

The Helpers and the Helpless

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

OK so. I would like to ask for somebody to name a Broadway play out loud. Hamilton? Good. OK, how many people have been very lucky enough to see Hamilton? Nobody in the room. How many going to see it this year?

[multiple hands raise among the audience]

OK, I thought so. How many of you know all the songs already by heart, right? I know that one that goes "I'm Jessica!" I don't know what that is, but, we listened to Hamilton the original cast recording on the way to Maine this summer and we got about halfway through it. It's a joke because it's a five hundred mile trip in the sense of very long and we didn't finish it....that didn't work so, OK. Well let's move on. Let me ask you this: Those of you who have heard the original cast recording and you know exactly how everything plays out... Is it true? Yes or no, is it true. That's an interesting question right? I see somebody going "ehhh". Right. It is true that it is a musical, yes we've covered that much. How do you evaluate that question about Hamilton? You could start with: is it historically accurate. Is it historically accurate? Yes Alexander Hamilton existed....and was a grandparent of Puerto Rican descent?

[audience answers "no"]

Did the founding the Founding Fathers break into incredible hip hop routines?

[audience answers "no"]

OK. OK, Did did the Aaron Burr shoot Alexander Hamilton?

[audience answers "yes"]

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Spoiler! Come on, I haven't seen it yet! Let me ask you a related question, which won't seem related at all. Would it make any difference for you, if you knew that the Book of Job was a play?

The the intro to The Book of Job, the prologue is one of today's lectionary readings. That's why the Book of Job is on my mind. If you've been reading the lectionary along with us, you already know this because we're now back on schedule, thankfully. And I won't go into that too much except to tell those of you who don't know what the Book of Job is - that it's a difficult book to read. The summary is that in this initial section of the beginning of it Satan challenges God about how faithful God's servant Job is, and basically says "You know he's only faithful to you because everything is going well for him. If you let me have a crack at him he won't be faithful anymore." and God says "Have at it!" And then Job's life gets completely wrecked. So that's a difficult book to read already, and then the prologue that sets the whole thing up is even more difficult because I'm not sure I'm really, like, that much a fan of the God who says: "Sure, go ahead, wreck the life of this great servant of mine!" Now this is not something that we can know or will ever know with perfect certainty, but many scholars have made a fairly compelling case that the Book of Job is not only the oldest book of the Bible, which could tell us some things, but also might just be - probably is - a dramatic work. And so let me ask that question again. Does it make your interpretation of the Book of Job - your ability to kind of accept its message - any easier to read if you think of it as a play? Given the fact that we tend to evaluate the historicity differently in a play than, say, well, a history book. The...what are they called? The artistic changes that went on Lin Manuel Miranda made to the story of Alexander Hamilton, we're OK with them even though they're not true. In that sense the story itself is true, kind of, with a capital T. Does that make sense? And so ,maybe the Book of Job is easier to read if you think of it as a play. At the very least it's probably a little more interesting to read if you think of it that way.

But the bigger point is this: if you find a passage of the Bible, or a whole book of the Bible particularly difficult, it might be worth your time to dig a little bit deeper and ask: Is there something else going on here that I don't see yet? And if you do a little bit more work sometimes what happens is you think: oh, I think of that differently now. There's a little bit that makes some of the more sense. It doesn't disturb me quite as much. Now that's not to say that this deeper type of study will always get you that result. Because what happens sometimes is you get this deeper understanding of a biblical text and it's actually harder to accept. Because I believe that sometimes we have to accept the correction that comes through the study of God's

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words - through the Scriptures - to us, and that's not easy to do all the time. So, there is something more there on occasion, and we want to keep that in mind.

