A Hispanic Reading of the Bible

(5 of 5)

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Hispanic Pastors' Retreat
(organized by Fieldstead and Company)
Corona del Mar, California
January 17, 2025

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For this session, I have been invited to discuss Hispanic readings of the Bible. I must begin with a caveat: What I will suggest today is not "the" Hispanic reading of the Bible. It is one of many "readings," for there are numerous different readings of Scripture in our community, just as there are in any other community. What I can tell you about is *my* reading of Scripture, which I have learned from many Latin brothers and sisters and that has also provoked encouragement and positive response from them.

The sort of reading I will try to present to you is important to me. It is important because it is a reading of Scripture that I have learned from others in my community. It is important to me because it has been an empowering and liberating experience. It is important because I am convinced that this sort of reading helps make Scripture more relevant to the Latin population. But it is particularly important because it could also provide important insights for the church at large.

But above all, this reading is important to me because it has helped me connect the story of the Bible with my own history and with the history of people around me. Go back to what we discussed in our first two sessions. What we heard is an ugly, yet beautiful story. It is the story of enslaved Indians, abusive *encomenderos*, and valiant prophets. It is a story of powerful but indecisive rulers and persistent defenders of justice. It is a history of which I was ashamed when

I first heard about the massacre in Caonao. It is a history of which I was proud when I heard of the glories of the Inca empire. It is a history of which I was proud when I first saw the paintings of Velásquez and El Greco, and when I first read the poetry of Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca. It is a history of which I was ashamed when I came to realize that the entire Inca empire was organized so as to benefit a very small ruling class. It is a history of which I am proud and also a history of which I am ashamed. It is a confused history. It is a history in which my Spanish ancestors violated my Indian ancestors. But it is my history. It is the history that I see in my own face whenever I look in the mirror.

Then I look at Scripture and, behold, I see the same kind of history! It is a story in which our very first ancestors, created in the image of God, are ready to tarnish that image as soon as they have the chance. It is a story in which Abraham and Sarah collude in getting rid of Hagar and Ishmael. It is a story of Jacob, a deceiver who ends up with a totally dysfunctional family. The children of Israel are willing to give up their freedom for the onions and cucumbers of Egypt, and they are ready to make and worship a golden calf. Their greatest king, David, is a womanizer and a murderer. Solomon, their wisest king, foolishly falls into idolatry.

The early Christians are not much better. They claim to hold all things in common; but they cheat on one another, and some of them drop dead for it. They argue over the distribution to the widows. Philip is willing to baptize Simon, no questions asked. Paul says that Peter is worthy of condemnation because he wavered in his beliefs.

Some may find this disconcerting, but I find it heartening because in many ways it reflects who I am. It reflects what the church is and has always been. It reflects what humankind is and has always been.

Yet, that is not always the way we read the Bible. That is not the way we read the Bible because that is not the way we want to read ourselves. That is not the way we want to read our history. We are pure. I am pure. We are a pure church. We live in a pure country. Keep it that way. Romanticize the stories in Scripture. Romanticize the lives of the original Americans. Romanticize how the West was "won." Turn slavery into just "one of those things." Forget about Jim Crow. Forget about any reasons others may have to distrust us. We are good! We are heirs of a pure and beautiful history! Don't besmirch it by telling it otherwise!

In short: Read the Bible with a non-innocent perspective; read the world with a non-innocent perspective; read yourself with a non-innocent perspective!

That is the first of two points I need to make by way of introduction.

The second point I will make by telling of two experiences that led me to what many have come to call a "hermeneutical suspicion." That sounds bad! But it does not mean that we should distrust Scripture. It means that we must distrust every interpretation that has come to us together with Scripture. We Protestants have long insisted on the authority of Scripture over

tradition, and it is important to insist on that point. But it is also important to realize that there are hidden traditions, particularly traditions of interpretation, that have come to us jointly with Scripture. It is of those traditions of interpretation, and not of Scripture itself, that we must be suspicious.

