

The Rule of Love

Exodus 1: 15-22



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When we approach the task of interpreting Scripture, it is good to remember that this work is not for the faint of heart. There are few simple lessons to be drawn, and very few crystal clear answers to be had. To take a collection of narratives, laws, letters, genealogies, prophesies, and liturgical songs; and to begin to make meaning of them, much less any consistency for a particular will of God, is something that scholars and preachers and faithful individuals alike have been at work for thousands of years.

We all know very well that one of the most difficult tasks is to recognize when our own biases or hopes for the text direct us as to how to interpret Scripture. These are, of course, among the ultimate proof texts.

Want to say that women and men are created equally?

Look to Genesis 1.

Want to make an argument for man's preference in the created order?

Look to Genesis 2.

Want to say that there are none who are enemies in the sight of God?

Look to Matthew 26.

Want to say that the enemies of the people are the enemies of God?

Look to Zechariah 9.

Want to say that strong borders should order our common life?

Look to Ezra or Nehemiah.

Want to say that we have a duty to draw the circle wide, and to welcome?

Look to Deuteronomy 10 or Luke 10.

Certainly these are not extensive of what we can and have done by way of trying to win an argument through use of the Biblical text. As those who claim the Bible as the unique and authoritative witness to the work and revelation of God, it is the faithful thing, in fact it is imperative, for us to consider what guides our interpretation.

One good rule is that Scripture can be interpreted in light of itself. I can look at Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 side by side, along with perhaps Jesus' conversations with Mary and Martha or the early apostle Lydia's creation of the church in Philippi and discern an equally important place for both men and women in God's created order, proclamation of the Good News, and purposes for the world.

Another good rule is Jesus. Yes, Jesus, who we as Christians claim to be best way that we can possibly know who God is and what God wills for us. Does God desire for us to destroy our enemies, as perhaps we read story of in the early days of the people, Israel? Well, the Gospel of Matthew reveals that when Jesus was confronted by the guards in the garden of Gethsemane, he first called his betrayer "Friend" and then took the sword from Peter to rebuked the disciple's impulse for violence. Christ shows us something about the will of God for how we treat those who wish us harm, and those with whom we deeply disagree.

There is also, and perhaps simply, the rule of love.

That is, the rule that pulls up God's command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and mind and strength, and further as Jesus takes it, to love your neighbor as yourself. As simplistic as it sounds, the witness and consistency of God's love made known again and again in prophecy, in narrative, in liturgy, in

revelation, in letter and in law can and does arise over every hateful, fearful, retributive, and heretical impulse we have to interpret God's will at the expense of others. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?," asks Jesus to the young lawyer who wanted to test him. The lawyer responded, "The one who showed him mercy." "Go and do likewise," said Jesus in return.

Not surprisingly, the rule of love and the rule of Christ tend toward one another.

The rule of love.

Shiphrah and Puah did not know of this. The command had not yet been given, for the people Israel did not yet exist. In truth, they might not have existed at all, but for these two: These midwives who worked in Egypt during the time of the Pharaoh, not named as they are in the text, for his rule was ultimately inconsequential and their actions were not.

These midwives did not know explicitly of the rule of love, but the text tells us, they did fear God; one way or another, they knew that God always moved people from bondage into freedom and they were willing to cast their lot there.

To fear God, a phrase we see often in the Biblical text, is to trust in God. It is to revere God, to stand in awe of God, to respect God as capital "G"-God and not of lesser form.

Proverbs puts the fear of God in line with wisdom, and says therefore that the wise one is the one who takes God's commands to heart. With this wisdom comes understanding of righteousness and justice and equity, as salvation from the paths of evil.

For some reason, these ordinary Egyptian women were wise before their time. Somehow they already knew of the God of Joseph, the king who had reigned over Egypt until this time and quite successfully at that.

The land was bountiful then, the people were happy. They knew of God in that time, and they had perceived that with all of the power wielded by this new leader, there was one with greater authority. That one, God whom they knew, counted life as sacred, and they knew in their heart of hearts that this God would have not wanted them to act in accordance with Pharaoh's cruel command to kill infants not yet in their mother's arms.

So Puah and Shiphrah did not listen to Pharaoh. Pharaoh feared the Hebrews. The midwives were in awe of God, so they did not listen. Instead, they acted with a rule of love.

The interpretive rule of love prevails in how we understand this particular story, not because they speak of love for the Hebrew children in particular or even because God speaks in here of love. In fact, God does not even act here overtly, until after the midwives have explained their subversive behavior before Pharaoh and somehow lived to continue on.

The rule of love prevails here because love is inverse to fear that provokes hate. We must understand here that Puah and Shiphrah join the narratives before and behind their own, that tell of how the will of God is consistent with acting in love towards God and towards our neighbors.

We cannot act in love when we fear the other. We cannot profess to love when we act out trauma on individuals and families and whole communities in order to show strength.

As a society, we may well debate the interpretation and implementation of law. We may well disagree on what we do when people enter the country outside of due process. We may not see eye to eye about what security measures need to be in place on our borders, though likely we'd agree that there should be some as is necessary for any sovereign nation. We may go back and forth about the conditions that exist in the countries of origin and the reasons someone might flee.

Yet as people of faith of every political party and persuasion, even more so, as followers of Christ who lived and died by the rule of love— we must affirm that there is no Scriptural authority nor any faithful interpretation of the will of God that can justify the trauma of forced separation of families and uncertain plans for reunification.

These are not the acts of a compassionate society. There is no mercy here, for no one is recognized as neighbor. There is no awe for or honoring of God; we are left with just plain, old, fear.

We are so afraid of one another. We have become so afraid of one another. We are so afraid of one another that life has ceased to be sacred; that we are unable to see in another person the very image we profess.

God forgive us, for we are so afraid.

My heart is broken. I imagine that yours is as well. As those who profess that we are made in the image of God who created us, I believe that God's heart, too, is rent into a thousand pieces. It would not be the first time that human action has caused pain to the heart of God, and still, we persist with God. And amazingly, God persists with us.

There is a place for our Scripture in the midst of all of this, however; be sure of that. There is a place for the Shiprahs and Puahs, who try a different way; for those who trust that God makes a way out of seemingly no way. There is a place for acts of creative disobedience that are grounded in love (not shrouded in self-righteous politics). There is a place for, there *must be*, a place for mercy that takes into account the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable. For it is of these, says Jesus, that the kingdom will be composed.

And if the rule of love is what guides our interpretation of God's work among us, then should it not also be what guides our activity and relationships as a partner in that very work? I think so. I believe so. I pray it is so.