

TEXT: Lectionary Readings
THEME: Seeing the kingdom of God
SUBJECT: The mosaic of faith
TITLE: Tesserae

Second Sunday in Lent
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Messiah Moravian
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Tesserae, tiles in a variety of shapes and colors, are used to create mosaics. This morning I invite you to think of these tesserae as words, words of scripture used in creating a mosaic of faith.

Robert Alter has spent his life translating the Hebrew Bible into English. The result is three large volumes, filled with footnotes. David Bentley Hart has done the same thing for Christian Scripture. His translation has been called “A theological and ecclesial event of the first magnitude” (John Milbank). Hart and Alter’s translations reveal how some tiles we thought blue are really green and how some tiles we thought blue are really bright orange.

This morning we are going to examine a few tiles/words to discover their true color. Nicodemus, in the NRSV, is called a leader of the “Jews.” Hart’s translation calls Nicodemus a ruler of the Judaeans, a reference to the indigenous Temple and synagogue authorities of Judea, not to all the people of an ethnic, national or religious group.

The Gospel of John definitely reflects a disenchantment of Jewish Christians with those they saw as having expelled them from the synagogue. Later Christian culture certainly took this as an excuse for anti-Jewish violence and injustice. Mistaking this inter-Jewish conflict over religious authority for a conflict between ethnic, national or religious groups has led to tragedy.

The NRSV translates John 3:16 “. . . everyone who *believes in* him.” Hart has “. . . everyone having faith in him.” The Greek word “pistis” can mean both “trust” in something and the “trustworthiness” of something. Faith, here, means entrusting one’s life to a trustworthy person, not intellectual assent to a proposition about something or someone.

Jesus spoke Aramaic and read Hebrew. The New Testament is written in Greek. There really is no Hebrew word that means “eternal” nor any Hebrew or Aramaic word that naturally means “forever.” What the Greek word translated “eternal” seems clearly to indicate in John is a qualitatively different frame of reality, the divine sphere rather than the earthly.

For John, reality is multi-dimensional. Rather than thinking of “above” and “below” as geographical places, we should hear references to realms of experience. To be born from

above, not “born again” as Nicodemus mistakenly thinks, is to be born of the spirit. Just as the natural world is rationally perceived; the spiritual realm is spiritually perceived.

The condition of our souls/spirits affects what we can perceive, what we can know. Love knows realities invisible to indifference or hate. This is why we cannot see the kingdom of God unless we are born of the Spirit.

In the epistle reading for today, the word translated “works” in the NRSV is translated by Hart as “observances.” It refers to obligations imposed by the Mosaic code, like circumcision, Sabbath keeping, or kosher laws. It refers to ritual obligations, not to works of mercy or of justice.

From the late Augustine to Calvin and Luther, Paul has been read as though he drew a distinction between, on the one hand, the divine blessings one wins through one’s good deeds, and, on the other, the entirely gratuitous graces bestowed by God without any reference at all to one’s deeds. This reading of Paul is, Hart unequivocally declares, an error.

Such a reading requires Paul to be diametrically opposed to the theology of “judgment according to works” clearly enunciated by Jesus in the Gospels, by the Letter of James, and by the book of Revelation. Moreover, one is required to read Paul’s teaching as diametrically opposed to itself, since he too clearly affirms “judgment according to works.”

For example, 2 Corinthians 5:10 “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.”

To mistake Paul’s distinction between faithfulness of the heart and observances of the Law for an opposition between faith and works of mercy or justice is to see blue when the tile is orange. For Paul, as for other NT writers, human beings are justified “by works, and not by faith alone.” Hart has shown, argues John Milbank, that “the core of Reformation theology is unbiblical.”

This is a problem! The Reformation claimed Scripture alone, not tradition, not the church, not the Pope, was authoritative for faith and life.

The Orthodox Church has read the relation between works and faith in Paul’s thought in a synergistic way. When Abraham is addressed by God, he says nothing. He responds in obedience; he acts. Abraham’s trust in God is revealed by doing what God commanded.

Just as Abraham was told to leave his land, his birthplace, his father’s house, so Abraham will be told to sacrifice his son, his only one, whom he loves. Again, Abraham says

nothing. He acts. Through his obedience his trust/faith in God is revealed. Faith and work are inseparable in Abraham's response to God.

Luther and Calvin, among others, created a mosaic of faith, one that led to what we know as the Reformation. Today, David Bentley Hart, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, Sarah Coakley, John Milbank, Kathryn Tanner, among others, are creating a mosaic of faith, one they believe is more faithful to the gospel, especially as interpreted in the early church. The design of this mosaic is still being drawn, the colors of the tiles still being chosen.

This redesign of the mosaic of faith is, I believe, a sign of hope. It is also in keeping with our Moravian heritage. "The Ground of the Unity" of the Moravian Church contains three sentences pertinent to this discussion.

The *Unitas Fratrum* takes part in the *continual* search for sound doctrine.

In interpreting Scripture and in the communication of doctrine in the church, we look to two millennia of ecumenical Christian tradition and the wisdom of our Moravian forebears in the faith to guide us as we pray for *fuller understanding* and *ever clearer* proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But just as the Holy Scripture does *not contain any doctrinal system*, so the *Unitas Fratrum* also has not developed any of its own because it knows that the mystery of Jesus Christ which is attested to in the Bible, cannot be comprehended completely by any human mind or expressed completely in any human statement.

The continual search for a fuller understanding of the Gospel results, from time to time, in a clearer vision of the mosaic of faith. Faithfulness to our Moravian heritage, faithfulness to the witness of Hus and Luke of Prague in the 15th century, a hundred years before Luther, before Calvin, requires of us an open acceptance of new elements when we recognize they are bringing something better, a deeper understanding of the truth we strive to follow.