



January 18, 2017

INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURES

When Jesus taught his disciples about the Hebrew scriptures, he said that he had come to fulfill the law. And yet, he was often accused of breaking God's law, as when he healed on the Sabbath, or allowed his disciples to harvest grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry. Both healing and picking grain were considered work, and the Sabbath is for rest, according to the interpretation of Sabbath law at the time. Jesus gave a different interpretation: that the Sabbath was made for people, and not people for the Sabbath. He emphasized different parts of the scripture in order to fit his time and place.

In his book *Way of Blessing, Way of Life*, theologian Clark M Williamson describes the Jewish tradition of halakha, which is "a process of interpreting and reinterpreting the law. Over time, old laws become irrelevant or fail to respond adequately to the voice of the vulnerable other in a new and different context. So each generation reinterprets its obligations. Halakha explicitly recognizes that God who gives the law also transcends it, and that no law is ever final. It is not fundamentalist with regard to the law."

This is an important reminder to us of our heritage from the Jewish tradition and from the example of Christ. God's law is made for human righteousness, and especially to protect the vulnerable. When God's law becomes a barrier to wholeness, or when it is used as a club to hammer any group of people, then it is time for a faithful reinterpretation.

Some Christians claim that we shouldn't bring our own interpretations to scripture, but simply follow the plain meaning of the text, to which I say "Good luck with that!" Every reading is an interpretation, and the plain meaning of the words depends on the reader. This is why we gather as a community to hear and interpret the wisdom of our tradition carefully, boldly, and faithfully.

Peace,

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