

Peacemaking and the prophets: imagining an alternative community

Lenten Peace Workshop Session 4

² Many nations will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
³ He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.
⁴ Everyone will sit under their own vine
and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.
Micah 4:2-4

Anabaptists believe that the bible plays a central role in our faith. Our witness to Jesus is connected to the history of witness through the communities that formed the scriptures, read, and transmitted them. When we want to know about Jesus, we read about him. Anabaptists also believe that reading is something communities do – we never read alone (even when we read by ourselves). Our reading is shaped by the community of our teachers and our dialogue partners (both Christian and otherwise). Through our teachers we hear something about (hopefully) the history and range of different readings, and through our dialogue partners the rough patterns of our reading become smoothed and our reading develops a more specific and hardened style – by talking about our readings we reinforce a perspective within ourselves.

The communal nature of reading the bible is always concerned with the application of two questions. 1) What is the evidence, or witness, that we see in the bible? 2) What does this mean for our situation? Of course, these are never separate questions, as we only perceive the evidence of the text in light of our current concerns – there is no such thing as reading without an interpretive lens. But like most of the cognitive limitations faced by humans, we can respond to our biases in reading in better and worse ways. For example, by spending some time to discover our biases and the biases of others and considering the strengths of both we can read more honestly and flexibly. It should also be encouraging to us as modern readers of the ancient text of the bible, that these two questions have always been at the heart of communal readings of scripture, whether acknowledged or not. The Old Testament authors and redactors spend their time hashing and rehashing the meaning of the life of the people of Israel in light of the exodus and Torah (Sinai Covenant), the monarchy, and the exile. In many ways, much of the text of the Jewish Scriptures (some of which we have in the Old Testament) can be understood as an exposition of the question: Since this happened (Torah, exile, etc), and we are now here, what does that tell us about God (or us)? The writers of the New Testament fall exactly into this

tradition, taking great pains to show how the accepted revelation of God to his people, the history and tradition of TANAKH (The Jewish Scriptures - Torah - Prophets - Writings), are continued and clarified in Jesus. The number and range of references in the gospels and epistles to text of the Jewish Scriptures is huge.

There are many complicated aspects to reading the bible, so many theological and technical issues to take into account, that it is not possible in any brief way to do them justice. Actually in a nutshell, this is probably the most important idea for a healthy hermeneutic for community reading: reading the text requires humility and faith – we probably do not have all the tools to read the bible as well as we could, and so we trust in God that he will miraculously speak to us, as he has spoken through the history of the church. Reading the text requires faith, because the text is not God, and we are not God. God's involvement in the world is what we call a miracle, and having some understanding of God through reading an ancient text – his purposes and the history of his involvement with people – is a miracle.

One of the up-sides to being aware of the nature of our communal reading is that we can grow in the potential range of readings we give to a text. We might come to a text with one sense of its significance for our lives, but then decide that because of our belief in the priority of certain communal values that we can read the text differently. I would argue that the change in attitudes towards the evidence in support of slavery found in the bible was not primarily due to learning new insights about Greek or Hebrew, but was due to theological convictions about the fundamental dignity of all human beings. Different groups appealed to different parts of the text to support their convictions, either that slavery was or was not affirmed by the authority of the bible, and over time those readings that supported slavery diminished, but the diminishment was due to the conviction that slavery was wrong, a conviction formed and supported by a reading community, and it was the conviction that drove the reading of the text. Of course, the meaning of a text is not solely brought by readers, but neither does it exist apart from readers. In the end, we hope for a dynamic process where we read the text, according to some set of communal values and practices, and are changed by our reading, then read the text again with new or clarified values and practices. As Anabaptists this is what we do when we emphasize readings of the bible that elevate our sense of Jesus as peacemaker, Jesus as radical herald of the kingdom, Jesus as redeemer of the enemy (and us) through death and not through violence. We typically hold the sermon on the mount as central to our hermeneutics, understanding that in this discourse Jesus provides us with a lens to view other texts, especially the scriptures that he read.

Thankfully there is more to what the bible has to offer us in terms of peacemaking than just the sermon on the mount. Another aspect of the communal nature of reading is that we are able to consider what type of reading community we are, and compare it to communities in the bible. Are we the community of powerful elites or are we the community of outsiders? Jesus, and many others, speak to different communities differently with messages of correction, support and inclusion, as well as confrontation and condemnation. One of the communities of people that can be inspirational for us as peacemakers is the prophets, which in many ways are defined as a group not so much in terms of a continuous well-designated community but as the outsiders or not important members in the community. The prophets have been seen as having a role in the life of the people of Israel, and different parts of the church across time have understood this role in different ways. Some parts of the church see prophets as future tellers or fortune tellers, whose primary role was to give voice to God-see visions of the near, but often distant, future. Other parts of the church, have understood the prophets as the original

countercultural critics, speaking truth to power standing alone in the wilderness. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann is well-known for his perspective of the prophets, and his description of the 'prophetic imagination.' What Brueggemann shows us is that prophets play an important role in creating alternative possible realities, something we more commonly call the imagination. The empire we live in, and the empires of the bible (Babylonian to Roman), seek to be totalities for the citizens of the empire. They determine not only what can be said and done, but what can be thought. Brueggemann shows us that the prophets, especially by their use of poetry, offer us a vision of how we might be a different kind of reading community, one that pushes back against the empire we live in by providing alternative pictures of what life might look like, and what is good.

There is much to be gained by a close examination of the prophetic tradition in the bible. But one brief observation is fitting now. As Brueggemann notes, poetry seems to be a favoured form of expression for the prophets because poetry resists assimilation into memoranda, and because poetry is a form of expression that tends to rise up in those that are on the fringes. Executives and empire functionaries tend not to have either the time or the inner angst that produces poetry. We might do well to consider how we can be formed as a reading community by giving ear to the fringe among us (women, minorities, kids) so that our imaginations will be broadened and we will see a new range of possible readings where previous we were convinced there were none.