

TOXIC LITERALISM

Matthew 21: 23-32 09.27.26
Dean Feldmeyer

From 1996 to 2001, NBC ran a sitcom called *Third Rock from the Sun*.

It featured four aliens from a distant galaxy near the Cepheus–Draco border (which is a real thing) who were sent to study a fairly insignificant planet called Earth.

They are given human form and pose as a family—Dick, the High Commander; Sally, the Security Officer; Tommy, a teenager and the Information Officer; and Harry, who has a transmitter in his head. They settle in Rutherford, Ohio, living in an attic apartment while conducting their observations.

Their mission: observe human customs, emotions, relationships, and social structures; report their findings back to their home world; and maintain their cover as “normal humans”—a task at which they fail spectacularly and hilariously.

Over time, they become more interested in being human than in studying humans. Their mission becomes secondary to the messy, delightful, confusing experience of living on Earth. One of the things that makes it hard for them to live as humans is the way humans communicate, especially in English.

They often find themselves in difficulty because they have heard a metaphorical figure of speech and taken it literally.

In one episode, Sally is in a play, and Dick hears someone tell her to “break a leg!” Dick thinks Sally is in danger. He panics and overreacts, insisting they must protect Sally from whoever is plotting to injure her. He even tries to warn her about “the violent customs of the theater world.”

In another episode, Tommy hears someone say, “I’m all ears,” and freezes, studying the person’s head and genuinely trying to understand how a human could be composed entirely of ears. Later, he asks Dick whether humans can temporarily transform their bodies when they want to pay attention.

The confusion caused when someone takes a figure of speech literally is a familiar trope in television and film, especially science fiction. In *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, a young Vulcan, Mr. Spock, is constantly confounded by human speech. And Scotty, the Scottish chief engineer who speaks in a word salad of Scottish idioms, axioms, and figures of speech, is saddled with a young alien assistant who rarely understands anything he says and takes every word literally. In the movie *Starman*, an alien who has crashed on Earth is learning to drive a car. When his teacher and friend tells him to “kick it”—well, you know.

THE PROBLEMS OF LITERALISM

Literalism in language is usually defined as a rigid interpretation that minimizes or entirely excludes the consideration of underlying intent, context, abstract concepts, or nuances of figurative language.

A literalist refuses to consider inference or context and is fixated on what is explicitly stated.

When Mindy says she is feeling blue, Mork looks at her and reassures her that she is still beige. When she asks if she is too transparent with her friends, he again looks her over and says that she is not transparent but opaque.

Imagine the harm that might be caused if we took phrases literally—phrases like “I’m gonna kill him,” “My dad’s gonna kill me if he finds out,” or “She’s gonna tear him to pieces on the debate stage.”

“This job is killing me.” “I died up there on that stage.” “That comedian killed tonight.” Any of these might cause our alien friend, who takes everything we say literally, some serious distress.

And our alien friend would no doubt call the police after hearing us say, “He stabbed me in the back,” “She spilled her guts,” or “He made a mistake, and they crucified him for it.” Or even, “Green Bay’s quarterback threw a bomb.”

Usually, the problems caused by literalism are played for laughs. But in real life, literalism can cause painful and sometimes dangerous misunderstandings.

It was two forms of literalism that recently tore the United Methodist Church apart: Wesleyan Literalism and Biblical Literalism.

Wesleyan literalism insists that anyone who calls themselves Methodist must base their church administration and beliefs on the exact words John Wesley wrote and said. No interpretation or modernization of those words is allowed.

Example: the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. John Wesley himself never used the term *Quadrilateral*, but Methodist scholar Albert C. Outler coined it in 1962 after studying Wesley’s sermons, journals, and letters. Outler observed that Wesley consistently drew on four sources when forming theological conclusions: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

Outler’s term became widely accepted and was formally incorporated into United Methodist doctrinal standards in 1972. Literalists insist that because Wesley never used the word *quadrilateral* in his recorded speeches and writings, it has no place in Methodist thinking.

Most United Methodists believe that a scholarly interpretation of Wesley’s works allows us to create an understanding of them like the quadrilateral and to let it inform our theological and ethical thinking.

Example: Wesley once said, in reference to the Bible, “I am a man of one book.” Literalists have taken this to mean that Methodists must use the Bible—and only the Bible—in forming theological doctrine. They do not consider that Wesley may have been using hyperbole. He was a widely read scholar, after all, well versed in classics by Augustine, Abelard, Anselm, and Aquinas—the “four A’s.” In fact, it was while studying Martin Luther’s *Commentary on Romans* that Wesley had his “heart strangely warmed” conversion experience.

Biblical literalism is so widespread in our culture that examples are everywhere. The Ark Encounter and the Creation Museum in northern Kentucky are just two. They insist that the Genesis accounts of creation and the flood must be accepted as scientific fact exactly as they appear in the Bible—preferably the King James Version.

Fundamentalism, which arose in the 1920s, was a literalist movement that insisted Christians were required to accept every word in the Bible as dictated by God. Every account was to be understood as historical fact, and every rule and law was to be obeyed word for word under threat of eternal damnation. If science or reason called any of those accounts into question, then science and reason had to be rejected. If compassion or kindness made us doubt the rules or laws, then compassion or kindness had to be rejected.

