



Rector's Essay - Domesticate the Bible

By Jarrett Kerbel (05/01/26)

The bright young curate at my neighboring church in Philadelphia started a Bible Study. That blue-blazer church had very little history of Bible Study and he was excited to introduce the practice by discussing the Gospel of Luke. All was going swimmingly until the group arrived at the Beatitudes in Luke 6:20-26, more correctly called the “Blessings and Woes.”

In verse 24, Jesus is recorded as saying, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” After reading this verse, the Bible Study ground to a halt. One member could not believe that Jesus said such a thing, and if he did say such a shocking thing, what did he mean by it? She had come to church every Sunday for 60 years and she could not recall hearing these words read in church or preached.

I relate this story because it is a very good example of how hard it is to domesticate the Gospel. Jesus was utterly shocking and even scandalous in his day, and he will continue to be until his Kingdom comes. Jesus consorted with all the wrong sort of people; people who were ritually unclean, the sinners, the dirty, the wretched of the earth, the outcasts, the despised and hated, and the foreigners. Jesus taught in a confrontational manner through argument and stories that shocked his listeners into a new awareness of God's radical love and the transformation that love offers. Most of all he shocked the world by dying the shameful death of a criminal and being raised from the dead by God.

When we approach Jesus with open and humble hearts, who he is and what he said may rub up against our pre-existing commitments, beliefs and loyalties.

Some people think they have me pegged as a liberal. Although I was raised by a strongly liberal mother, I was also raised by a conservative father and grandfather. As I grew into an adult I rejected these secular categories altogether in favor of the Biblical category of disciple. The authority in my life who I follow is Jesus. The values, direction and morals I receive from him are what guide my private and public choices.

A priest friend told me how a member accused him of preaching a 'left-wing' sermon. My friend Greg politely replied, "Left wing and right wing are secular terms that come from the French Revolution. In the revolutionary assembly one group sat on the right and the other on the left. Left and right denote a secular lens or mindset that cannot be found in the Bible. I was simply preaching from the teaching of Jesus. How that interacts with this secular lens is something you need to wrestle with."

I agree with Greg completely. We need to be conscious of the assumptions we bring to our interpretation of scripture and leave open the possibility that scripture may not support our assumptions. This is hard to do. We cannot rip up all the planks in our boat at once without fear of sinking. But, in a way, that is the Baptismal invitation of Jesus. Let go of all that steadies your life that is not from God, and plunge into the life-giving waters of the new creation that comes with life in me!