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First Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 5:21-33

“Banned Books Part 4: To Kill a Mockingbird”

Three weeks ago I began a sermon series on banned books. I’m doing this series because books have the power to change hearts and minds. And books about difficult topics, which many banned books contain—can compel us to make our society more just show because they show us our failures. When approached with openness and attention to context, they can transform us into more empathetic people and more responsible citizens. And if all of that doesn’t sound like something we should be doing as Christians, I don’t know what does.

So today’s book is To Kill a Mockingbird. I’m guessing most of us have read it and love it. More than 200,000 readers of the New York Times Book Review named it the best book published in the past 125 years.

One reader wrote, “I grew up in a small, white, insular, Protestant town in the West, and this book first exposed me to the cruelty of racism. I do believe it changed my life and made me a person who cares about social justice.”

A teacher wrote: “Each time I read it with my students, I find in the author’s words something brilliant and entirely new to discuss with my classes. **As Atticus said, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”**

So why have people attempted to ban it? Well, the earliest attempt to ban it was in 1966 and the reason given was the book’s inclusion of rape and because it was considered immoral. One of the most prominent critics of that attempted ban was Harper Lee herself, who wrote a letter to the editor stating: “Recently I have received echoes down this way of the Hanover County School Board’s activities, and what I’ve heard makes me wonder if any of its members can read.” Into the 1970s and 1980s, school boards and parents continued to challenge the book for its “filthy” or “trashy” content and racial slurs. The main reason the book is challenged is because of its racial slurs.

But it's also been challenged recently because when read with 21st century eyes, some people feel that:

- There are better books to use when teaching students about racism. Because To Kill a Mockingbird teaches about racism from a White perspective.
- It has a white savior complex, which is a term used for white people who believe they know what is best for people of color and that it's their responsibility to support and uplift communities of color b/c those communities lack the resources, willpower, or intelligence to do it themselves. So they need white people to come in and save them. Atticus Finch is often accused of being a white savior.
- The book has language we don't use anymore, makes Black students very uncomfortable, and has cringe-worthy moments. Read it again – you'll probably cringe a little.

But does this mean it shouldn't be taught in classrooms around the country?

To get at this question, I chose a cringe-worthy uncomfortable passage from the Bible to help us think about how we can read something that we treasure and hold sacred while also critiquing it.

“Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Now, I have a very simple rule about this passage at weddings, and it is this: it shall not be read. I had one groom challenge this rule once, and I told him the only way it would be read was if I preached on it. He agreed, because clearly he didn't know me very well. I never got to preach the sermon though because he cancelled the wedding because, ironically enough, his fiancée wouldn't submit to his religious beliefs. She's probably thanking her lucky stars now.

But a few years ago a couple pulled a fast one on me and the next thing I knew 45 minutes before the service the reader asked me to find it in the Bible for her. To

which I replied, nicely but firmly, that won't be read. "But it's in the Bible," she said, questioning why I wouldn't want that verse read.

I don't remember what I said, but the irony of her choosing this passage but ignoring the fact that a woman was going to officiate at their ceremony wasn't lost on me.

I did once co-officiate at a wedding where the other minister read this passage right next to me, without my permission, in the church I pastored – and it was humiliating. Because really, I have a sneaking suspicion that that minister really did believe that wives should be subject to their husbands and also probably believed that I had no business standing there next to him.

And the only instances of sermons excusing this passage, saying it really is OK ladies because Paul's arguing that men should also submit to us wives just like Christ died for the Church, well those sermons were all written by men. So, it really does matter when thinking about a person's story who's writing that story.

So what do we do with this outdated, uncomfortable, cringe-worthy passage? Shall we ban it? Yes we should! And in some respects we have because it never appears in our lectionary readings. But I'm a Presbyterian, so I know we can't ban it.

Plus I'm not sure that's the right take. I think the better approach is to challenge it, like people do with To Kill a Mockingbird because then we can learn something from it. Can we read with a critical eye? One can hope.

And to do so is quite Presbyterian of us. When we look critically at Ephesians, we question certain interpretations, like those who say it's OK to state wives are subject to their husbands, because the passage says husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church, and we all know Christ made the ultimate sacrifice -- So therefore the passage isn't bad if we remember that husbands are asked to sacrifice themselves for their wives. Right?

Wrong. This interpretation reeks of complementarianism (how's that for a word?!) . . . Complementarianism which is the teaching that masculinity and femininity are ordained by God and that men and women are created to complement, or complete, each other. But friends, complementarianism sounds

a lot like separate but equal. As long as everyone stays in their lane, things are OK. But what if my lane has more limits than your lane, or I don't like my lane? Then what?

You see the logic, if one can even call it that, collapses on itself. First, husbands do not die for their wives as Christ died for the church. And even if there are some that do or would, the passage sets up a divine standard that most of us can never live up to.

So when then, do we do with a passage like this? Well, we start by looking at the whole Bible rather than just its individual parts.

For example, when I look at the Bible as a whole I see a God of justice, reconciliation, forgiveness, love, inclusion, grace and compassion.

And when I read scripture through the lens of Jesus, as I do the Ephesians passage -- and when I think about what Jesus teaches us about the heart, character and will of God, and the command to love God and others, it's pretty hard to justify passages of scripture that are used to exclude, hurt, and oppress -- which the Ephesians passage does. So when I look at the totality of the Bible, I sometimes come to the conclusion that the writer got it wrong. And that's not an unfaithful statement to make. I have said before but will say again that John Calvin said about scripture that God spoke with a lisp or stammer that the Biblical writers couldn't always understand, so sometimes they got it wrong.

Which leads us back to To Kill a Mockingbird. Did Harper Lee get it wrong? Not exactly; she likely got it quite right for the time in which she wrote and the time period the novel covers. And personally, I think the novel should be taught. But I also think it should be taught differently to my kids than it was to me. Because it's 2022 not 1982 or 1962. For example, in 2022 we should probably look more critically at Atticus Finch. Was he a crusader for justice as I was taught, or did he prefer fairness, continuity, and order? Neither is necessarily better than the other, but there's a difference.

Atticus believed in changing hearts -- which is noble -- but he didn't necessarily believe in changing the structure that put Tom Robinson in jail. But if we're going to talk about dismantling racism, well that requires more than a change of heart.

It requires naming it, and saying out loud that Walter Cunningham who leads a lynching mob, really isn't a good man.

Is Atticus Finch a product of his time? Yes, and likely a progressive one. Likewise, some people argue that the writer of Ephesians was quite progressive because at least he felt women should have a lane. But we now know better. So let us read these books and difficult Bible passages but also look critically at them, taking into account who wrote them and when, and who is telling whose story and whose voice is missing so that we can learn from them and grow from them.

Atticus Finch is famous for saying: **“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”** Lord knows we need more empathy today. But friends, empathy is not the end goal. Empathy only is the starting point.

Amen.