

FOUND IN SCRIPTURE
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January 31, 2015
4th Sunday after Epiphany
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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All the people gathered in the square. They told Ezra, the scribe, to bring the long-forgotten scroll of the Law of Moses. And so while the people stood, Ezra read from it from early morning until midday. He read from the scroll and gave an interpretation so that the people understood it. And the people wept. (Nehemiah 8:1-10)

I don't know what Ezra found in the Scriptures that precipitated tears. Maybe he found a passage that portrayed God as compassionate and merciful and the people wept for joy.

I don't know what Ezra found in Scripture, but here's something I found in Scripture. "There is no God." That's right out of Psalm 14. It's shocking. But then, that quote is out of context. It is preceded by these words: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*

Context matters.

I also found this in Scripture. *The poor will be with you always.* That's in Deuteronomy.

Because of that single verse, the Baptist church of my childhood disparaged any programs that aimed to alleviate poverty. My own devout father once cited that verse to urge me to forsake Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. *The poor will be with you always. Just accept it,* he said to me. Years later I found that the next line in that verse says:

Therefore open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land. Give liberally and be ungrudging. (Deut. 15)

If you're citing the Bible as an authority, context matters.

I also found this in Scripture, in the New Testament, in I Corinthians.

A woman must not speak in church. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. (I Cor. 14.)

Which is why the church of my childhood and many others still today forbid women to be priests, preachers or leaders in church.

But I also found this in I Corinthians: *In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male or female, slave or free. But we are all one in Christ. We all drink from one Spirit.*

Context matters and so does interpretation.

As you can see, Christians pick and choose from thousands of verses—often those most agreeable to them. I know I do. And, for better or worse, so do Muslims from the Quran.

I guess we can say that the words on the page matter, but what's in the heart matters more. We see most clearly with our hearts.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today. (Luke 4:14-21)

Once upon a time Jesus showed up at his town's synagogue, a kind of Jewish community center. Because he was known as a rabbi, he was extended the courtesy to read the scripture for the day. He was presented the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

He could have found this at the top of scroll. *May the descendants of evildoers nevermore be named. Prepare to slaughter their children. (Isaiah 14)*

He could have found that and read it. Instead he unrolled the scroll and kept unrolling, the way Muslims, Jews and Christians must keep unrolling their traditions until they discover compassion. Jesus unrolled and unrolled until he found this near the end.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

They knew and he knew that he'd left something out. He had stopped short of the line after *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*. The next line is: *and the day of vengeance of our God. As in: may the descendants of evildoers nevermore be named. Prepare to slaughter their children.*

But Jesus stopped short of attributing violence and vengeance to God. Yes, many others did and do; but Jesus didn't. He saw God as merciful and compassionate toward all people. Jesus didn't reject the Scriptures of his people. He pruned them so compassion would blossom. And so must we.

Jesus found what his heart longed to find in Scripture. He chose mercy and welcome over judgment, condemnation and exclusion.

This morning we found in scripture the story of Jonah [as enacted earlier by our senior youth class], a parable about universal kinship and God's universal love for all people, including our most despicable enemies.

It's not so much what's on the page as what's in our hearts. Breathe in the Spirit and you will find love in your heart and in the Scriptures.