

“THE BIBLE DOESN’T SAY THAT: III – ‘GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT,
THAT SETTLES IT!’”

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John 1:1-5, 14-18

A few weeks ago, when I took the week after Easter off, I spent some time going through stuff at the parsonage. Periodically I’ll do that, mostly because I have too much stuff, but also because I’m thinking that if I do that every once in a while, whenever I eventually decide to retire, it will be easier to pack up and move with less stuff. One of the things I did that week was go through things in and on my dresser – which led me to look at everything in my jewelry box. Many of you know that my house was robbed a few years ago, so almost all of my original jewelry was gone – but what wasn’t stolen was two charm bracelets that I’ve had for years – and I mean years – since I was middle school age.

They’re silver and they’re tarnished – I haven’t worn them in forever – but it was wonderful to look at all of the charms and remember. You’ll read about some of this in this month’s newsletter – but what I saw there were things like a band hat charm and a clarinet charm, a mustard seed charm and a cross charm, a little tiny drivers license charm on which was engraved the date I got my drivers’ license – November 15, 1971, a charm for my high school graduation, engraved with the date June 10, 1973 – and then, there was a charm for my confirmation.

I looked at that and turned it over and saw the date – and wait ‘til you hear when it was! April 28, 1968, which means it was fifty years ago yesterday! Right there, down there at that chancel rail with all my other 12 year old friends – like Donna Mercer and Robin McCool and Rose White and Neil Thomas. Donna (whose last name now is Horgan) and I talked about it the other day, and we remember that day like it was yesterday. It was really special, and we remember how emotional Rev. Thomas was that day, particularly as he confirmed his own son. That was a really important day in our lives, and especially in our lives of faith!

That lines up with another important day in my life that I’ve told you about before – the day I received my Bible from this church – August 28, 1964. I’ve shown you that Bible numerous times – it’s leather cover worn out almost completely – held on now by tape. Getting that Bible and using it has guided my journey, and

even though I have numerous other Bibles now, that particular one is very dear to me.

I hope whatever Bible you have, that it's dear to you as well. And I hope you open it and read it regularly, because it is the living and breathing Word of God, with a word for your life every single day.

You know, this year's Disciple class just finished up our study on Wednesday, and I was reminded once again, as I journeyed with that group, how amazing the Bible is – how words that were written so long ago are still so relevant to our lives today. No matter what we were reading, whether it was words from Genesis or Leviticus or Matthew or Revelation, we always had rousing discussions and barely a week went by, where one or more of us discovered something new we hadn't seen before.

I say all this as a prelude to the saying we're about to look at together this morning, because it is something that is said about the Bible. It goes like this: "God said it! I believe it! That settles it!" It is said when someone wants to show absolutely certainty about something in the Bible, and not infrequently, it is said in a way meant to cut off further conversation. "God said it! I believe it! That settles it! Done."

All of us know that persons of faith cover a wide theological spectrum when it comes to their views on scripture. Some believe in the inerrancy of scripture, that everything is absolutely, positively 100% true; while others believe the scriptures should be interpreted through the lens of things like the context of the day and time in which it was written. And these differences in how scripture should be seen and used have caused, and sadly, continue to cause big problems in the family of God.

But let me get back to the statement: "God said it! I believe it! That settles it!" Most often, they are said by people who believe in the inerrancy of scripture, and what they mean when they say it is, that these words are from God, they're meant to be for God's people forever, we're not meant to mess with them, or interpret them, they are what they are, and we need to obey them.

At face value, we can understand that. The Word of God is the Word of God, but does that mean, we're not meant to wrestle with them, and try to discern what God is saying to us today?

If the answer to that is no, then we're in a lot of trouble, because all of us are ignoring a whole bunch of things that are written in scripture. Preacher Gary Haller explains in this way: "We don't follow everything in the Bible; we don't come anywhere close. We don't even make much of a pretense in doing so. Raise your hand (he says) if you eat pork or lobster or shrimp. Deuteronomy firmly and repeatedly tells us they are an 'abomination' to the Lord our God. We don't worship on Saturday, as specified in the early scriptures. We don't own slaves, even though this is clearly accepted and time and time again approved in the scriptures. We don't have an absolute prohibition against divorce even though we find that (in the scriptures). We don't put rebellious children to death, although that's commanded in Exodus and Deuteronomy." (On-line, Rev. Gary Haller, "Half-Truths," Birmingham First UMC, 3/26/17)

Well, he goes on and on, but you get his point. There are a whole lot of things in the Bible that we no longer do, which takes the wind out of the sails of the "God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It!" remark.

