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there's no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." And who could blame them? Well, according to the Bible, God can. The scriptures say, "Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died. No wonder so many people think that if you do something wrong, God will punish you. It seems to say that in our own scriptures. But here is the good news. God is way bigger than the scriptures. God will not be imprisoned by a book, even a holy book.

This past Wednesday, I was talking to Kellie Herdade, who is our phenomenal children and youth minister, and she is one of my favorite theologians. So she was saying, what are you doing this weekend, after I asked her what she was doing. And so she said, what are you doing this week? And I was like, oh, I'm preaching. And she said, well, what text? And I said, John 3:16. And immediately she quotes it from memory. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever shall believe in him will not perish, but have eternal life." And I was like, yep, that's the one. And then Kellie said, that is my least favorite verse in the Bible. It has been used over and over again to exclude people. If you don't confess Jesus as Lord, you're going to hell. Ridiculous. People love to use the Holy Word of God to hurt others, instead of something that's supposed to bring us closer to the living God.

Now, Kellie has a significant history of using the Bible to bring people closer to God. During Lent, she has this daily text group where she sends a Bible verse and then explains what the Bible verse is and tells people all about God. And this text group is filled with her teenagers and teenagers who become 20-somethings now. I mean, it's like really popular.

And Kellie's been doing youth ministry for almost two decades. And even though every year she adapts her ministry to match what the kids are doing today, there are three basics to her work with youth. One, she is never afraid to use the Bible to show people how much God loves them. Two, she insists that God loves everyone no matter how messed up they are, and no matter how messed up they get. And they all get messed up. And number three, she demands that all youth trips must be well stocked with pixie stix candy for long road trips.

And you know what? Her ministry works. When we talked, she shared with me this beautiful card she received last week, and she gave me permission to put it on the front of your bulletin cover. It's from a former youth student of hers who's now 26 years old, was living in Lapeer, now lives in the state of Maine and is an elementary school teacher. This person writes,

"Dear Kellie, I hope you're doing well. I am writing to you from a woman's retreat from my church, which has been a lovely little getaway filled with lots of peace, reflection, and fresh air by the ocean. I have been thinking a lot about you and how grateful I am with the time spent with you, from Sunday School to confirmation class to Bible studies at Starbucks. You were the first person to show me that Jesus' friendship and God's love is best found in laughter with friends, often while consuming pixie stix, singing songs in tie dye t-shirts, and in service alongside others. I've come to learn more and more that not everyone's first understanding of God is so joyful, which makes me all the more appreciative of you and the profound impact you have had on me. Sending you lots of love, Annika."

I have no doubt that Annika knows, believes in, and loves Jesus. I also think that she would totally agree with me that the God of pixie stix is not interested in killing people who have been traumatized and who grumble about 40 years without a home and decent food on their tables. Not that God. So how do we reconcile all of this? How do we make sense of the sacredness of scriptures and the living God?

I have two antidotes to a condemning, punishing God that we read about in the scriptures that I would like to lift up for you. The first is this idea of there being actually four senses of scripture. This idea may have originated with Jewish and Greek thought, but it was helpfully offered by the great church father, Augustine, in this gorgeous understanding that scripture can be understood by using different senses. Just as you and I make sense of our surroundings using our nose, our eyes, our ears, scripture can be interpreted using various lenses that are commonly referred to literal, allegorical, topological, and anagogical.

So in other words, for us to seek the wisdom from God in the scriptures, we begin with the literal. But then we move to the other senses. We cannot always stop at the literal. We are mature thinkers. We understand that some stuff in the Bible

lends itself to being allegorical or metaphorical, and there are other parts of the Bible that actually help us with some sort of moral lens or develop a trope to understand and guide us in life. And then there are parts of the Bible that are future vision or anagogical. Anagogical comes from the Greek word, which means climbing up or ascending, so it's looking for something greater than what you can plainly see. Please give yourself the freedom to seek other visions in the scripture rather than the literal.

Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, has been quoted using a verse from Deuteronomy to warn us against being too literal with the Bible. He supposedly said, "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind." Now, whether he actually said this or not, this pithy saying warns us of being too simplistic in reading our scriptures. It is the same thing that was said about the scriptures that are used to condemn same-gender relationships. In a letter to the committee who translated the Bible using the wrong word, a pastor warned them, misinformed and misguided people may use the translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9 as a sacred weapon, and he was tragically very right.

The Bible was never meant to be used as a weapon. The Bible is like John the Baptist. It is pointing to us, Jesus, the living word of God. It is there to help us recognize the triune God. It is there to make utterly clear to us that the person of Jesus Christ, whose life, whose love, whose death and resurrection is the clearest understanding of God that we have in order to know God's will, in order to follow God's way, in order to seek God's desire. It is Jesus who is the Word of God, which brings me to the second antidote against poor biblical usage. It's something Martin Luther purportedly said about the scriptures. "The Bible is the cradle that holds the Christ. Without him, it is nothing more than wood and straw."

And what this means is that the purpose of the Bible is to direct us to Jesus, who lives and works among us for our own good, for our own sake, who saves us and doesn't condemn and punish us. Whether we want to be saved or not, and whether we believe it or not, the Bible is simply the medium to get us to see what that elementary school teacher saw, that Jesus' friendship and God's love is real.

Now, I do have to tell you something, a little confession. Martin Luther, he actually never really said, "The Bible's the cradle that holds the Christ. Without him, it is nothing more than wood and straw." I found that on a website called quotefancy.com. Luther, actually, in Luther's works, number six, said that the Old Testament, with its simple stories, is just as much the cradle of Christ as the New Testament is. But you know what? Here's what I think. God can use quotefancy.com and pixie stix to point us to the never-quenchable powerful grace that means that the world is being saved, even if we grumble. Sometimes we don't even believe it because God knows this world seems to be getting more and more dangerous every passing day. And we may not believe everything that

is said in the Bible, but God will still deliver us to the Promised Land, hold up love as the greatest way to live with one another, no matter our genders, and God will even let women speak in churches.

So which God do you see? Do you see and sense a God who works through poisonous serpents and condemns the unfaithful, the unbelieving and the unrighteous? Or do you sense a God who works through pixie stix, laughter, singing, and a Bible that is filled with all kinds of stories and ideas, but central to it is the word of God, who is Jesus Christ, who is seen in His full glory when He's lifted up high on that cross in order to bring the whole entire world to Him? Because how you sense God will change the way that you experience the scriptures, your life, and the whole world.

Amen.