Tradition is not bad. On the contrary, traditions empower us and give us a sense of identity. But they become a problem when they are not recognized for what they are. In the case of biblical interpretation, a tradition of interpretation may be valuable; but when it is no longer recognized as a tradition and is taken to be Scripture itself, it may become an obstacle in our study of Scripture instead of a help.

I have written elsewhere about these two significant experiences. Some of you may have already read about them. But I think it is important for me to mention, however briefly, these two events that took place almost at the same time and led me to try to read the Bible in a way different from what I had been taught.

I had just finished my studies at Yale and was teaching in Puerto Rico when two things happened almost simultaneously. One was an invitation to preach during the following Holy Week at a very large United Methodist Church in Florida. The other was the convening of the Second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII.

The convening of the council led to ecumenical events everywhere. In Puerto Rico, we decided to have our own. We met at a large church right across the street from the Seminary. The Catholic Archbishop was there, in full regalia. The Methodist bishop was there with more regalia than the Archbishop. The Episcopal Bishop and the president of the Lutheran Synod were also there, with vestments proclaiming their importance. Several Pentecostal pastors were there also, all sweltering in three-piece suits…

I, too, was there. And, because I was the Dean of the Seminary and was representing it, I also was wrapped up in academic regalia. My task was to read Scripture. Obviously, the text to be read on such an occasion had to be 1 Corinthians 12: The church is one body with many members, and each member needs all the rest. I stood up and began reading in a serious and sonorous voice. But then, I came to verse 23. Suddenly, I was shocked! I could hardly refrain from laughing. Paul says: "Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect." I looked around, and I had to ask: What parts of the body are we, up here on the platform, clothed with greater honor?

The service ended, and I rushed to the library. I was surprised to find that most of what Paul says in the entire passage was commonplace in ancient literature. After all, it is fairly obvious that society, like any living body, cannot function without a variety of members. What I could

not find anywhere in classical literature –what was clearly Paul's– was the verse that shocked me.

Then I went back and read the entire epistle. Paul had just been discussing communion. He had declared his disgust that in communion the rich ate their fill and drank to excess, while the poor remained hungry and thirsty. Therefore, he tells them: "examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves."

These words of Paul have led to endless discussions. How is Christ present in the bread and the wine? What are you to believe about the bread and the wine in order to be able to partake of communion worthily?

But now I came to wonder: When Paul tells the Corinthians that they should "discern the body of Christ," does he mean the body in the bread on the table, or does he mean the body around the bread and the table, the church? Is the error of the Corinthians that they do not understand the presence of Christ in the bread? Or is it that they do not manifest the presence of Christ in the body of the church?

Now my second example: As I was preparing my sermons to preach in Florida during Holy Week, I remembered a sermon I had heard many years earlier, in my childhood. Talking about Peter's

denial, the preacher asked: “How did they know that Peter was one of the disciples?” And then he answered: “Because when you have been with Jesus it shows in your face! There is a deep glow that nothing can hide.” I remember after the service, sitting on the curb across the street, looking at people coming out of church, and deciding that nobody had been with Jesus!

But obscuring those distant memories was my worry that people in Florida would not be able to understand me because of my accent. I had preached in English before but only to small congregations. What about this time, when there would be thousands present? Would they be able to understand me? I had to be careful not to say that Jesus died for our scenes!
Then I read the story as Luke tells it: “…the bystanders came and said to Peter, ‘certainly you are one of them, for your *accent* betrays you’.” The reason why they knew that Peter was one of them was not that his face shone but that he talked funny!

Once again, this led me to look more deeply into the matter and to find that part of what is happening in Jerusalem at that time is that the presence of Jesus and his Galilean disciples, all outsiders in Judea, is seen as a threat by the good religious people of the Holy City.

To me these two experiences I have just shared were a clear reminder that sometimes, when we are in particular circumstances, those very circumstances, if taken seriously, may help us see things in the text that we would not have noticed otherwise. Those two events, as well as much

that I have seen and heard in Hispanic preaching and biblical interpretation, have led me to the conviction that this is something we must share with the rest of the church.

