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A Hermeneutical Self-Survey with Pedagogical Implications

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Like most construction projects in the neighborhood where I live, education rarely takes place on an empty lot. A building is already present. It can be demolished and replaced, repaired, or enlarged; but a successful builder will not ignore it. Learners and teachers alike need to consider how new information relates to learners' prior understandings. Learners ordinarily integrate new ideas and experiences within existing knowledge structures, but sometimes new information causes enough cognitive dissonance to motivate either a replacement of old understandings or a rejection of the new.

Regular readers of this blog may remember that I am participating as a learner in a course on womanist hermeneutics taught by Dr. Mitzi Smith of Columbia Theological Seminary.[i] Dr. Smith knows from hard experience that teaching womanist hermeneutics typically requires much deconstructive as well as constructive work. Her most recent post, "Decentering Biblical Interpretation is Anti-Racism Work," testifies to the taxing nature of that challenge, especially for an African American woman teaching in a majority white context.

As a learner, I have the freedom and responsibility to decide whether and how I will change my understanding of hermeneutics. This work, too, can be emotionally and intellectually taxing. It can involve modifying or discarding beliefs that have been central to my identity and sense of purpose. Or it can require negotiating tensions while moving toward synthesis and integration.

With the intensive portion of the course about to begin, I would like to survey some of my prior commitments in order to test their compatibility with womanist hermeneutics. Along the way, I will mention some pedagogical implications of those commitments.

I interpret the Bible as a Christian immersed in the Anabaptist and Pietist streams of the Radical Reformation. “Seeking the mind of Christ together” is an essential goal in this tradition, and Bible study is one means to pursue that goal. For me, seeking the mind of Christ is analogous to other interpersonal relationships in which I attempt to learn how someone feels and thinks. Along with other disciples, I ask the living Jesus, “What do you think of this text, and how do you want us to respond to it now?” I ask similar questions when the interpretive process begins with a contemporary situation instead of a biblical text. For example, “What do you think of unjust policing, or of the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people of color? How do you want us to respond?”

Christ-centered hermeneutics allows for prioritization and critique of biblical texts. It is not a matter of doing whatever we want with scripture, but of prayerfully discerning what Jesus wants. When asked about a text, Jesus may answer, “You have heard that it was said . . . , but I say to you” (Matt 5:21-48); or “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’” (Matt 9:13; 12:27). Justice, mercy, and love are essential values in Jesus’ reading of scripture. Jesus is especially inclined to reject scriptural reasoning that reinforces unjust privilege and marginalization. Dr. Smith has offered a similar thought about African-American hermeneutics: “Critical engagement with the Scriptures could involve a resistance to and/or a rejection of some biblical texts and yet leave ‘my Jesus’ intact.”[ii]

To imagine Jesus faithfully is often counter-cultural work. Although incarnated in a male body, Jesus does not conform to societal expectations of gender. Jesus has never been white. Thus, I am especially drawn to the image that Dr. Smith put at the top of her Moodle page: Jesus, who is black, covers his eyes in dismay at the injustice around and within us.

Although students may or may not share my Christ-centered approach, it affects how I teach them. I assume that another Teacher is present in the classroom (or wherever the students are). Jesus may speak through anyone, most often through people who have been marginalized. My academic training is a resource for students, but it gives me no claim to superior authority. Instead, my primary task is to lead students in the formation of an intersubjective and intercontextual community of inquiry where they can learn from one another, from me, and from a range of other interpreters. In such communities we can all hope to stand corrected as Jesus uses conversation partners to raise insights, questions, or objections that we might have otherwise ignored.

The communal emphasis of Anabaptism warns against a complacent, individualistic approach in which any interpretation is deemed valid regardless of its impact on peoples’ lives or its relationship to the text. We need loving communities to correct unloving interpretations while teaching and modeling better ones.

I am aware, of course, that communal interpretation is not a panacea. Entire communities

might be wrong, and majority votes at church conferences might or might not bring people closer to the mind of Christ. Systemic injustices (racism, sexism, etc.) are endemic to many communities, including many denominations, congregations, and seminaries. These injustices distort both the processes and the outcomes of our discussions. In such circumstances, Jesus often speaks through prophetesses, iconoclasts, and activists to call for repentance by the majority.[iii]

My claim that some interpretations merit rejection does not mean that there is only one right interpretation. Jesus is free to inspire the multiple understandings that different interpreters need at different times. When communal conversations uncover more of a text's "meaning potential,"[iv] interpreters are better able to discern which possible meanings are just and faithful for their contexts.

As a professor I accept responsibility for designing and leading courses in ways that maximize the potential and avoid the pitfalls of communal interpretation. I strive to avoid any hint of systemic injustices in my courses, but I am not perfect in that regard. Sometimes I have allowed a few students to dominate discussions instead of ensuring that all voices are heard. Sometimes the best I can do is repent, apologize, and work to improve in the future.

This survey has revealed some common ground between my Christ-centered, communal approach to hermeneutics and what I am learning from Dr. Smith. I, too, decenter the Bible to some extent, and I understand Christ to have an ethical agenda like hers.

[i] Earlier blogs have introduced this learning opportunity. See Daniel W. Ulrich, "Learning Womanist Hermeneutics during Covid-19" at <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/07/learning-womanist-hermeneutics-during-covid-19/>, and Mitzi J. Smith, "Change and the Baggage I Bring to This Collaboration" at <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/07/change-and-the-baggage-i-bring-to-this-collaboration/>.

[ii] Mitzi J. Smith, *Insights from African American Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 66.

[iii] See Mitzi J. Smith, "'This Little Light of Mine': The Womanist Biblical Scholar as Prophetess, Iconoclast, and Activist," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 109-127.

[iv] Brian K. Blount, "The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138 (Spring 2019): 6-21, esp. 14.

<https://wabash.center/2020/08/a-hermeneutical-self-survey-with-pedagogical-implications/>