

JEREMIAH 31:27-34 or GENESIS 32:22-31

PSALM 119:97-104 or PSALM 121

II TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5

LUKE 18:1-8

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 16, 2022; Year C

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

### ***The Pot Calling the Kettle!***

“The Bible has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies,” so said Mark Twain in the early 1900s in *Letters from Earth*. This is also the same man who once opined, “I believe that our Heavenly Father invented man because he was disappointed in the monkey!” The question is, could the reverse have been true? And I love his numerous quotes about cigar smoking! I resemble most, if not all of them! Ira Gershwin, brother and not wife to George, once observed in 1935, “It ain’t necessarily so—The things that you’re liable to read in the Bible—It ain’t necessarily so” from *It Ain’t Necessarily So*. And who could forget William Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, “The Devil can cite scripture for his own purpose!” And I am assuming that any one of us can be the devil on occasion when we cite and quote, proof-texting from the Bible to prove a point, to win an argument! Jack Miles, in *God, a Biography*, once noted, surely after further review of the biblical narrative, “God is no saint, strange to say!” And finally, from contemporary progressive writer Karen Armstrong in her book *A History of God*, one of the reasons why religion seems so irrelevant today is that many of us no longer have the sense that we are surrounded by the unseen!” All these quotes are captured in Kenneth C. Davis’ book, *Don’t Know Much About the Bible: Everything You Need*

*to Know About the Good Book but Never Learned.* And I would have included in that subtitle, did not even know needed to be asked!

**Certitude!** Perhaps the most dangerous tendency that gets attached to any of our religious aspirations or persuasions is when we become so satisfied with our beliefs, so fat and happy with our faith, so content, that we end our supposed lifelong search, we cease our quest for eternal truths, yes, all our sacrosanct beliefs and faith suddenly frozen in time. Any time we allow our spiritual expressions to become concretized, or let our personal religious dogma become set in stone, all our conjecture in then rendered nothing more than inflexible opinion. We may not realize it, but we are in deep trouble! The problem arises when we embrace our viewpoints at the expense of disrespecting the views of others, all of which are valid in their own way. When we disregard other opinions as inferior or irrelevant, it has nowhere good to go, a short, dead-end street. When in order to feel secure, to be right, our narrow views demand, surely forcing our neighbors to be wrong. When we adopt and adapt our faith to suit our needs, and ours alone, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment and isolation. Yes, many of us long to believe in something other than ourselves, all the experiences that bless this earthly life. Yes, we think, there must be something more to this life and living. But at the point when and where we suddenly and arrogantly think that we have got it made, that we have arrived spiritually, that there is nothing more to learn or discover, yes, that we have, indeed, got it right, no doubt according to our closed minds, then we have turned our religiosity, a faux spirituality at best, into nothing more or less than an idol, an idolatrous perspective beyond question, beyond reproach, no matter the opinions of others! **Religion is always a matter of opinion! Period!**

**I raise these considerations today because we are confronted with a most interesting text from Paul's letter to his young protégé Timothy, a narrative in which the apostle appears to do all the very**

inappropriate things I just mentioned! In the apostle's sage advice, these warnings, that while seemingly innocent or benign on the surface, are full of dangerous pitfalls, perhaps the deadliest spiritual traps, at the least no-fly zones, creating the very isolationist thinking of which I have just warned us to beware at all costs. Paul reminds young Timothy that his novitiate has learned well the scriptures, the apostle even declaring, and "you know who taught you," knowing full well that person to be the apostle Paul himself, a learned Jew who prior to his Christian conversion had attained the rank of Pharisee in his previous, yes, his former, life as a zealous, not-so-spiritual, leader within Judaism. Of course, we know that when Paul spoke about the scriptures, he was talking about the Hebrew Bible, a book he knew well, perhaps even memorized, because he had been well-schooled in the faith of his forebears. The apostle would have never dreamed that his epistles, these popular letters, passed around from church to church, would one day become Bible, canonized as scripture. And of course, the Gospels had not even been written at this point. And so, Paul makes the mistake that millions of Jesus' followers, Christians all, have made down through the centuries, claiming that the Hebrew Bible foretold the coming of the Christ, of Jesus, the one who came to be considered, understood to be the incarnate son of God. It is an assumption that we routinely, typically, and blindly make because it makes perfect sense, when like the early Church, we look back on the life of Jesus, his mission and ministry, his preaching and teaching, reading Christianity into each line. It is so convenient, so easy! And yet, it is so wrong, blatantly insulting to our Jewish brothers and sisters, yes, forebears in the faith all! For those keeping score, this egregious error is called "supersessionism." **Paul declares to Timothy, "Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good!"** Had Paul stopped right there, quit while he was way ahead, had left well enough alone, all would have been well, for indeed, these