Does that mean the scriptures mean nothing for us today? Absolutely not. What it means, I believe, is that as faithful Christians we are called to wrestle with scripture, to study it, to try to discern what its message is for us today, and most of all, to look at all of scripture through the lens of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That, for me, is the only way to look at all of scripture. Over and over again, we see Jesus saying things like "You have heard that it was said, but I say . . ." which meant, "in the past, it was said like this, but now, with me, there's a new way of seeing it." Or as Jesus said elsewhere, "I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them." Nowhere did Jesus say the words of the Old Testament were bad, he simply brought new life, love and grace to them.

For example, do you remember when the woman caught in adultery was brought before him by people who wanted her to be stoned? They not only wanted to punish her, but they wanted to test Jesus, to see if he would abide by the scriptures which said that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned. But do you remember what Jesus did? He turned to the crowd, and said, "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone," and then he invited her to go and sin no more. For Jesus, grace abounds, not legality, but grace.

Another place he turned Old Testament scriptures and thinking on their head was when it came to the Sabbath. You might recall that he was attacked by

the religious authorities because he healed someone on the Sabbath. Of course, doing anything on the Sabbath was strictly forbidden. Yet, through the eyes of grace and love, Jesus healed someone, telling his critics that the Sabbath was made for human beings, for the good of human beings, not human beings being made for the Sabbath.

I could go on and on with examples of how Jesus interpreted the holy scriptures in new ways, but my point is this. There are so many verses of scripture, particularly in the Old Testament which we don't follow literally anymore, so to make a blanket statement that "God said it! I believe it! That settles it!" doesn't hold water.

Adam Hamilton, in his book *Half Truths*, says the trouble with this statement is that it oversimplifies scripture, and I would add that by saying it, one is saying, "I'm just taking it for what it says, I'm not going to think more about it, or wrestle with it for this day and age. It is what it is. God said it! I believe it! That settles it!"

You know, last week I mentioned Billy Graham in my sermon, and this week, I learned something else new about him. He was very much a man earlier in his life that espoused the feeling 'God said it! I believe it! That settles it!' But in an article written when he was later in his life, published in 2006 in Newsweek magazine, author Jon Meacham interviewed Graham's daughter Anne Graham Lotz, and one of the things she talked about was how her brother Franklin Graham was much more conservative in his views on certain issues than was their father Billy. She said, "When Daddy was my brother's age, he was saying some pretty strong things, too, so you have to remember that experience and the living of a life can soften your perspective."

Reflecting on that, Billy Graham himself said to Meacham, "There are many things I don't understand. I do not believe that Christians need to take every verse of the Bible literally. Sincere Christians can disagree about scripture and theology. I'm not a literalist in the sense that every jot and tittle is from the Lord. This is a little difference in my thinking over the years." (Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, p. 31-32)

It's clear that Billy Graham and his son Franklin were in different places, believing differently about scripture and theology. Which leads me to one other point I want to make – and that is – how we speak with those who believe

differently than do we. As I said earlier, the statement “God said it! I believe it! That settles it!” is very often used as a way to stop a conversation when two parties disagree. It shuts down discussion.

Now, lest you think I’m picking on Biblical literalists and conservatives, let me say this – all of us come to scriptures with our own biases. We read what we want to read, and often see things in the light of which we want to see them. Again, words of Adam Hamilton – “It’s important to recognize (he writes) that when we study scripture, our own biases can lead us to hear what we want to hear. Conservatives see Jesus as conservative, tend to find scripture passages that line up with their own viewpoints and gloss over passages that do not. Progressives do the same. Like the slave owners and preachers in the mid-19th century, we focus on certain passages and ignore others in seeking support for our views.” (Hamilton, *Half Truths*, p. 131).