Today we are concluding a five week series called Beloved Community, the idea that we are called to experience, and to participate in, and to extend to others, God's Shalom, God's peace, God's original design for the flourishing of the whole world. In short, that we are to be doing what our series subtitle suggests, which is loving our neighbors as ourselves. And we're five weeks in and I haven't been totally consistent with this but when I do this with my hands,

[Pastor Scott extends his open hands, palm up, toward the audience]

we all say: "Loving our neighbors as ourselves". If you remember nothing else you can remember my goofy face up here saying "Loving our neighbors as ourselves". The beloved community phrase was popularized in the 60's by Dr. King but it is not just a slogan of a social movement. It's consistent, I believe, with the overarching narrative of God's work in the whole world as revealed in Holy Scripture, and that's worked out and lived out by God's people throughout the ages, albeit with some missteps, some false starts, some mistakes. Now Beloved Community, that's our theme for the whole year, so this whole academic year you're going to be hearing that phrase "Beloved Community" come out. And we're going to be talking a lot about loving our neighbors as ourselves. We're going to talking about nonviolence. We're going to be talking about belonging. We're going to be talking about the scourge of poverty and the evils of systemic racism, and we're going to talking about working for equality. And all of that, we hope, will be expressed and lived out throughout the, you know, in the whole life of the church, together all of our ministry, as a congregation will be infused with this idea. Beloved Community. Even when the sermons stop being about it every week, and the graphic has changed and we're talking about other things.

What's really been fun for me is that even though we're using the lectionary which assigns the Bible readings for each week and has been settled for years and years, the themes have still been kind of bubbled to the top throughout this series. And beloved community, all of the stuff that I just said about the love of community, we're finding it in the scriptural texts that the lectionary has given us over the past several weeks. But here's a challenge: what happens when you hear somebody preaching from the Bible a message that does not seem to advance God's peace in the world? Has that ever happened? Surely you've never heard that in a sermon, surely not from me, that you didn't seem to think was very consistent with the idea of a community of loving our neighbors as ourselves. You know we have a very incredibly disturbing example of this in the history of our nation. If you go back in the history books and read the sermons that were preached by southern preachers as as our country was trying to advance the

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cause of abolition of slavery. Southern preachers in particular, the northern ones were not much better to be perfectly honest with you, but the southern preachers in particular were adamant that any movement of abolition of slavery was in contradiction to the clear teachings of Scripture. Have you ever heard that phrase used before? In contradiction to the clear teachings of scripture. And anybody who wanted to abolish slavery, these pastors would say, and did say, is disobeying the Holy Word of God. This was not an uncommon thing. This was everybody. So it does happen.

What happens when when it's maybe not a sermon, maybe just reading the bible? Reading it yourself, and you're suddenly taken aback at what it says. You're wondering whether the Bible itself actually teaches about equality and justice. As it turns out, one of our other lectionary readings for today might be for some of you, one of those texts where you read it and go: "huh?" And maybe that's because we've kind of infused it with some baggage. Maybe it's because there's a hard word for us to hear in scripture and we don't want to hear it. That's the kind of decision you have to make when you're studying the Bible. What I want to do is look at this text with you for a few minutes this morning from Genesis chapter two. It's the second account of creation, and if you want to find a new red Bible that's easy to find: it's page two. And I'm going to read Genesis two eighteen through twenty four which is what the lectionary gives us for the Hebrew Bible reading today.

18 Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." **19** So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. **20** The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man[c] there was not found a helper as his partner. **21** So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. **22** And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. **23** Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones

and flesh of my flesh;

this one shall be called Woman,[d]

for out of Man[e] this one was taken."

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

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So. The Lord God said it is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him my helper. And then. After some fits and starts it turns out that the helper is woman. You could read this verse and take it to mean that women literally only exist to serve men. And in fact many people have taken this verse to mean that and have applied this verse in that way. And on the face of it... the “Just read the plain words preacher! Just read what it says and do it” level you read Genesis two eighteen: “It is not good that the man should be alone, I'll make him a helper” and then the helper ends up being woman. That's maybe a fairly straightforward and simple interpretation of that text isn't it? And if this is one of those places in Scripture where there is a clear standard being set, then God's people ought to be willing to meet that standard, whether they want to or not. That's part of being obedient to the scriptures and to God's revealed will. But, what if it's one of those other situations where a challenging text has a deeper meaning? One that makes it - might even make it a source of joy rather than a source of pain. A source of liberation rather than a source of control. Well in fact, I want to suggest that that's exactly what this verse of the Bible is. And to explain why, I want to give you a little insider secret for Bible study.