So, what I invite you to do –not necessarily now, but in our later discussion, or even in the coming days– is to think about any such experiences you have had. How did you respond to new insights? Did you convince yourself that you must be wrong because you had never heard that before? Did you pursue your new insight, discuss it with others, see where it would lead?

In order to do that, there are some hints or pieces of advice I would like to offer. I will list them as if they were independent from one another, while, in fact, they overlap, and several of them can be applied at the same time to a single passage or a single context:

First of all, give yourself permission and claim for yourself the right to ask different questions of Scripture, to read it from your own situation, and thus to discover in it, dimensions that you had not suspected.

Let me give you some examples:

Some years ago, I was in New York for a series of meetings and was lodging with a Pentecostal family in the Bronx. On Sunday morning they invited me to church with them. They were very enthusiastic about a series of sermons their pastor had been preaching on the Ten Commandments. This particular Sunday, he would be preaching on the Sabbath, and they were

looking forward to it. But I was not! I knew that I would be hearing a long litany of do's and a much longer litany of don'ts.

In church, after a long time of "praise," the pastor came to the pulpit, read the Ten Commandment, and re-read the one on Sabbath rest. He looked at the congregation and asked: How many of you had full-time work this last week? A few hands were raised. He then said, "How many of you were looking for work?" Many more hands came up. He said: "How is it that we live in a world that will not allow us to work, as the Bible commands?"

To him, the commandment was not just about rest. It was about a rhythm of work and rest. He talked about people who are so eager to get ahead that they work at three and even four jobs. And he talked about people who are frustrated because they are made to feel useless, because they have to spend their time, not doing something, rather looking for something to do.

I had grown up in a fairly liberal middle-class family and in a church that was constantly advocating for workers' rights –particularly the right to rest. Now this pastor brought up a more fundamental right, a more fundamental need for his people: the right and the need to work.

What he was doing, surprising as it was to me, was simply reading the Bible within the context of where he and his people found themselves.

A second example of the same point, this from my own experience: A Hispanic United Methodist pastor had just told me of his frustration when he took a group of the leaders of his church to a meeting of the Annual Conference. He said: “The people in the conference talked as if only their issues were important. We just sat in a corner and listened. And you should have seen the expression of frustration on T.J.’s face! (T.J. was an African American pastor who was also part of the same meeting.) When the pastor told me that story, I had been reading in Luke 5 about the paralytic who was brought in through the roof. Reading that passage in the light of our conversation, three points jumped at me that I had never noticed.

First, in this passage there is no indication that the Pharisees and the scribes were there as enemies of Jesus or to criticize him. On the contrary, they came from every village in Galilee and Judea, apparently to listen to him. These were not bad people. They were listening to Jesus. Then the people come carrying the paralytic, and they cannot get in “because of the crowd.” Apparently, the crowd is so interested in what Jesus is saying that they do not notice the paralytic and his friends trying to get in. I immediately thought of that Annual Conference, with those devoted and dedicated pastors and lay leaders, so intent on “the Lord’s work” that they hindered the approach of the paralytic and his friends.

Second, when in a rather unorthodox manner –lowering their friend through the roof– these people who were kept outside, at the edge of the crowd, make their way to Jesus, the paralytic that the Pharisees and the scribes had ignored is placed “in the middle of the crowd, in front of

Jesus." Once again, I thought of that small group of Hispanic leaders, sitting at the back of the church, ignored by the rest of the assembly, and what would happen if just for an instant they were placed at the center.

Third, the text itself told me what would possibly happen to those who had impeded the paralytic and his friends: "Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God" (Lk 5.26).

In short, these two stories –the one about the Sabbath and the one about the paralytic– illustrate my first suggestion: give yourself permission and claim for yourself the right to ask different questions of Scripture, to read it from your own situation, and thus to discover in it dimensions that you had not suspected.

Now to a **second** suggestion: Think of where you divide the passages.

