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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Cutting Both Ways”

Scripture Text: Hebrews 4:12-16

Dear people of God, a woman parishioner was ill at home and her pastor came to visit her. She was lying in bed and poured out her woes to the pastor who listened patiently. Finally he said, “Betty, I think you will find some help from the Word of God which I wish to read to you.” And so, Betty called to her little daughter, “Emily, please bring to mommy that book she loves so much.” Promptly the little girl brought to her the *TV Guide*.

We laugh at that and think that the little girl is obviously mistaken bringing the *TV Guide* to her mother. But is the Word of God found only in the Bible? Certainly the Bible is the first thing we think of whenever we hear or read the phrase, “the Word of God.” But how closely do you pay attention when we celebrate Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month and read from the Preamble to the *Constitution of the United Church of Christ* where it says that the UCC “looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures . . . to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world.” Notice it does not equate the Word of God and the scriptures. It says “the Word of God in the Scriptures.” Does this mean that the Word of God can be found in places other than the Bible? I think so. And so did the Protestant Reformers. The Belgic Confession, a solidly Reformed Confession of Faith of the 16th century, states that God is made known to us by two means: “First, by the creation, preservation, and government of

the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book Second, [God is made] more clearly and fully known to us by [God's] holy and divine Word . . . the written Word of God" (Articles II and III). Even the Protestant Reformers believed that the Word of God was to be found in more places than just the Bible.

I raise this issue because I think that we need to understand that the Word of God is more than can be contained in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. Our Bible Study group is currently reading the Books of 1 and 2 Maccabees. They're not found in our Protestant Bibles. Do they contain the Word of God? I think they do. Though we Protestants have always insisted on reliance on the Bible for our faith and practice, we must be careful not to make an idol out of the Bible. We do that when we insist on a literal interpretation of the scriptures. We do that when we insist that what God intended for an ancient people who lived 3000 years ago is still binding on us today. We do that when we deny that "God is still speaking," the theme of the UCC.

The Bible is certainly very important to us, especially in our worship services. We put that heavy Bible on the lectern each Sunday to symbolize the primacy of the Bible in our worship. And we always read passages of the Bible each Sunday, one of which is always the focus of my sermon. And I'm sure that you notice that before I read the passage of scripture upon which my sermon is based, I always give the historical context for it. I do that so that we may interpret the passage properly. You see, we must not only take the time to read the Bible; we must take the time to understand it.

For many of us, not only is reading the Bible becoming less and less frequent, but so is understanding it. When Protestantism began, the fascinating new invention of the printing press made the Bible available to more people. It was one of the great accomplishments of the Protestant Reformation that it put the Bible into the hands of the common people in their own language. This was a wonderful change that took place. But many more changes took place during the next few centuries that actually served to remove the meaning of the Bible from the daily lives of people.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought changes in science, technology, and industrialization that has continued since unabated, so that now we live in a world of computers and cell phones, MRI machines and rocketships. Our way of life has little resemblance to that of the people who lived in biblical times. They lived in a time of herding sheep with a crook, catching fish with giant nets, and writing on rough parchments with bamboo stems. It was truly a world far different from ours. When biblical characters used tools, described diseases, and engaged in travel, they were describing phenomena vastly different from our world. When the Bible makes allusions to idolatrous religions, or explains the work of high priests, or gives us instructions on how to build altars, sacrifice animals, or conduct primitive warfare, its language seems archaic.

This creates a wide distance between us and the people who lived in biblical times, making interpretation a problem. I think almost everyone here owns their own Bible, but I venture to say that most Bibles accumulate dust on bookshelves. And when we do open it, we are often mystified and stumped.

So we encounter a passage in the Bible like today's Sermon Lesson: "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword . . ." (Hebrews 4:12). How many of us own a two-edged sword? How many of us have ever seen a two-edged sword? The two-edged or double-edged sword was used by the ancient Romans and helped them to become one of the most feared military powers in the world. What made the sword superior to others was that it could cut both ways. The soldier would be able to swing it in either direction to slash an opponent.

But there's a danger in using such a sword. Think of when you're at home or in a restaurant using a steak knife. A steak knife has only one side that's sharp, either a straight edge or a serrated edge. When you cut a piece of meat with it, you not only wrap some fingers around the handle, but you also position your index finger on the dull side of the blade to put direct pressure so that the meat cuts easily. If your steak knife was sharpened on both sides, you wouldn't be able to put your index finger on the top of it. The knife would slice your finger.