**affirmations reveal a solid perspective, exactly what any scriptural perspectives are intended to be and to do. Yes, whenever we read the Bible, Hebrew and Christian scriptures alike, we learn something, we are moved, we become more enlightened about ourselves, our world, and make discoveries about the divine mystery that is life and is our God. Or at least we hope so! We cannot help but be changed, if only in the slightest way. Even so, we learn as we go to take this sacred writ seriously but not literally, knowing that literalism forces us into an isolationist corner, espousing sectarian theologies that disparage or diminish the inclinations of others, making us less welcoming and inclusive, contrary to the hospitable nature of the one we claim to swear our allegiance and fealty, as we seek to follow in the profound footsteps of the lovingly gracious man from Nazareth, Jesus the human one of history.**

**Paul admonishes his promising mentee to “preach the word,” yes something I consider a very noble enterprise! Don’t mind if I do! He tells this preacher-prophet evangelist in the making, “Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, confront, and encourage with patience and instruction!” Good advice to those who sense a call to dare engage the homiletical journey, hoping to have congregational companions who will join them in these holy conversations! I resemble that remark! If Paul had left well enough alone at this point, all would have been well or so it would seem, all would have been interpreted as positively productive counsel, the wise apostle offering his most sage advice to wide eyes and open ears, who surely were ready and willing learners, soaking up every verbal morsel from a frontline witness who was already becoming a larger than life figure in the early Church, a legend in his and a whole host of others’ minds. Don’t include Peter in Paul’s growing fan club! See Galatians for their not-so-entertaining theological spat! But then the apostle’s invitations become warnings, words that are indeed especially troubling to our twenty-first century, postmodern, and to**

many of us, progressive minds, striking not just a chord, but a nerve, juxtaposed against those who harbor more liberal leanings. Paul paranoically pontificates, “There will come a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching! They will collect teachers who say what they want to hear because they are self-centered. They will turn their back on the truth and turn to myths!” Folks, the Bible is a book of mythological material! Myth is all we’ve got! In other words, Paul was insecure, a touch paranoid, obviously fearful of new ideas, all of which were and are a threat, alternative facts, his version of “fake news,” each opinion and each opinionator demanding respect. As Elaine Pagels observes in *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, “. . . Although the apostle Paul, about twenty years after Jesus’ death, stated ‘the gospel,’ which, he says, ‘I too received’ (‘that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day’), it may have been more than a hundred years later that some Christians, perhaps in Rome, attempted to consolidate their group against the demands of a fellow Christian named Marcion, whom they regarded as a false teacher, by introducing formal statements of belief into worship. But only in the *fourth* century, after the Roman Emperor Constantine himself converted to the new faith—or at least decriminalized it—did Christian bishops, at the emperor’s command, convene in the city of Nicea, on the Turkish coast, to agree upon a common statement of beliefs—the so-called Nicene Creed, which defines the faith for many Christians to this day.” “Yet I know from my own encounters with people in that church, both upstairs and down, believers, agnostics, and seekers—as well as people who don’t belong to any church—that what matters in religious experience involves much more than what we believe (or what we do not believe). What is Christianity, and what is religion, I wondered, and why do so many of us still find it compelling, whether or not we belong to a church, and despite difficulties we may have with particular beliefs

or practices? What is it about Christian tradition that we love—and what is it that we *cannot* love?”<sup>1</sup>