A first example of this second suggestion: a few years ago, a group of church women asked us to write a Bible study for their magazine. They gave us the passage in Ephesians 5 about husbands and wives. We insisted that, rather than reading only verses 25-33, which deals with husbands and wives, we begin with v. 21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ," and that we not exclude the rest of the passage, which in chapter 6 goes on to deal with children and parents, and with slaves and masters. They objected that we no longer have slaves. We responded that this was precisely the point, for whatever we do with what the text says about

slaves and masters we have to do also with husbands and wives, parents and children. You cannot simply say that, since the culture has thankfully evolved so that slavery is no longer legal, we do not have to deal with that, but we still have to deal with husbands and wives as if nothing had changed.

In this particular case, there is another factor that makes it easier to deal with husbands and wives, but not with slaves and masters. The husbands and wives are part of chapter 5, and the rest is in chapter 6. And here again, remember that the original text had no such divisions, for our present division into chapters dates from the 13th century, and division of chapters into verses dates from 1551, seven years after the death of Martin Luther!

The same point applies to the well-known passage in 1 Corinthians 13. Again, there were no punctuation marks in the original. Suppose that at the end of chapter 12, instead of a period, you place a colon. In chapter 12 Paul has been discussing the gifts of the Spirit –particularly some that are commonly called “extraordinary gifts.” After listing them, he says: “I will show you a more excellent way:” That more excellent way is in chapter 13, which begins by referring to “tongues of mortals and of angels” and then says that without love those tongues are mere noise: “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” This can easily be missed if we read chapter 13 as an independent unit.

A **third** point or suggestion: Try reading in community, and not only privately.

We often forget that most of Scripture was written to be read out loud, to the gathered people of God. The printing press has made it possible for practically every believer to have a Bible at home and to read it privately. This is good. But there is also the danger that people may substitute private reading for community reading. And then something is lost.

(By the way, here we have a difference between English and Spanish that may be helpful: Modern English does not distinguish between the singular "you" and the plural "you." Thus, when we hear Jesus saying "you are…" we can read it as "tú eres," or as "ustedes son" or "vosotros sois." Very little of the Bible is addressed at an individual, and most of it is addressed to a community, to a plural "you" –or, as the KJV says, "ye.")

When the passage in Ephesians 5 and 6 to which I referred earlier was written, it was intended to be read out loud, in the church, so that slaves would hear not only what was said to them but also what was said to their masters: "Masters, do the same to them." Likewise, the wives were to hear what was said to their husbands: "Love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." All would have heard together what was said to all of them: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

The slaves who first heard this passage would be startled and encouraged when they heard their masters being told: "Do the same to them." In a highly patriarchal society, the wives would

hear their husbands being told that they must “love your wives, as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her.”

This is very different from what a group of women hear when they gather in a home to read the Bible by themselves and to hear only what the Bible says to them.

This third suggestion, reading in community and not only privately, leads to a **fourth** suggestion: Try to make that hermeneutical community as inclusive as possible in matters of age, gender, social class, culture, political stance, theological tradition, and so on. In other words, try reading together in situations in which others might see something in the text that you or others like you would have overlooked.

For instance, try reading and discussing the story of Pentecost in Acts 2 in a group in which there are young and old, men and women, people of different cultures and languages, some who have grown up in church and others who are hearing this story for the first time, people who fear disorder and others who despise routine. If there is sufficient trust among them to allow all to express their opinions and reactions, you will have quite a discussion, and your understanding of that story will be substantially enriched.

If you cannot gather such a group, remember that the church at large is precisely such a group. Even though the final consummation has not yet come, and the church is often split by

differences such as I have just mentioned, still the church is already a multitude that no one can count, of every tribe, and nation, and language. When you preach, while making certain that what you say is pertinent to the listening congregation, make certain also that what you say you would also say in the presence of the whole church catholic. As you prepare a Thanksgiving sermon, consider: Would you be able to say what you intend to say in the presence of Cherokee or Apache brothers and sisters? If not, don't say it in your congregation!

Time is running out, and therefore I will quickly list some other suggestions or hints that may be helpful.

Fifth: Ask the question of culture and its place in the text itself.

I have already mentioned my own sudden recognition that the accent of the disciples marked them as Galileans, and therefore as probable disciples of Jesus.

