

“Jot and Tittle”

Several years ago I was attending a diocesan training event. During a break between discussions I heard someone say, “What good is the Old Testament. We don’t need it, because we have Jesus and the New Testament.” I was speechless, until I heard a priest, of all people, say, “Yes we should throw out the Old Testament it is nothing but wrath, and grief and murder.” At that point I went beyond speechlessness to outrage. I looked at these two and said, “What scripture do you think Jesus read? What scriptures did Jesus teach? What scriptures does the Gospel of Matthew point to when he cites the prophets predicting the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ? Without the Old Testament we don’t get Jesus or the New Testament or salvation. Without the Old Testament the New Testament is dumbstruck.”

I was on a roll and had the facilitator not intervened we might be there still as I cite chapter and verse to show the paramount importance of the Old Testament and how it makes the New Testament possible. But perhaps the most powerful comeback to such foolishness about the unimportance of the Old Testament are Jesus’ words. He says in the Gospel lesson today, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

Like many of you I grew up reading the King James Version of scripture and I am still enamored with their translation of verse 18, which reads “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” Jot and tittle are so evocative and charming. A jot is the dot over an i or j. A tittle is the line that is used to cross a t. Jots and tittles are the most insignificant of marks used to make letters. Jesus makes it clear that nothing will pass out of the Old Testament (that is what he is referring to when he says the law and the prophets) until all that he is teaching is accomplished. It is a powerful statement that should stop any Old Testament denier in his or her tracks.

If that doesn’t, the sentence which follows should give those OT deniers great pause. For Jesus continues by stating, “whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” Yikes, we better be careful what we say about the Hebrew Scriptures and what we teach about them. Our Jewish brothers and sisters may have something over us Christians with their devotion to the sacred scriptures of what we call the Old Testament. For Jesus goes on to say about the Old Testament scriptures, “whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus makes it clear that the most important parts of the Old Testament, that is the Torah or Law which are the first five books of the Bible, and the Prophets which are not only the prophetic books but also what Christians think of as histories i.e. Joshua, Judges, 1 and

2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are the foundational scriptures of Jesus's faith and of our faith. The Old Testament really matters and Jesus says so.

What's more Jesus goes on to issue a challenge to everyone in his hearing. He says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now, in Jesus' time the scribes and Pharisees were considered the most holy of men. They studied the scriptures, debated them with other learned men trying to parse out the exact meaning and how it applied to everyday living. These were men who did not labor in the fields or seas or at a trade for their livelihood, but rather they labored at understanding scripture and scriptural traditions and teaching it to the people. Pharisees, in particular, were known for their focus on the 613 commandments recorded in Hebrew scripture, and their interpretation of those laws in order to govern the lives of the people. These were righteous and holy men who were revered by the populace.

But Jesus just told the person on the street—the laborer, midwife, homemaker, craftsman, farmer, fisherman, shepherd—that they had to be holier than the holiest people that they knew in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. They had to wonder how that could be possible. But if we go back to the first lines of today's reading we hear Jesus not focused on righteousness but on saltiness.

Does anyone remember the common phrase for one who is a very good and honest person? We call those people the salt of the earth. He called the people who were in his audience the salt of the earth. He told them upfront that they were the good and honest people of the world. The scribes and the Pharisees for all of their study, argumentation, and parsing of the law were no more holy or righteous than these common folk. It was the diligence of the common folk in living lives of labor and trust in the Lord that made them worthy and righteous in the eyes of God. Indeed, because the scribes and Pharisees often look down on common folk for their illiteracy and lack of learning it was they who are condemned for their dismissal of others who are also creatures of God and made in the image of God.

As we heard in the passage from Isaiah, God wants to be close to those who delight in the Lord and fast in righteousness. God is not compelled by those who fast only to quarrel and fight and strike with a wicked fist and oppress the workers. Our fast should be:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke
... to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;

As the psalmist writes: "their heart is right; they put their trust in the Lord. Their heart is established and will not shrink." These are powerful words that come from the Old Testament, the same set of books at which so many

scoff. These are the promises that Jesus wants us to remember and live into in our daily journey through this world.

The Bible is a library of books with a wondrous message of God's love for humanity and God's desire for a full and rich relationship with us. Open your heart to God's word in all its manifestations. Do not discount one jot or tittle of scripture because it is old or new, because it is easy or uncomfortable. All scripture is worth our attention. But most assuredly of all, it is living like the salt of the earth—honestly, humbly, and in the awe and love of God—that is what Jesus calls us to and God loves to see.