

Sermon Title: **“Hermeneutics: Text, Context, and Reader”**

Bible: **Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 & Mark 12:38-44**

When: on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 10, 2024

Where: about 25 people (plus YouTube Live viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. How to Read the Bible

Last Sunday we celebrated All Saints Sunday, which was after All Saints Day, November 1st, and Halloween, the evening of the Saints, October 31st. October 31st is another important day for Protestant Christians, because it is Reformation Day. In 1517, on October 31st, Martin Luther posted his ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Thanks to many Protestant movements, now we can read the Bible in our own languages. Before the Reformation, only the priests could read the Bible in Latin. There was no Bible available that had been translated into other languages. At that time, congregations could not read the Bible, and could not listen to the Bible, because it was read in Latin only. Communion used to be the most important part of the worship service. After the Reformation, the Bible and the message time became a significant part of the worship service.

And there was a very interesting debate about how to read and interpret the Bible. Is it okay to play the violin in church? Because the Bible is very important, let me change the question.

Is playing the violin mentioned in the Bible? No. Ulrich Zwingli, who was one of the reformation leaders in Switzerland, thought that because there was no mention of playing the violin in the Bible, argued that we should not play the violin in church. Even though he was a musician and violinist, it was known that he stopped playing the violin after reading and studying the Bible. He thought that we should do only what the Bible says to do. If there is no mention of it, we should not do it. He rejected many traditions and tried to follow only what the Bible says. So, it was known that the churches of Zwingli's followers had very simple or poor music in their services. However, Martin Luther had a different idea. He thought that it would be okay to play the violin in the church, because there was no prohibition against playing the violin in the Bible. He thought that we should not do only what the Bible says not to do. So, it is known that there has been abundant and beautiful music in Lutheran churches. It is very interesting how to understand the Bible. Which interpretation do you prefer, not playing the violin or playing the violin? How about the pipe organ? How about an electric organ? How about the piano, the guitar, the drums, and trumpet?

Actually, there was a very controversial theological debate about infant baptism during the Reformation period. Is infant baptism in the Bible? No. Then, should we stop infant baptism? No. We, the United Methodist, respect the tradition of infant baptism, and we also respect our experiences of infant baptism, and the parents and the church's commitment to raise their children together with God's love and grace. Does this mean that all babies need to be

baptized when they are babies? No. It depends on the parents' choice. Many people might regard the United Methodists as being in the middle of the two positions, but I would like to say that we are open-minded; we welcome all, and we embrace many. We, the United Methodist Church, have four resources that inform our theologies, which are the Bible, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. If we have any ideas or theologies about some topics, like playing the violin in the church, infant baptism, female pastors, social justices, etc., we have some ideas or theologies, we might need to think of why and where they are coming from. Believe or not, we already use four resources about how to read the Bible and how to apply it to our lives.. Is my idea from the Bible? Is it from tradition? Is it from the Reason? Or is it from experience?

2. Hermeneutics: Text, Context, and Reader

Probably, the most popular tool to read the Bible with is the idea of hermeneutics, which is the combination of text, context, and reader. The Bible is the text, and the society of the text is the context, and there is the idea of the perspective of the first reader of the Bible. We can be called the second reader. When reading the Book of Ruth today, would you want to have Naomi as your matchmaker? No. That's because we are not the first readers of this text, and because their context is different from ours. My love story is totally different from the love story of Ruth and Boaz. Mihyun and I met first on a blind date. Misun, who was my church friend and Mihyun's co-worker, arranged this blind date. After the blind date, we saw each other for about 7 years, and then, decided to get married. I am thankful and blessed to know

Mihyun and for our 12-year married life. How about reading the story of Ruth and Boaz?

Their love story is totally different from mine and yours. Nevertheless, could you see God's presence, guidance, and blessing there?

Have you heard of picture brides? About one hundred years ago, some women left Korea to come to Hawaii and the mainland United States, just holding a photo of their future husband. They were called Picture Brides. Being a picture Bride could be a way out of poverty for security. There were not enough women living there for the immigrant workers. At that time, there was no internet, no phones—so sending pictures was the only way to know about each other. This Picture Bride and husband-matching was a legal process at that time. Under the limited circumstances, they found love and life. Their children and future generations might be our neighbors. I learned that this story is about not only for some Korean immigrant families in Hawaii, but also some Japanese immigrant families.

3. First Reader and Second Reader

Naomi and Ruth became widows, and they returned to Naomi's homeland. They were like an immigrant family and they were poor, because they lost all of their men, who could make a living for them at that time. So, according to their earthly realities, the love story of Ruth and Boaz made sense to them, right? And can we find God's care and protection for Ruth and Naomi? Can we find God's blessing through their family, their children, and their grandchild, David? If we could, we would understand and accept the testimony of the women in the story, just like the first readers of their story at that time. I believe that this story was not only

for Ruth and Naomi, but also for many women at that time, and for women who are in similar situations today like the Picture Brides. Sometimes, we are so weak and small compared to the big system, but we can find God's presence, comfort, and guidance.

But as the second reader, who lives in the 21st century and in the United States, do we apply this matchmaking story directly to us and our children? No. We care for the poor, widows, and the orphans, or the marginalized. But we do not apply the Bible directly to our situation, because we are not the first reader. The slavery system is mentioned in many places in the Bible. Does this mean that God justifies slavery? Not at all. We are the second reader. Of course, we witness God's guidance and presence through our history. But how about in our current situation? How about the here and now? As Ruth and Naomi experienced God's care in their situation, can we experience God's care and protection in our situation? Where can we see the divine presence in our lives?

4. Like Jesus who Saw a Poor Widow

There was another poor widow in the Gospel of Mark. She gave two small copper coins, which were worth a penny, out of her poverty, while many rich people gave a lot out of their abundance. Does this mean that we should give even out of our poverty? I do not think so. Does this mean that we should give everything we have? I do not think so. My focus is Jesus' perspective upon seeing a poor widow. The penny might be nothing for the rich, but the penny was everything she had. Jesus saw the poor widow and her situation together, the text and the context together, with love and care.

With the same Bible, we can have many different understandings and interpretations. Unfortunately, with the word of God, our faith ancestors and we had justified slavery, oppression of women, war, colonization, and hate against others and strangers. To look at the Bible through the lenses of hermeneutics might be very helpful. To learn about the text itself, to study context, and to distinguish the first readers would be helpful. It is also significant to know who we are as the second readers and what context we are located in. Our Wesleyan quadrilateral, four resources like the Bible, tradition, reason, and experience, is a great tool to understand our ideas and theologies, and where they are coming from. But most importantly, when you read the Bible, and when you live day by day, please hold onto our God who cares for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Please remember our Lord Jesus Christ, who is love. Please be with the Holy Spirit, who heals, liberates, and empowers us. Please do not make our Lord out to be stuck and dead in the book. Our Lord is the living God, who loves you and others. Like Naomi and Ruth met God's care in their days, like the poor widow was understood and accepted by Jesus, like the first readers and many faith ancestors encountered God's holy presence, the living and loving Spirit is with us and in us. Let us live together with our living God here and now and create our stories!

Closing Prayer

Loving and living God, when we read the Bible, when we live day by day, when we face our challenges, and when we experience joys and concerns, please open our eyes to see you, like Naomi and Ruth met you, like the poor widow met you, and like the first readers met you. We want to live with you day by day here and now. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.