This is something that anybody could do, And something that I do all the time. And it's something that helps me come to a deeper understanding of the vocabulary of the Bible. Because the vocabulary of the Bible is important, and in this case we need to know what that word helper means. It's (the Bible) not originally in English - we know that right - the Bible didn't pop out of the sky in 1776, having been carried in by a bald eagle.

[audience laughs]

The Bible has been with us much longer. And this part of the Bible was written in Hebrew, but I don't know, do you read or speak Hebrew? I went to seminary and I don't either. I'm going to give you a tool that will allow you to go a little bit deeper with Hebrew, this word, by the way, is “ezer” and so what I've wanted to do is I made a little - the new version iOS has a screen capture tool I wanted to try - and so I made a little screen capture video of what I do to study this word. And so here's what we're going to do I'm going to show it to you. It takes about a minute, I'm going to try to narrate it, although I realize that I went too fast to narrate it very well. So we'll do what we can. Go ahead Avila and show us this video.

Link to video showing use of blueletterbible.org

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io9h8m0i01s>

First thing we're going to do is go away from our home page and go to www.blueletterbible.org and then we'll type in the passage here. Genesis two eighteen, and I would prefer to read it in the N.I.V. it's a little bit easier, so I'm going to click NIV and then search and it's going to pop up

here, and you see it right at the top there. "The Lord God said it's not good" over there on the left is "tools," click that, and then it breaks out that whole verse into its words and the Hebrew counterpoints. Now that number right there is a not important to know what that means, but if you click it you'll get the the page for that Hebrew word, and you get every usage of that word. And so here's some of the usage of that word. The first one is the one that we just had, and the second one is like it, and then we get "My father's God was my helper", ezer, and then "Oh be his help against his foes" speaking to God there. "There's no one like the god of Jershurun who rides across the heavens to help you." "He is your shield and helper," "May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion." "We wait in the Lord and hope for the Lord he is our help," "You are my help and my deliverer Lord". These words, every single one of them where the Hebrew word that's used is the same as the helper that God made for the man. Does that change the way you read it at all? If the woman is to be the helper of the man - based on the extended usage - and I can tell you can go all through and find over and over again this type of usage of that Hebrew word in reference to God and God's relationship to the Israelites - it sure seems to me like the helper that God made for the man with a lot more like a god than like Merry Maids. That's right, a powerful helpful. I see an ezer right back there. So, maybe that makes you all happy about this verse. It makes me happy about this verse. But perhaps this kind of thing can leave you, a little bit like, actually even feeling a little bit *more* despair because you're like: well if I have to do that kind of work with every word in the Bible it's going to be a long time and take a long time to understand the whole Bible. Well first of all: yes, it is going to take you a long time to understand the whole Bible. You know my grandmother who died a couple of years ago at ninety two was still, up until the end when she couldn't do any more, was still reading the Bible every day of her life. Put me - her pastor grandson - to shame in her efforts to study and understand the Bible. And she still didn't have it all figured out. She had some stuff she was wrong about! I know because I'm smart and I went to seminary right? But you see what I mean? Yes it's going to be work. And so, if you're not ready to sign up for that that's OK, I certainly don't want you to think that you can only study the Bible if you're willing to do this kind of graduate level study of it, OK? I believe God meets us where we are in the Scriptures. OK, and you can read it in English and never go to blueletterbible.org, never even remember that I mentioned it, and you're going to be OK. God is going to speak to you through the Scriptures. So don't despair about that part of it. But it does sort of raise the question: how are we to know? How are we to know. If all kinds of people who went to seminary in the in the nineteenth century still ended up thinking that the Bible taught that the enslavement of African people was the was the will of God, then what hope do we ever have of getting it right?

