

There have always been some people who attempt to limit the meaning of the scriptures—to insist upon one, and only one way of interpreting various passages—with meanings that are etched in stone.

I must agree, it's sometimes comforting to do that, and it certainly makes us feel powerful, to think that we know the exact meaning of things. Because – of course-- that means that we are right about what we have decided is the correct meaning of scripture. And, of course, that means that others are wrong.

But what happens when new scientific thought, recent archeological finds, new understandings of the human genome—shake us up? For some people new knowledge can be scary—make us think that our old certainties may not hold water.

Lack of certainty can be unnerving.

There will always be those who want the safety of old ways of thinking about things—even when the evidence we might be wrong stacks up against it.

So the fundamentalist movement became a sensation in the late 1800's, early 1900's. Does it surprise you to find out that fundamentalism has only been a part of the Christian landscape for roughly 100 years?

Prior to that scripture was seen as containing poetry, story, metaphor. Scripture was full of truth—but it wasn't always taken to be literal truth.

A fundamentalist, then and now, will insist that the bible is a unified document. Fundamentalists will tell you that the bible is inerrant—it contains no mistakes, and infallible—it is always correct---despite the discoveries of historians, archeologists, geologists, physicists, biologists.

This idea of the bible being factually true came about because society had been exposed to science's insistence on provable fact. Fact had become more believable than truth. So—the bible had to be seen as FACT, not just TRUTH.

And that's where we find ourselves today: caught between the realms of truth, and fact.

But could it be, instead, that the bible becomes a *greater* a source of authority for us only when we are able to swim in the pond of contradiction & paradox? That the bible has deep truths that lie within it—some factual, some full of a greater truth?

Instead of just looking at surface, simplistic meanings of scripture—easy, dogmatic understandings that play to our sense of needing to right, and justifying our prejudices--perhaps God wants us to go deeper?

And then we have Peter's vision. In this vision, God calls into question how we view holy scripture itself. And – God seems to be telling Peter that there are certain portions of the scripture that God doesn't agree with. If that startles you—imagine how it startled Peter.

I know, I know-- he should have been used to it—after all Jesus argued with scripture all the time. *"You have heard it said in scripture that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

And Peter must have learned from his time with Jesus, because he doesn't dismiss this vision that seems to "update" scripture, he pays attention to the vision:

Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

Peter is describing the very clear Levitical law about what animals it was ok to eat, and which were not. The ones that were not were considered "unclean"-- meaning morally or spiritually unpure. I mean, it was really

clear in the bible what was clean and unclean. Everyone knew what was what.

It always feels good to know that we are “in” and others are “out”, right?

But here is God telling Peter that yes, that was the way it was done in the past-- *but this is where we need to go now!*

God wants to make sure Peter understands. He sends the vision three times. And then – just to drive it home—God makes it clear that he’s not just authorizing a new food menu, here, he’s making a larger point.

Peter continues: At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us... And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning....If God gave them the same gift [of the spirit] that he gave us---who was I that I could hinder God?"

Interesting.. Peter—like us-- has been taught definite ways of behaving and judging others based on verses from the bible: rules and practices handed down to him—and to us-- for generations. And now God suddenly sends Peter—and us-- a vision that our understanding of biblical things—based on what we had been taught, and understood—may not, in fact, be always complete...

In Peter’s vision, God declares that the gentiles--people who had been hated and reviled for generations for their way of life, their unusual lifestyles, and for not living like the Jews thought they should live—these same non-Jews were now being declared by God to be “clean”—morally and spiritually pure. And then: God blesses them with his Spirit.

We see today in Peter’s vision a new truth.

Who are the people in our lives that we—as Christians—have been taught to hate and revile for generations for their way of life, their unusual lifestyles, and for not living like the Christians think they should live?

It can be really uncomfortable to understand that scripture isn't always *safe*. It doesn't always urge us towards what we *already* think. And, like Peter, maybe we need to lean into our discomfort. Try to understand the new truths God is still trying to teach us as we become mature enough in our faith to understand them.

Or, we can attempt to limit scripture—to insist that there is only one meaning allowed for each scripture passage. We can ignore Peter's vision: that God can rewrite our hearts.

God will continue to speak to us in new ways. God continues to give us visions of a world larger than we can yet imagine.

His prophets and wise ones sometimes come packaged differently than we expect, like they did for Peter, but they always push our boundaries and enlarge our love for both God and humanity.

"Look!" God says. "I am showing you a new thing? Can you not perceive it?
Amen.