Paul’s random comments, his creative commentary, simply leave us nowhere to go, nowhere good at any rate, making us question our neighbors, distrusting of those whose pathways are different even if when the same or similar! As Yogi Berra is purported to have said, “If you come to a fork in the road, take it!” It really is profound advice, and many have followed these uniquely worn pathways! Yes, as Henry David Thoreau brilliantly opined in 1854 in *On Walden Pond*, many listen to the sound of a different drum, those who hear another voice and march to a different beat. There are those who hear a completely dissonant, discordant, syncopated rhythm. Sometimes the best rhyme and reason is the one that refuses to follow convention and has a sound, a flavor, all its own. Everyone is not programmed the same, like robots, to sway to the movement of a steady, a constant and consistent, metronome! **Paul, a novice in his own emerging Christian faith, his own theology evolving, writing letters and preaching during this embryonic phase of the young and fledgling Church, was already trying in essence, perhaps defacto, to create a new edition of cookie cutter religion, a one size fits all approach to a spiritual expression, a faith, that was still growing, emerging and evolving, however, never maturing, all of it occurring in real time as he gave what became his very narrowly defined, myopically limited, yes, finite, witness, oft times seemingly misinformed by his inflexibly articulated, better said, more like, opinionated, musings, yes, opinions all, as valid and appropriate as they were, as anyone else’s are. Yes, Paul was attempting to put his stamp of approval, his inerrant and infallible imprimatur, on the early Church and the churches he personally and with much care established, condemning and attacking all comers who brought any counter narratives, any opposing views, all**

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<sup>1</sup>Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 5-6.

**happening amidst a cacophony of competing narratives and varied viewpoints. Obviously, Paul was not comfortable with complexities or polarities, even as he created and proffered what many consider his extreme ecclesiological and theological ideas and ideals. After all, Paul recommends some very backwards opinions regarding women, and the Bible advocates for, unapologetically supporting slavery. The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it! NOT! I'm just saying! Evidently, inconsistencies did not seem to bother Paul as a primary concern, not mattering in the least. Even so, the apostle's thoughts and actions were understandable even if reprehensible! As I am prone to ask, who died and made Paul God? Frankly, it is the proverbial pot calling the kettle black! Frankly, Jesus did not even want that title despite it being thrust upon him after his death! Frankly, he wanted none of the accolades of praise, any of that flattering, flowery, language that was forced onto his person. But that is another story and another sermon for another day!**

**The cold, hard truth of the matter, the facts of the case, is that Paul made up things, he created his own theology, imagining as he went. Yes, the apostle made up stuff! He treated each local church in his care in the same way that hospital emergency rooms treat triage patients, each one getting a dose of whatever would address their specific issue, assuaging their acute problem. That is why Paul's letters have a certain discrepancy, a certain inconsistency about them. They are not cohesive nor consistent units, except when and where they are! In case specific instances Paul set a poor standard, a very bad precedent, with many of his inanelly arcane and archaic views, setting litmus tests for Christian orthodoxy that would one day be the driving impetus, fueling the fires that would burn reprobate apostates at the stake, those accused of heresy! Frankly, there is no such thing as a heretic! There are just those of us who think differently, creatively, or outside the box, who color outside the lines, who do not fit the norm, who question and who challenge convention and the**

**authority figures who obediently and abusively enforce it all. After all, who do you trust because it is always a matter of trust? Just because it is in the Bible. . . !** Paul's narrow way led the early Church to practice an early version of "Don't ask; don't tell" by those who feared the consequences of its ecclesial wrath. Paul's frequent hypocrisy, his coercive and manipulative agenda, created a divide and conquer mentality, levels of superiority that were always patriarchal, dominated by a male hierarchy. Many ongoing biblical biases and blatant prejudices against women are rooted in Pauline theology, for example, his ramblings in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. And despite his protests to the contrary, Paul's views were based in his traditional Judaic faith. This "my way or the highway" approach led to schisms, splits at every level, even prior to the age of denominationalism, puppet trials performed to convict those summarily accused of going against the prevailing grain, eventually including the infamous Inquisition and the Crusades, wars waged against anyone thought to present a contrary view or who refused to convert to Christianity.

