

Understanding [1]

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“The Levites, members of the tribe of Levi, helped the people to understand the law, teachings, interpreted the law, the teachings, and gave it meaning while the people remained in their places.” — Nehemiah 8:17.

While I was in my last year at Bangor Seminary a world famous New Testament scholar, the Rev. Dr. David Trobisch, arrived to take over the reigns of the New Testament Department. Trobisch came there, to Bangor, from Heidelberg University in Germany.

Was it strange that a scholar with an international reputation might choose to come to a small Seminary in a rural State? No. Why? The shoes Dr. Trobisch filled were those of the late Rev. Dr. Burton Throckmorton, a scholar with an international reputation. Throckmorton was the professor with whom I studied the New Testament.

I was never in a classroom with David since I was in my final days at the Seminary but we spoke, shared meals— that happens at a small Seminary— and just doing that I heard fascinating stories. This is one.

In Germany everyone pays a tax to the government to support the churches. Hence, seminaries are state sanctioned. Mind you, I think there is more separation of church and state in Germany than here but that’s a topic for a 3 hour classroom lecture, not a sermon.

But therefore in the German context, anyone who wants to be a pastor with a state supported church, even those who have a background we might label as a fundamentalist background, have to go to these seminaries. David would start a New Testament Survey Course at Heidelberg by asking students to examine ancient Greek manuscripts. There are thousands.

Each manuscript of exactly the same passage has dozens of words which are different from one comparable manuscript to another comparable manuscript. It was at that point, said David, when the students who thought Scripture should be taken literally and could be taken literally, when they saw a multitude of variations in ancient texts, it was at that he could see the scales fall from their eyes.

In short, it is impossible to read Scripture literally once you examine the ancient manuscripts. Rather, in order to understand what is there, the text needs to be interpreted. Meaning is not obvious. Meaning needs to be gleaned. (Slight pause.)

These words are in the work known as Nehemiah: “The Levites, members of the tribe of Levi, helped the people to understand the law, teachings, interpreted the law, the teachings, and gave it meaning while the people remained in their places.” (Slight pause.)

One of the great precepts of the Protestant revolution is everyone should be able to read Scripture in the vernacular. People died, were burned at the stake, for simply trying to translate the text.

One question we fail to ask about the era in which this idea was promulgated is ‘who could read?’ That was a small percentage of the population— those who could read.

If you could read, the odds are you could read the Greek in Scripture. Even the Hebrew Scriptures were available in Greek— the Septuagint. And people who were literate usually could read Greek. When Calvin came to the pulpit in Geneve the Scriptures were read in Greek with the understanding that everyone would

know what was being said.

One of things we need to be considered when we, today, read Scripture under the precept that everyone should be able to read Scripture in the vernacular is simple. Unless you have gained some expertise about the underlying documents and about the eras in which the texts were composed it is highly advisable when you read Scripture to have a reputable commentary open next to the Bible from which you are reading.

Why? In order to understand what's there, the text needs to be interpreted. Meaning is not obvious. Meaning needs to be gleaned.

And, as we just heard, the Hebrews in the time of Ezra, the Fifth Century Before the Common Era, were no different. There is something else to be considered. Simply reading Scripture is insufficient. After all, how can understanding be had without doing the hard work called study? How can anyone understand without trying to understand? Trying to understand means studying it. (Slight pause.)

This is yet another piece. How do we interpret Scripture? Theologian Bruce Epperly says many have forgotten about the reality of Scripture. Many portray God as a distant, coercive power, a God whose Word and will separate humankind from lifeless nature.

Many turn away from the biblical vision of the goodness of creation. Many turn away from our vocation as God's agents of Shalom, God's agents of justice, God's agents of love. (Slight pause.)

Our call as God's beloved children is to repair the breaches, mend the world. Our call is to use our intelligence to bring healing and beauty to the earth.

God invites us to experience God's wise creativity and love. God invites us to live in harmony with the world rather than see the world as a place we can afflict with cruel domination. (Slight pause.)

In a few minutes we shall consider the budget for the coming months. Like Scripture, people take budgets literally all the time. That is an interesting, wrong-minded mistake.

First, a budget is simply a plan. Second, the goal of a church budget is not to formulate a plan or be a plan. For the people of God a church budget is and needs to be seen as an invitation from God. A church budget is an invitation to live in harmony with the world rather than submit the world to domination.

It is an invitation to repair breaches, to mend the world. It is an invitation to use our intelligence to bring healing and beauty into our world. It is an invitation to experience God's wise creativity and love in all things.

It is an invitation to renew our vocation as agents of God's Shalom, God's agents of justice, God's agents of love. A budget... is just numbers.

It is up to us to faithfully translate those numbers into actions— actions of peace, justice, equity, freedom, joy, hope, love. Tall order that— let us pray that we are up to the task. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "I have two aphorisms to share this morning. Modern

theologian Walter Brueggemann said ‘The Gospel is a dangerous idea. Our task is to see how much danger we, ourselves, wish to perform in our own lives. St. Francis of Assisi lived 8 centuries ago and said ‘When you leave the earth you can take nothing you have received only what you have given.’” [2]

BENEDICTION: Through God’s grace, by being attentive to God’s will, our deeds and our words will change our world for we will discover ways to proclaim release from the bondage of narrowness. Let us seek the God of Joy. Let us go in peace to love and serve God. Amen.

[1] It should be noted these comments are more brief than usual since (as is obvious based on the context) the Annual Budget Meeting of the Church was held in the course of the service of worship.

[2] Note: both these quotes are somewhat paraphrased.