

Best Game of Horseshoes, Ever!

A Sermon on John 18:33-37 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Since today is the last Sunday of our church year, let's take a few minutes to consider the big picture. Let's put our claim to be disciples of Jesus in a larger context.

The first thing I would say is that everyone has a religion. Even those who follow no organized religion end up creating some versions of their own religion, complete with rituals, sacred texts, and high holy days. Many people like to watch professional sports, but some people have gone a step further and created something that can rightly be called a religion where the high holy day is Superbowl Sunday or the World Cup finals. Many people like to play video games, but for some people, every part of their lives is focused around video gaming. Many people own guns, but for some people, ownership of guns, and using guns, and the creed of the second amendment is their religion.

Every person practices some sort of religion. The members of St. Paul's follow a religion that is based on the example and the teachings of Jesus as found in the New Testament. Since the example and teachings of Jesus are rooted in the religion of the Jewish people, the Hebrew scriptures provide a foundation for us as disciples of Christ.

The second big idea is that Holy Scripture points us toward God, but Holy Scripture is not God. All of the ideas necessary for us to live in the way of salvation are found in the Bible, but we do not worship the Bible. We worship the one described in the Holy Scriptures as Immanuel, 'The God who is with us'. Since the scriptures are pointing us towards truths that are beyond simple, human understanding, the Bible needs to be read and studied in the community of God's people. The scriptures are pointing us towards the God who is beyond the descriptive powers of human language. Scripture points us towards the God who creates us and knows us, but whose love, intelligence, and grace are beyond our understanding.

I'm going to be a little bold here, and suggest it might be helpful for us to think of the Bible as like a game of horseshoes. The Bible is like the very best, most important game of horseshoes, ever. In ancient times our ancestors told each other the stories of their faith, over and over again. Eventually these were written down. They treated the process as a sacred process. For me, the results of their efforts are sacred. These are the most important words I will ever hear in my life, because they have led me to the God who has saved my life.

Yet we remember the words of the Bible were put down on parchment or animal skins by people. It's God's story, but it was transcribed by people. Have you ever made a mistake in your life? The people who are telling God's story are making their very best effort, but they are trying to tell a story that isn't really our story. They are trying to tell God's story. They are aiming in the direction of God. It's like the best game of horseshoes, ever.

Sometimes those who are telling the story seem to hit the mark perfectly, like the person who manages to hit the iron pin with the horseshoe every time. Today's passage from 2 Samuel is an example. *One who rules over the people with justice, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning.* Yes, that is true for us, as it was for the people who lived 300 or 3000 years ago.

You can probably recall passages from the New Testament that hit the mark perfectly, in the same way. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the young lawyer that, to inherit eternal life, he must love his neighbors. Then the young lawyer asks, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the story of the Good Samaritan. Right on the mark. Yes, the foreigner is my neighbor. That was true in Jesus' time, and it is true in our time, and it will be true in 500 years and in 1000 years. The Bible points toward a God whose grace and goodness are much broader and bigger than we can imagine.

But there are parts of Holy Scripture where a few verses or a chapter seem to have missed the mark. If the Bible is like a game of horseshoes, there are places where the attempt has clearly gone off to one side or the other. Deuteronomy chapter seven includes these phrases: *When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy...and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat the people of that land, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them.* This prohibition against intermarriage is described in further detail in chapter 23: *No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted into your congregations.* These verses exhorting destruction of the

foreigners and prohibiting marriage between the children of Israel and people of other nations seems to be veering away from the main themes in the story of salvation described in the Bible.

In the book of Ruth, we hear the story of Naomi's sons breaking the prohibition about intermarriage. Naomi's sons broke the rules put forth in Deuteronomy by marrying Moabite women. Ruth is a Moabite woman, one of the foreigners. Yet she is one of the prime examples of faithfulness and love in the Hebrew scriptures. According to Deuteronomy 23, Ruth's children, grandchildren and so on, down to the tenth generation, should be forbidden from full participation in the life of the nation of Israel. But when we hear the whole story, we come to realize that Ruth's grandson will be Jesse, and Ruth's great-grandson will be David, the greatest of all of the kings of Israel. The book of Ruth conveys a truth that seems as relevant and powerful today as when Ruth and Naomi lived, more than 3000 years ago.

With these ideas in mind, let's turn our attention to the Gospel of John and today's Gospel passage. John contains many passages that are not found in the other three Gospels. In John we find a unique, extended account of the Last Supper. In a passage not found in the other Gospels, after supper Jesus washes the disciples' feet and says, *I give you a new commandment. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.* These are some of the most powerful, life-giving verses in Holy Scripture. They hold a truth that endures, and to this day they provide one of the clearest, most important directions for Jesus' disciples.

A few chapters later we come to the passage assigned as today's Gospel reading, where Jesus is interrogated by Pontius Pilate prior to his crucifixion. The passage begins much as the other accounts: *Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"* Then, as often happens in the Gospel of John, we come to a verse which is quite different from what we find in Mark, Matthew, and Luke: *Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"*

Unlike the Gospels of Mark and Luke, in John's account of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, the entire nation of Israel is held to be responsible for Jesus' death. The passage continues with verses not found in the other Gospels: *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews."* This is a strange expression. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers, who are all Jews, would be fighting to keep me, the Jewish Messiah, from being handed over to the Jews." This is strange because it was the Romans who tortured and killed many hundreds of Jews, so many that the part of the city where the Romans crucified the Jews was called 'The place of the skull', Golgotha. Jesus and his disciples are all Jews, yet they are not afraid of Pilate and other Roman officials; they are afraid of their own people. This is especially strange because, according to the official record of the time, the Talmud, during the years before and after Jesus' trial, capital punishment was never enforced by the Jewish authorities.

Today's Gospel passage and similar passages in the Gospel of Matthew have been used to justify violence and killing of Jews for hundreds of years. In placing responsibility for Jesus' death on the entire nation of Israel, the Gospel of John seems to be missing the mark.

When I read a passage like this from the Gospel of John, I don't get too frustrated with the man who did his best to put Jesus' story into words. I remember that so many of his expressions in the Gospel of John were right on the mark. Yet clearly, a few of his attempts to tell the story have gone pretty far off to the side, like someone playing a game of horseshoes.

I also remember something one of my seminary professors used to say. "All the books of the Bible bear some weight; they support us in our faith journeys. But different passages and different books of the Bible bear different amounts of weight." They are like stones you might walk on while crossing a stream or a small river. Some of the books are like large, flat, dry stones. They don't wiggle when you step on them. Others can be a little bit slippery. You have to be careful with how much weight you are putting down on them.

In the precarious journey of life, the books of the Bible are like the stepping stones. For me, the Bible is the way I keep moving in the right direction through the river of life, though the waters may be churning loudly beside me. Don't get too distracted by some of the misses we see in the Holy Scripture. Our religious forebearers had the task of telling the story of the God we will never completely know or understand. Yet there is one stone that bears all the weight of life: God's unfailing grace and love.