Another example is the case of Paul. Time and time again I have heard preachers say that Saul's experience on the road to Damascus was so life-changing that this turned Saul the persecutor into Paul the Apostle. All you have to do is set aside that common notion and read the Bible. Saul has his great vision on the road to Damascus, yes. But then *Saul* rises, goes to Damascus, and meets Ananias. Then *Saul* preaches in Damascus. *Saul* escapes from those who were planning to kill him. *Saul* goes to Jerusalem, then to Caesarea, then to his native Tarsus.

Eventually, Barnabas brings *Saul* to Antioch, and *Saul* becomes a leader in that church. In Antioch, the Spirit commands; "set aside for me Barnabas and *Saul*." Barnabas and *Saul* are commissioned and then go to Cyprus. It is while *Saul* and Barnabas are preaching in Cyprus that Luke tells us that *Saul* "is also Paul."

In brief, the notion that Saul became Paul at the time of his conversion is not true. The fact is that it was common for someone to have a Hebrew or Aramaic name and also use a similar Latin or Greek name. That is why in the New Testament Silas is also Silvanus, and Saul is also Paul –Paulos.

This seems inconsequential, just a matter of names. But note that Luke tells us that Saul is also Paul precisely at the point where his missionary work begins. One reason why Saul can do his extraordinary missionary work is that he is also Paul. His inbetweenness, his having studied at the feet of Gamaliel and his being a Roman citizen by birth, are an important factor in his missionary work.

This reminds me of my now departed friend whose mother named him "Jesús". When he went to school a teacher said, "You can't be Jesus! I'll call you Jesse." For the rest of his life, Jesús was Jesse. And because Jesús was Jesse, he could do extraordinary work within his own denomination, clearly dominated by non-Hispanics.

Another example of this, an example that reminds me of what happens to many Hispanics in this country right now, is what happened to Paul when his presence in the Temple caused a near riot. The tribune, whose main task was to keep order, upon hearing what was happening, collected his forces, went to the Temple, arrested Paul, and ordered that he be bound in chains. Then, when he was about to be carried into the military barracks, Paul spoke to the tribune in very refined and respectful Greek: “May I say something to you?” The tribune was surprised and said: “Do you know Greek?” And then revealed his prejudice: “Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt?” Paul does not boast. He tells the tribune that he is a citizen of Tarsus, and he is allowed to speak to the people. The tribune allows him to speak. Presumably, he cannot understand a word of the Aramaic that Paul is speaking. But the response of the people makes the tribune take harsher action, and he orders Paul to be flogged. It is now that Paul pulls the ace from his sleeve and says: “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?” At that point the tribune panics, for one of the oldest laws, dating from the early days of the Republic, was that a citizen could not be tied and flogged.

The prejudices of the tribune are similar to what Hispanics often encounter. If you speak a language others cannot understand, you are presumed to be talking about them, probably saying something despicable about them, and planning who knows what.

Sixth: Ask the question of power and powerlessness and their role in the narrative.

As I was growing up, I didn't quite understand why it was necessary for Judas to betray Jesus. After all, Jesus was preaching openly before the crowds, and it was not difficult to find out where he was. And then I realized that what is happening in the last chapters of the gospel of Luke and the first chapters of Acts has much to do with power, powerlessness, and the control of the people. Try this exercise sometime: Take two pencils of different colors. Read beginning with Luke 22.1 to the end of that Gospel, and then going on to Acts 1.1--7.1, mark with one color all the times that the "people" –meaning the common people– are mentioned, and with the other color references to the High Priest, the Sanhedrin, the elders, and other persons in authority. You will soon note that, until the end of Acts 7, with the stoning of Stephen, the people are generally supportive of Jesus and his followers, while the higher ups are not. As to my question, why the betrayal of Judas was necessary to apprehend Jesus, the very first verse of Luke 22 should make it clear.

(In passing, let me add that according to the Gospel of John –a gospel that we tend to read as the most mystical and otherworldly of the four– the decision of the powerful among the Jews in Jerusalem to destroy Jesus had political dimensions. After the raising of Lazarus, "Some of them [the people who had witnessed the miracle] went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called the meeting of the council and said, 'if we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation'." (Jn 11.46-48)

Seventh: Try to be aware of other struggles parallel to yours.