I had to smile a little when I read his words because it brought to my mind my friendship with my friend Rev. Jim Jones, who died last year. Jim was pretty conservative in his theology and he always called me a flaming liberal. We had many an argument about Jesus – because he thought Jesus was conservative and I thought Jesus was liberal – and we would go round and round about it – each of us being able to pull out of the hat scriptures that supported our viewpoints.

But here’s the thing, and what I want us to think about this morning – Jim and I would talk about it. We didn’t try to shut each other down, or pull the “God said it! I believe it! That settles it!” Too often, in the world today, we don’t listen to each other, we shut each other down, because our opinions are so divergent, and we don’t want to give an inch from our position.

It’s bad enough when that happens because of politics, friends, but oh, when it happens because of religion, I think it breaks God’s heart. So I’d like to make a few suggestions this morning on how we Christians should act with one another, no matter where we stand on the theological spectrum.

And the first is this: respect the other person enough to talk to them, and more importantly, listen to them. Have conversations where you listen to each other first without responding or being defensive. Listen to what the other person has to say, and then let that person listen to you. It’s what Jesus did. Think of the time those persons confronted him about healing on the Sabbath. He didn’t just cut them off and dismiss them, he explained his thinking to them. And when they brought the woman caught in adultery to him, he didn’t cut them off and dismiss

them, rather he helped them to take a really hard look at what sin was all about – not just that woman’s sin, but their own.

As disciples of Christ, we owe that much to each other. To listen to each other and not cut each other off. You never know what you can learn when you take down your defenses and actually listen. You may end up agreeing to disagree, but at least you won’t end up as enemies, shutting each other out.

Another thing I want to suggest, is that, even with those with whom we’re on opposite sides about scripture and theology, we find the things we have in common or beliefs we hold in common. When we have our heels dug in about scripture or theology, sometimes it’s hard to believe we have anything in common. We just label them “conservative” or “liberal” or some other label, and write them off.

I read this week about a person who was leading a workshop for a group of lawyers in Philadelphia. He said they were a group of very strong, opinionated, and pretty uptight guys, who were all business, and expected to have a workshop that was all business. Instead this workshop leader decided to try something different with them. Rather than just getting down to business, he invited the men to stand up, find someone in the room they didn’t know, and in the next two minutes, try to identify as many connections between each other as possible. And he added, “the stranger, the wilder, the weirder, the better.” In other words, try not to make them about business or law. Frankly, he wasn’t sure how this little exercise would go.

Lo and behold, it went fabulously well! Pretty soon, the room was buzzing with energy. Here’s what he said about what happened: “All of a sudden they were invigorated. ‘You like sailing?’ one person said. ‘I like sailing!’ It was as if each of them had found a long-lost friend. One pair discovered they grew up two blocks from each other. Real bonds were forming. There’s an emotional consequence (he concluded) in finding connections and embracing them, and they are often hidden. But imagine if I’d asked them to tell their partner whom they ‘d voted for and why.” (Oprah Magazine, May 2018, “Who Knew?” Daniel Shapiro, PhD, p. 127)

Well, there you go. That’s what I mean. When facing someone we know is on the opposite side of an issue or of a different theological bent from you, find what you have in common, and let that then lead you into calmer waters as you discuss tougher things.

Finally, and most importantly, when it comes to things of faith, and what we believe, and how we treat people who believe differently, may we remember the one thing we know we have in common – and that is Jesus Christ. We may see scripture differently, but we believe in Jesus.

Frankly, I know that was what enabled Jim Jones and I to be best friends. We both loved Jesus and committed our lives to him, so the things we believed and how we believed them mattered, but didn't cause us to walk away from each other, or dislike each other.

You know, dear friends, we have the power to do great harm to others when we say some of the things I've talked about these last three weeks – “God won't give you more than you can handle,” “Love the sinner, hate the sin” and “God said it! I believe it! That settles it!” But we also have the power to be loving disciples of Christ when we instead think about the power of the words we say, the way we say them, and the way we treat those to whom we are saying them.

May we, in all ways, seek to be people who speak and live in such a way that those with whom we come in contact will be reminded that they are beloved children of God and worthy of dignity and respect. For that is what Jesus did and what he calls us to do. May it be so.

Amen.