

The bible's plain and not-so-plain teaching

By Bill Lewellis

[526 words]

The bible contains a lot of plain teaching. So little of it has to do with matters frequently debated and debased.

The bible's plain teaching comes with strong verbs and short sentences: gospel imperatives.

Repent, be, do, give, forgive, feed, clothe, go, sow, pray, judge not, fear not.

Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Heal the sick. Welcome the stranger. Visit the imprisoned. Proclaim good news. Sell what you have and give the money to the poor.

Love God with all your heart. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. Be reconciled. Take up your cross. Find your life by losing it. Love one another as I have loved you.

The Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer* pulls much of the bible's plain teaching into promises made during baptism: "Continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers... Persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord... Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ... Seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself... Strive for justice and peace among all people... Respect the dignity of every human being."

Not even the plain teaching, however, comes always with one-size-fits-all marching orders. And, then, there's the not-so-plain teaching: stories, images and themes that mess with our heads. The Good Samaritan, the Forgiving Father, Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, an innocent man on a cross, resurrection.

They invite us into the mystery of God's mercy and compassion, challenging us to imagine what is beyond ordinary imagination.

The most difficult aspect of God's relationship with us is not the strong verbs. It is that God loves us unconditionally. So hard to imagine. We hesitate to trust anyone, even God, in that regard.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more ... and nothing we can do to make God love us less.

So many of us Christians, however, are really closeted heretics on this matter. We think there must be something.

The lingering grip of evil has not to do with doubts about doctrine nor with our refusal to make gospel imperatives part of our lives. Evil's last hope suggests we have done or can do something to earn (or lose) God's love – *and so should others*.

It may be that we'd rather that God not love us unconditionally. That's the greatest challenge to belief in God. For if God does love us unconditionally, that is what the command to love one another as God has loved us may mean.

Our lives are based on a true story that cannot be captured in orthodoxies, human certainties, laws, sermons or newspaper columns. When we discover the story of God who loves us beyond worth and measure, beyond whatever we can imagine, we will discover an ability to recreate our world beyond last Tuesday's conclusions.

A conclusion, Mark Twain is said to have said, is the place where someone got tired of thinking.

Keep thinking. It's so religious. That's why we have so many parables, images and themes in the bible. I think.

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