In the last few weeks, some friends of ours have been taping a sort of autobiographical series of interviews with Catherine and myself. In that process, we were remembering how often years ago Catherine was invited to speak to a group of women, mostly white and middle class and up, many of whom were much more liberated than they allowed their maids to be. And I would be invited to speak to a group of Hispanics pastors and leaders who wanted to hear about liberation theology but not about liberation in their own households. We soon established the practice of trying to speak jointly, so that women who were mostly interested in feminist issues would also hear more about liberation of the poor and the immigrants, and Hispanic men would hear more about the liberation of their wives and daughters.

Bringing this back to Scripture, we all know the story of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well. It is common to speak about this confused woman of little understanding, who seemed to be more preoccupied about her bucket, or perhaps with pleasing her non-husband. The poor woman simply could not understand what Jesus was telling her!

She needed for him to perform a miracle, proving that he had unexplainable knowledge about her life, before she could begin to understand what he was telling her: that the water he was offering was of a different kind. So, it is only after Jesus shows his miraculous power that she runs to bear witness to him. And there the story ends.

But it doesn't really end there. While the woman was away telling others what Jesus had done, "the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So they said to one another, 'Surely, no one has brought him something to eat?'." So, we are told that the woman was not very bright because she didn't understand that Jesus was speaking about another sort of water. And what about these disciples, who had been with Jesus for some time, hearing his teachings day after day, seeing miracle after miracle, and still did not understand when he spoke of a different sort of food?

Eighth: (And almost last!) Change the cast of characters.

Catherine spoke of this long before we met. She and I have spoken about this repeatedly. Whenever one watches an old Western movie, we tend to identify ourselves with the guy who wears a white hat. Most of us do the same with the Bible.

We read the parable of the Pharisee and the publican and rejoice that we are not like the Pharisee who himself rejoiced, boasting that he was not like the publican. No. Not us. Thank you, Lord, that we understand the parable, and are therefore humble, and not like that misguided Pharisee who boasted of his goodness! Most probably, the place where we should see ourselves is with the publican, for –like him– we have no other recourse than the grace of God.

We read the parable of the prodigal son, and we readily become the prodigal who has strayed and returns to the father. This may well have been true at a certain point. It may even be true that right now we are in a distant land and dream of being reconciled to our father. But by and large, even when we rejoice at being reconciled, we forget that the parable itself was not directed at bad people, who had strayed, but at those who, like the older son, felt worthy of commendation because they were faithful and obedient servants of the father.

When facing such a text, it is sometimes helpful to change our own placing within the characters in the story. Could it be that the parable is about us, not so much because we strayed and came back, but rather because we have strayed less than others, and we expect this to earn us some recognition?

Or, even further, what happens if we place ourselves in the place of the father? If we claim to be children of such a Father, is it not our duty to behave like our Father, whose perfection is such that it rains both on the just and the unjust?

A similar change in the cast of characters may be helpful, not just when dealing with such narratives, but also when dealing with our task as preachers of the Word. We read what Isaiah, or Ezekiel, or Micah, says, and we think that our task is to say it to the congregation. We stand behind the pulpit. I stand as the prophet telling the people things they need to hear, no matter whether they like it or not.

But, is that the only position in which we should place ourselves in this cast of characters? Could it be that I am not the one speaking for the prophet but rather that the prophet is speaking to us –to the congregation and to myself, the preacher– and that, even when imagining that I stand in the place of the prophet, I stand in the place of the people whom the prophet chastises?

Now, a final freebee –what we might call a **ninth** suggestion: Make every effort to preach periodically on texts you do not like.

If you don't like a passage, it may well be because you don't like the way it has been traditionally interpreted. In that case, you have a responsibility to struggle with it, reinterpret it, and explain it to those under your care. But there is also the possibility that you don't like it because you don't want to hear what it says. In that case, you must really struggle with it until you hear it!

Ultimately, reading the Bible from our place is having the Bible tell us something about ourselves, and about our place, that may not be a very nice word; but it is also finding in that word the grace and the power that will change both us and our place.