



Los Altos
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

"A Church that Reaches Out"
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God Shows No Partiality

Acts 10:34-43

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In the second chapter of the Qur'an, the sacred book of the Muslim faith, there are a number of passages referring to word "infidel", which means "unbeliever" or "pagan":

"The curse of God is upon the infidel." (2:83)

"God is an enemy to infidels." (2:92)

"God loves no infidel." (2:276)

"This portion of the Qur'an was written in about 606 AD, when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were under attack in the city of Medinah". (Imam Yahya Hendi, Georgetown University, Washington DC, "beliefnet") According to Karen Armstrong, author of the book Muhammad, the prophet "and the first

Ironically those who suggest that Paul's wrath should be taken literally towards gay and lesbian people rarely apply the same invective "...those who practice such things deserve to die..." to "gossips" and "rebellious children" otherwise we would have very few people in our churches!

Sadly we ignore Paul's profound words in the very next verse, "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourselves, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." (Romans 2:1)

When we use sacred, ancient words to justify our contemporary human fears, anger and prejudices we do violence to one another. Such hermeneutic has nothing to do with God, "biblical authority" or shallow definitions of righteousness.

Listen to what Peter has to say in our

Muslims were fighting for their lives..." most of the time in defensive battles against great odds.

Muhammad finished the Qur'an having received the revelation from God through the angel Gabriel in the year 610 AD. Following an assignation attempt on his life in 622, Muhammad began the Hijrah or "migration" leaving the city of Mecca, waging a civil war between his followers and the various tribes in the region. By 628 he consolidated his military victories, entered Mecca in triumph and unified all of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula under the religion of Islam.

Numerous Islamic scholars suggest that the Qur'an's references to infidels and war referred to the historical context of Muhammad's struggle in the 7th century AD. In chapter 9:124 of the Qur'an it reads, "Believers! Wage war against such of the infidels as are your neighbors and let them find you rigorous". It would make sense to suggest that Muhammad was referring to enemies of Islam he was opposing during the Hijrah 622-628.

Leaders of terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, Hezbollah and Hamas have interpreted those passages as having

scripture lesson this morning.

The 10th chapter of the book of Acts describes the encounter between the apostle Peter and Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Peter is a Jewish follower of Jesus as the Messiah. Cornelius is a devout and generous gentile, sincerely interested in Judaism but considered a pagan or "infidel" by orthodox Jewish standards. By Jewish law in the Old Testament Peter should have nothing to do with one such as Cornelius; shouldn't enter his home, shouldn't share a meal, shouldn't even shake his hand, less Peter be defiled. Yet angels and the spirit speak to both men with new and astonishing truth. In spite of centuries of religious instruction regarding the Jewish dietary laws in the Old Testament, Peter is told that he may eat and touch anything, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."(:15) Encountering Cornelius for the first time, Peter says, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."(:28) Peter enters Cornelius' home, something forbidden for a Jew, and preaches a sermon about Jesus in which he says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does

literal application for today. By taking these passages out of their historical context and insisting that they are absolute truth for the 21st century, the terrorists justify their violence. It is a shameful use of religion for twisted and sick goals. It abuses the true message of a man who even in the midst of social struggle was really seeking peace.

Seems ridiculous doesn't it, taking ancient words and insisting that they mean the exact same thing almost 1,400 years later as if God only spoke in the past and has nothing to say today? What kind of hermeneutic is that, anyway?

The same hermeneutic we Christians have been practicing for years!

Before and during our Civil war in the 1800's, Christian theologians and preachers insisted that slavery was an institution ordained by God since it is mentioned so many times in the Bible as normative.

During the struggle for equal rights for women in the 20th century, Christian theologians and preachers insisted that women not vote, be ordained priests or hold positions of authority because the Bible says women must be

what is right is acceptable to him." (:34-35)

The Holy Spirit moves the faithful to radically re-interpret their own scriptures. The Holy Spirit moves two men who were strangers and ritually estranged to become brothers. The Holy Spirit reveals that Jesus is Lord of all and through him all people receive forgiveness and new life.

God's love is not offered on the basis of what the Bible said in the past, on the basis of one's religion, nationality, gender or class. Anyone who "fears" God...anyone who is in awe of and open to the dynamic, reality of the Living God in our lives...and anyone who does what is right, is acceptable to God. God shows no partiality.

Now are these ancient and sacred words culturally relevant for our times? Or is this "bleeding heart liberal" preacher manipulating them for his own theological and political agenda? It is a fair question if I am going to apply it to others. In the end the answers resides in you. We all have to ask ourselves, "what is God speaking to us today?" We don't just take the words of any preacher as the final authority of the Bible. It belongs to all of us, not just the so-called

submissive.

White supremacists today still interpret the “curse of Ham” from the 9th chapter of Genesis to justify their hatred of non-white races.

Our denomination is deeply divided over the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of our churches. The conflict arises out of how we use the Bible.

Those that suggest homosexuality is a sin will quote Leviticus 20:13 in the Old Testament which reads, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death”. Many interpreters will assert that the first half of the verse, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” is culturally relevant for our day, warning us of contemporary moral decay, even if the verse was written 3,000 years ago. At the same time they’ll insist that the second half of the verse, “they shall be put to death” is the quaint relic of an ancient past that is obviously not relevant for today.

Tragically, some have found interpretative consistency in their

experts. And its meaning is found in our relationship with God.

The spirit and truth of the Bible isn’t found merely in the ink of its pages. The Word of God is a dynamic and living spirit discovered in its reading, unleashed in community, heard in the heart as well as the head (note; John 5:39-40). It moved the faithful to oppose and end slavery centuries ago in spite of the Bible’s words. It moved the faithful to insist that woman be allowed to vote in this country a century ago and still struggles for their full inclusion in equality in spite of the Bible’s words. It moved a nation to confront its own racism and end legal segregation fifty years ago.

One of its greatest prophets, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before our nation and dreamed that one day we would judge his children “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”.

Would that we would apply the same ethnic to our own denomination.

I pray that one-day gay and lesbian people would be judged by their character not their sexual orientation. I pray that the United Methodist denomination will some day soon end

hatred. Brothers James and Benjamin Williams will shortly go on trial in Sacramento for the murder of a gay couple outside of Redding in 1999. They were caught with the couple's credit cards in their possession after they had set fire to three Jewish synagogues in Sacramento that summer. The Williams brothers are members of the Christian Identity movement and quoted Leviticus in a media interview as justification for their violence. (Washington Post, 7/21/99)

If the Old Testament becomes too problematic for those looking to justify discrimination against gays and lesbians, they will turn to the New Testament, often quoting the first chapter of Romans, in which Paul describes what happens to those who practice idolatry. Along with references to same gender intimacy Paul writes; "They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice...envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parentsthose who practice such things deserve to die...." (Romans 1:18-32).

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its hypocritical policies of denying ordination to gays and lesbian and restricting their access to churches for the purposes of celebrating their commitments with each other. I pray that we would all listen to the living spirit of God when we read the Bible rather than use it to justify our fears and bias.

God shows no partiality. Haven't we seen enough of what the world will do when it uses religion as the pretext for violence?

Amen.

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