One of the heirlooms, a pathetically sad legacy, of such rigidity and inflexibility, is the ongoing fights, battle royales, within denominations and their systems. I lived through the Southern Baptist Holy War that began in 1979 and was waged throughout my seminary years in the 1980s, a conflagration that damaged many a good individual, seminary professors especially subjected to fundamentalist hysteria and insanity, fired for exercising their freedom of conscience in teaching and writing. The mantra turned from "publish or perish" to "publish and perish!" Look now at the United Methodist Church as it separates, living its own version of schism, a nasty split, because of conflicting views on human sexuality with nonheterosexuality being the issue da jour, obsessions espoused by the Global Methodist Church. Even in the United Church of Christ we have the annoying irritant called the Biblical Witness Fellowship, a small, splinter group of sectarian fundamentalist protesters, the proverbial fly in the ointment within our largely liberal



denominational fold. They once vehemently expressed their dismay and disapproval, that the church I once pastored, Virginia-Highland in Atlanta, be accepted into this unapologetic Open and Affirmingly progressive denominational body. We were proud to affiliate!

**Every time we open the Good Book we have no choice, no alternative, other than to make value judgments about ancient narratives that reflect the views of prescientific, first century and long before, peoples. Their world was not our world! As we all know full well, if we are honest and sincere in our critique, objective in our approach, the Bible is a book of books filled with love and hate, inclusion and exclusion, welcoming and inviting as well as prejudicial and blatantly biased mythologically slanted viewpoints. The biblical narrative has discrepancies, inconsistencies, and outright false information in terms of science and history. Plain and simple, the Bible is propaganda, a linguistic attempt to persuade, to sway opinions toward whatever position was being debated by those with influence in real time, in that frozen-in-time moment when a given text was written. Yes, the apostle Paul, a great evangelistic missionary, no doubt a profound contributor to the theology of the early and the later Church, and everything ecclesial in between, had a typical first century, one-dimensional, black and white, worldview. Based on anyone's opinion, Paul rightfully gets credit or blame! It depends on who you ask! It is always a matter of perspective! The apostle also had a closed faith to match, both in his formative Jewish and Pharisaical years and especially after his subsequent conversion to Christianity. Paul's conversionary experience on the Damascus Road, whatever it was, would come to define, to reflect, in every conceivable and imaginable way his hardline, either/or approach to belief and faith, to life and living. Causes me to wonder: might it have been sunstroke or an epileptic seizure? My excuse today is hydrocodone! You can't blame me for anything I say this morning!**

**Paul, man of mystery and intrigue, and much enigma, not so much, except when he was! The Bible, however, is always very much a book of mystery and intrigue, and indeed, definitely much enigma! Our job is to unlock its many secrets! The only thing of which I am certain, besides death and taxes, is that there is no certainty in scripture. Paul was not intuitive enough to know that literalism kills! Yet, even so, he was quick to describe the mystery of theology in terms of a dark glass, a dark lens through which we strain to see, what the King James Version of the Bible calls “a glass darkly!” Very intuitive indeed It stifles creativity of thought! It kills the spirit and destroys the soul, and throughout history, has shown that it adversely affects the body as well! Paul has left us a wonderful legacy, a richly rewarding understanding of the challenges that confronted a new and emerging and evolving faith perspective. But the former Pharisee also left us in a lurch, with a whole lot of baggage that we continue to carry as a weighty load, things that only now we believe we have the permission to analyze, to critique and are thus unpacking as we go, learning the bigger picture of the Christ event, what it means to be a follower of the man of history, yes, Jesus of Nazareth, the one in whose footsteps we long to travel as we order our lives. So, take nothing at face value! Question everything as you develop your belief and faith, as you interpret the Bible for yourself, as you evolve spiritually as one committed to the cause of the cosmic Christ and the earthly Jesus, a fabulous combination that has given us more than we could ever ask or imagine as we seek to experience the mysterious presence of an awe inspiring and inspiriting transcendent God of marvel and wonder!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and has given us ancient words with contemporary meaning, hoping we will take the challenge and learn from them in real time, in our day and our context! Amen and amen.**