There's a definite danger to a double-edged blade, whether on a sword or a knife. If you're swinging a two-edged sword in battle, you can swing it to the left or to the right to attack your opponent. A single-edged sword can't be used that way. It can be swung in only one direction. And so, a double-edged sword is more dangerous than a single-edged one. The double-edged sword is not only dangerous to my enemies, it's also a danger to myself. Because if I'm poorly trained, I might wind up not only injuring my enemy, but also injuring myself on the backswing. When my sword rebounds from the head or shoulder of my enemy, it may cut my own head or shoulder, and I would end up killing myself.

And so, we should immediately be aware that when the writer of this letter, Priscilla, in my opinion and in the view of many other scholars, talks about the Word of God being a double-edged sword, she's saying that the Word of God is very dangerous. If you pick up the Bible to clobber someone over the head with it, I'm speaking figuratively of course, not literally . . . beware! The Bible is a two-edged sword. Your use of the Bible to hurt someone else may rebound back to hurt you. If you use the Bible as a weapon to condemn all those who do not live according to its literal commands, beware! It may spring back to cut you. If you use the Bible to condemn people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, beware! It may recoil to slash you. If you use the Bible to condemn the sinful splinter in your brother's eye, it may return by condemning the sinful log in your own eye. If you pick up the Bible as a weapon, remember that it has two edges, and you can be hurt from it.

A lot of Christians have difficulty with understanding how some things in the Bible are no longer the Word of God today. Well, think about marriage. Do you know what the biblical view of marriage is in most of the books that address it? It's bigamy, that is, one husband having more than one wife, or one husband having a wife or several wives and several mistresses or girlfriends as well. This view of marriage as bigamy is not only mentioned most often in the Bible, it's actually approved by God in the Bible! Do we want to bring bigamy back today because it's the view of marriage most often found in the Bible? Bigamy is not God's Word for marriage today.

What about slavery? Slavery is rarely condemned in the Bible. Whenever it's mentioned, it's taken for granted as part of the way society is organized. Now the

apostle Paul does appeal to Philemon to accept his returning runaway slave Onesimus back as a beloved brother and as more than a slave. Nevertheless Paul told Onesimus after he has successfully escaped from Philemon, his master, to go back to him. The Bible's accepted view of slavery was the major inspiration for the Southern states to secede from the Union and to fight the Civil War to preserve it. Do we want to bring slavery back today as an acceptable institution? Slavery is not God's Word for today.

What about homosexuality? The Bible condemns the practice wherever it is mentioned. I think we need to be honest about that. Those pastors and theologians who try to make it sound as if the Bible really doesn't exactly clearly condemn homosexuality are being just a little bit disingenuous. There is no good word about homosexuality in the Bible. Does that mean that the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality is God's Word for today? No, because God is still speaking. And God speaks in places other than the Bible. We know today from conclusive studies that homosexuality is not a choice. Those who have a gay or lesbian orientation did not consciously choose to be that way. They are naturally, physically, truthfully attracted to those of the same sex. It's no wonder that still many in our society have a difficult time accepting this fact. The most educated persons in our society, namely, psychiatrists, still considered homosexuality a mental disorder as recently as 1973. Psychiatrists study longer than any other profession in our society because they must earn two doctorate degrees. They must graduate from medical school and become physicians because they must be able to prescribe drugs. And they must earn a doctorate degree in psychology in order to acquire expertise in how the mind works.

And so, it's no wonder that many in our society think that homosexuality is abnormal when the most educated professionals just 36 years ago thought the same thing.

The Word of God is such that no single book can contain it for all time. As the writer of the Gospel of John states at the very end of his document, "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). In one sense, he exaggerates, but in another sense, he doesn't. For if we substitute "Word of God" for all the things that Jesus did, then truly all the books in the world could not embody it, for Jesus Christ himself was the embodied Word of God.

Therefore, let's be careful with the Word of God. Let's use it to cut out ignorance, but not cut off dialogue. Let's use it to cut off fear and worry, but not novelty and diversity. Let's use it to cut out the cancers and boils of the spiritual life, but not the growth and challenges of the spiritual life. The Word of God is a double-edged sword. Let's use it carefully.

By the way, did anyone look up what a gaffer does on a movie set? Tell me during Fellowship Hour. Amen.