

Message: "When Scriptures Are Weaponized"

Scripture Lesson: John 10:1-10

10"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Today I need to prepare you for a great shock. I am going to lift up three words that are the most harmful, despicable, detested words in the English language. They are so very bad, so very awful that there was a time in my life when I thought about petitioning Webster's dictionary to have them eradicated from the English language. They are terms that redefine ugliness and hostility, that through their use have the power to destabilize the human soul, crushing it into nothingness and despair.....are you ready to hear those three words? Actually, it's one word and a two-word phrase.....here they are:

"Grasshopper" and "MacIntosh's Twin."

Is everybody doing OK? Are you as horrified by these words as I am? Or, to be very clear, as I used to be, for you might guess what these words represent - these were nicknames given to me in Junior High school, meant to taunt me and insult me. There were about four older boys in my junior high school who for some reason made it their job to try to get under my skin, and their main weapon was those words - I was called "MacIntosh's Twin" because I looked like one of them named Dan MacIntosh; and I was called "Grasshopper" because, well, I never really knew. I thought it might be because one of the most popular shows at the time was Kung Fu, where the David Carradine character was called "Grasshopper" by his martial arts teachers; but I had absolutely no martial arts skills, nor any grace about my body at all - I was the definition of gangly and awkward. Maybe they called me "grasshopper" because I looked a bit like a grasshopper - I had very long legs and wore large, round glasses, and I was very good at the high jumpin any event, these four boys would shout these words at me and laugh to my

discredit; as my face grew red and I began to shake with embarrassment, they only laughed louder, realizing their weapons had found their mark.

I would be willing to bet that every one of us in this space have had a similar experience, perhaps as children, maybe when older, where words were used as a weapon against us. Insults are one form of weaponizing words; there are many other forms that are much worse.

Take, for instance, today's scripture lesson. Jesus says "I am the gate for the sheep." The sheep are called "his own sheep by name," and he says that he will "bring out all his own;" Jesus further states that "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved."

And there you have it - the portion of the scripture that is among the most weaponized passages in the entire bible.

But what does this mean, to weaponize scripture? What does it mean to take a verse or passage of the bible and turn it into a weapon? Can words on a page, can a voice speaking auditory constructs, can the message they contain, be shaped or designed to cause harm to others?

Absolutely, they can - and they have been used this way for most of human history.

I've seen this many times in my ministry, where words or understandings from scripture are weaponized against another. One such occasion stands firmly in my mind, a time when I was a part of an interfaith gathering of mainline pastors in Barre, Vermont. This was in the year 2002, one year after the September 11th terrorist attacks upon our nation. Islamophobia was running rampant, with the hatred for all things Muslim threatening the lives of many in our area. Our local minister's association decided to try to do something to help counter the misperceptions running wild; we decided to invite two Imam's representing the Muslim communities of Vermont to a seminar, to talk with us about what they were going through and how we could be supportive. We wanted to let them know we were there for them in this very difficult time.

Our planning team worked overtime on security and safety; the event planners reassured the imams that they would be among friends. On the day the event got underway, it started well; the two Imams were graceful, honest, and vulnerable with us. All was good-natured and on track - until, towards the end of the talk, one pastor took it upon himself to make a point with a weaponized question. He said, "Do you believe that the only way to be saved is by professing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of one's life?" The two men were taken somewhat

aback, but after a moment replied "No, we don't believe that." Then, that pastor did something that made my stomach turn - he smiled; not a nice smile, but a smug smile, as if to say, "GOTCHA!" I felt judgment in the air, and I'm pretty sure the Imams felt it too, for they seemed to wither a bit, not because they were concerned about their salvation, but because they felt demeaned.

Words can so easily be turned into weapons that demean, demoralize, exclude, judge, and otherwise attack another. We've all experienced this, I would be willing to bet, and we've probably each been on both sides of that weaponization. Such experiences demonstrate powerfully that words can hurt.

But so can their absence. There is another form of word weaponization that seems to be gaining popularity in our world these days, where certain words or speech or histories or texts are being forbidden. This is one of the more insidious types of weaponization, where what needs to be said is not allowed to be said. It is the silencing of certain voices. We don't have to look very far for an example, do we? Witness the silencing of state representative Zooey Zephyr this past week; she had much to say against the anti-trans bills that were being considered; professionals in the medical field throughout the state have warned these bills will result in serious harm to our younger population who are discerning their gender identity. Zooey was silenced and even barred from the remaining session due to her breach of decorum protocols. Making it impossible for someone to speak words on serious issues is also a form of weaponization.

What's happening on our state government level is what is happening all around our country and our world where the words we speak or forbid are chosen and shaped in ways that harm others. It is a very human inclination to shape society in ways that benefit our own perceptions and opinions; we sometimes seek like-minded people to strengthen our effect and employ or forbid language and messages and histories that do not serve our cause. We tend to want to make sure we control who gets in and who stays out of the favored status we seek. And we sometimes even use scripture to our personal advantage.

And then, again, we come back to this passage from scripture where Jesus says "I am the gate; whoever enters by me shall be saved."

It may seem obvious what Jesus is saying here; many Christian denominations take the stand that salvation requires a verbal profession of faith; to enter the gate of Jesus means to profess out loud that Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; they get this understanding from the apostle Paul, who outlines this requirement in Romans chapter 10, where he says "If you declare with your mouth,

'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." It would seem from this passage that verbal profession is essential for salvation.

But what about those who cannot speak? Or even have profound challenges understanding faith concepts at all?

If verbal profession, or even rational agreement, with a creedal position is required to be saved, then I fear for the many people I know personally who stand automatically condemned for their inability to perform such professional oration or conceptualization.

For five years, I volunteered with a recreation program in my hometown of Boulder, Colorado that worked with what we termed at the time developmentally disabled children and young adults; the program was called Expand, and it ran swimming lessons, hikes, horse rides, game days, and whatever we could think of to get the participants recreating. In those years, I worked with many children and young adults who were non-verbal; they couldn't speak a word, and many of them could not understand words spoken to them. The program paired a volunteer or staff member with one of the participants, a one-to-one platform to help with activities. I was usually paired with a young man named Steve; in my five years of working with Steve, I never heard him speak a single word, and I had no sense that he ever understood anything I ever said to him. If verbal profession was essential for Steve to experience God's grace, for Steve to be saved, then he was without any hope at all. But I knew better; the God I knew in my life was absolutely one who embraced Steve with the fullness of his grace; words were not only impossible for Steve; they were unnecessary regarding God's favor. If anything, Steve was most favored by God.

It was precisely because of that experience that I began to understand profession of faith as more a human protocol than one of divine origin - and it opened my understanding of grace to be much more in line with what Jesus actually represented. God's grace is something that obeys God's expansive principle of universal love alone; it will obey nothing of human design. There can be no rigid formula, no particular creed or doctrine, that controls God; it is rather God who establishes all, and asks that we pay attention.

When words are used to hurt, they are misused. When scriptures are used to condemn, they are misused as well. Scripture is meant for one thing, and one thing alone - that in Jesus, we all may have life, and have it abundantly.