I have two part answer the first part is: none. And we maybe should be OK with that. Because we are going to get it wrong sometimes. And there's such a fear about getting it wrong, that it

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leaves us unwilling to even try sometimes. But the second one is an even better answer, and the answer is Jesus. You know that the answer is always Jesus, right? Here let me give you one more lectionary text from today. This is Hebrews Chapter One. This is from the New Testament. This is one of the letters of the early church. You want to read this, I quote this all the time, but it just so happens that the lectionary gave it to us today. So I'm going to quote it again. Hebrews Chapter one. Imagine trying to read the old books of the Bible and understand God's will with all the confusion and everything, every question you might have, and you read this:

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, [a]whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. **3** He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.*

The answer is Jesus. Anything you read in any book, including this one, that doesn't seem consistent with the way of Jesus...you're allowed to question it. In the case of the sacred scripture, Jesus is the ultimate word of God, the great logic of God, "logos" the Greek language would say. Jesus supersedes any other revelation that came before him. And so, if you see anything in the church in the history, in the application of the Bible that seems inconsistent with the way of Jesus, you are allowed to question it. You're actually supposed to question it. Jesus is the final answer. And as far as it goes with some of things we've talked about today - marginalized people being marginalized even further by application of the sacred scriptures - Jesus sides with the marginalized people. Jesus ignored and rejected the conventions of the day that a man could not meet alone with a woman, and that foreigners were subhuman and he sat and talked with the Samaritan woman at that well, and he communicated God's love to her directly with no intermediary, with no Jewish or Roman citizen around. With no man to teach it except himself, the Word of God. Jesus does not stand up in front of a crowd of people and mock the woman who's been scorned by the lawyers, heaping more shame on her. Jesus disbanded the leering mob (to quote Jen Hatmaker) to *their* shame, never to hers. Jesus held men accountable when they came to him wanting to divorce their wives without cause, probably honestly in a patriarchal society, actually to try to get them off the books. Right? To stop having to pay for their food. Saying that Moses may have allowed that because of the hardness of your hearts but that God's original design was that a marriage should be a place where both parties cling to each other, and build a new family together. By the way, Jesus used today's reading from Genesis two in response to that question. Jesus refused to accept the prevailing notion that lepers should be avoided and definitely never touched and he drew them in close and he touched them and healed them. Jesus went right up to that tax man hanging out in the top of the tree, ashamed of his deep sin of stealing from his brethren on behalf of the evil empire of Rome. And he said: "Zacchaeus come down out of that tree, I'm going to your

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house for dinner today!” and that act of love and embrace of the sinner led that sinner to repent and repay what he had stolen four times over. And when it came to meeting a person with a disability Jesus dismissed that question which unfortunately is still asked so often today: “Exactly what kind of sin was committed that led to this poor man being born blind?” and he told people that this was not the result of anybody's sin but that God was going to be glorified in that man today anyway.

So do you see now, why beloved community is the phrase that we use to envision the world functioning as God intended it to function? Can you imagine with me a world where we are truly welcoming and embracing of all people? Where everyone is welcomed, everyone is embraced with the same love that God poured out in His Son Jesus Christ. A world where those who are dehumanised and mocked and mistrusted and hated are instead accepted and loved into new being, joined together in community with others where they can truly flourish. Can you see how spending a little bit of effort with one simple word in the scriptures can completely invert our prevailing notions and implicit biases and cause us to come to honor those who society tells us not only *could* be, but probably *should* be dominated and subjugated?

Will you come now to the table of the Lord? That place where Jesus offers his body and his blood to his friends and his enemies alike. To that table where all are welcome no matter what the world says about you. To that great feast of God, that banquet of grace, where we taste forgiveness and drink of mercy, and will you then go from this place with that truth in your belly. Will you go to build the beloved community that he's invited you into, so that others might be invited into it as well? Let's do it together. And pray with me. Lord, you are the defender of the weak in your submission to death. You conquered it in your forgiveness of all - even those who caused your death. You model for us the true way of God. Help us to keep you, Jesus, front and center, first and foremost in all things so that even when we fail we have an anchor to return to. That draws us into the truth of God who is love. We lift you up and pray these things in your name. Amen. As the band comes up and leads us in a couple of other songs our table is open for all who are seeking to follow Jesus in this place. We will have a member of the prayer team who'd be happy to pray with you this morning if you'd like. Continue to worship God however the spirit might be leading you respond in truth.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com