The fact is that literalism, in both its Wesleyan and biblical forms, is fundamentally hypocritical. Literalists say they take Scripture literally, without interpretation, but that is simply not true. Everyone—**EVERYONE**—interprets Scripture.

Rare indeed is even the most ardent literalist who truly believes that adulterers or homosexuals should be executed, as prescribed in Leviticus 20. You will never find a literalist who believes that disobedient children should be stoned to death, as Deuteronomy 21 says.

We all, literalists and progressives, filter the precepts of the Bible through other things when we decide which passages to take literally and which ones to set aside. The question is what shall we use as a filter? Will it be our politics? Will it be our personal preferences and prejudices? Or will it be Jesus – his teaching, his kindness, his love?

THE LESSON OF THE TWO SONS

In today’s Gospel text, Jesus offers an alternative to mindless literalism. The account starts with a discussion about authority.

When Jesus begins teaching in the temple, the chief priests and elders approach him and ask by what authority he is doing “these things.” They want to know: What seminary did he graduate from? Which version of the Bible is he quoting—the King James Version or the Revised Standard Version?

Matthew’s use of the phrase “these things” opens the question to more than teaching, however. By what authority, one might ask, does Jesus do any of the outrageous things he does—heal the sick, work miracles, defy established authority, challenge Jewish and Roman leaders, and teach countercultural ideas?

Predictably, Jesus turns the discussion on its head. He makes it not about himself, but about the nature of authority. His answer seems to paraphrase Forrest Gump: “Righteousness is as righteousness does.”

He begins by asking the church leaders of his day whether John the Baptist’s ministry was authentic. They hem and haw and finally admit that his calling was probably from God—not because they believe it, but because they fear the reaction of the people standing around if they say otherwise. They are more interested in maintaining their position of political privilege than in searching for and discovering moral truth.

Jesus responds, “Well, if you believed he was an authentic prophet of God, then why didn’t you do what he said?” Remember that time when John said if you have two coats and your neighbor has none, give one of your coats to your neighbor and do the same with food? So, how many coats do you have and how much food is stocked in your larder?

Then he tells a parable:

A man has two sons. One says he will obey the father and doesn’t. The other says he won’t obey the father but does. Which son is truly obedient? Which son can be said to have obeyed the father’s will?

All agree that the obedient, righteous son is the one who actually **DOES** the will of the father.

By this point in the Gospel, we have already heard the Great Commandment nine chapters earlier (Matthew 22:37–40). Jesus has already said that the commandments to love God and love our neighbor supersede and gather all the other commandments into themselves.

The only question left for us is: What does “love” mean? Here, Jesus seems to say unambiguously that love is something we **DO**. It is not about how we feel toward other people, or what we say about our relationships with them—including our children—but about how we treat them.

People convicted of abusing their children commonly insist that they could not possibly be considered abusive because they love their kids. Criminals often insist, with a Bible clutched to their chest, that just because they did one bad thing does not mean they are bad people.

And many are the Christians—and here we arrive at our main point for this morning—who argue that as long as we believe the right things, as long as we take every word in the Bible as literal, historical fact, and as long as we are “born again,” none of our other behaviors matter.

They can stand outside the funeral of a gay son or daughter and shout insults and threats. They can attack people who do not belong to the correct political party until those people feel so unwelcome that they leave the church. They can dance on the graves of children killed in war because those children were on the wrong side. They can threaten Jews, gay people, immigrants, people of color, and liberals with violence. And all of this is considered acceptable because they have found a verse of Scripture that can be interpreted to allow or at least not to

condemn it. They can ignore a politician's corruption, immorality, and dishonesty as long as that politician belongs to their party.

God calls us through Jesus Christ to love our neighbor—and our neighbor is not only the person who lives next door, but every person, everywhere, who needs our help and care. Loving our neighbor is not about what we feel; it is about what we do.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS – LITERALLY

We must be careful about believing literally everything the Bible says, because—

In Leviticus 20: 10 it says, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death."

And in verse 13, it says, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death."

And in verse 27, it says, "A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death..."

In Deuteronomy 21 it says: "Rebellious and stubborn children are to be taken to the gate and there be stoned to death by the elders of the town."

In Leviticus 19:33 it says, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself..."

In 1 Corinthians it says that "Women shall remain silent" in church.

In Matthew 19 it says that any man "who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

And in Matthew 5, it says that "...any man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (And what do we do with adulterers?)

No one—not even the most hard-shell fundamentalist—takes the Bible entirely literally. We all interpret what we read in Scripture so that we can apply it faithfully and responsibly in our own time and place.

With that in mind, it seems to me that when we stand before our Maker, God will not ask whether we believed everything we found in the Bible as factual, propositional truth. God will simply ask how we treated God's people. Did we judge them? Did we concentrate all our energy and creativity on changing them? Did we ridicule and belittle them, trying to show them where they were wrong?

Or did we love them? Did we pick them up when they fell? Did we feed them when they were hungry, visit them when they were sick or in jail? Did we encourage them when they were

down? Did we share with them from our excess and sometimes even from our necessities? In other words, did we love them?

Because that, brothers and sisters, is the true measure of the gospel and the rule by which God will measure our lives. May his measurement be just and merciful.

Amen.