The Diaconal Hermeneutic
Session One: **Hermeneutics: The Art of Interpretation**

Hermeneutics is one of those polysyllabic Greek-origin words we use in church circles to try to capture and express important ideas. The intent is good, but it often confounds clarity. The term came into use first specifically in relation to how we engage scripture. From the first centuries of the Christian experience, hermeneutics and its companion exegesis, have been tools for understanding the diverse books and writings that became codified as the Bible. In the 21st century the concept has a wider application, including being embraced as a valuable tool in post-modern scholarly work in disciplines other than theology.

Some years ago, in a session of persons responsible for adult formation in the church, including diaconal formation, Prof. John Kater, then of CDSP and still a CALL instructor, made the following statement. “Scripture is ALWAYS interpreted.” Now, at one level, this is what a friend of mine calls a BFO—blinding flash of the obvious. Yet, in the context of the issues that continue to disrupt the Anglican Communion, and the exceptional role that religion played in the last two presidential elections and the fallout thereof, and items showing up daily in the media, it is a profoundly important statement. Scripture is ALWAYS interpreted.

In the 19th century, in a somewhat panicked response to the claims of emerging modern science, some elements in western Protestant Christianity made the counter claim that the text of the Bible was literally true and its truth transcended (or simply dismissed as error) all others. It is the central point of view that sets religion over and against all science—a stance that is in the ascendency at this very moment. This stance was then shored up with the additional claim that the text was not only true but inerrantly so. That is, everything, every word was true and the directly dictated work of God. The Bible contains no “error” of any kind.

The Roman Catholic Church not only turned its back on modern science but declared “modernism”—any attempt to bring emerging scholarly tools and ideas into the arena of theology and scripture—to be a heresy. Definitive authority was sited in the church, more specifically, its hierarchy (viz. papal infallibility,1870) and scripture was sidelined and not to be critically assessed at all.

Both Protestant and Catholic reactions fell heavily on an emerging group of scholars in both streams of the church who were applying newly defined critical tools to scripture in search of fuller understanding. That one could interpret at all was at issue. In many quarters this has been resolved, and ‘modern’ critical tools embraced and used widely. There are, however, still strong voices for only the literal (and inerrant) understanding of the text of the Bible, and the differences over interpretation itself, not to mention varieties of interpretation that inform current disputes over authority, power, gender, human sexuality, and ministry. Today this is sometimes expressed as the only truth being “the plain meaning of scripture.”

So, to state that scripture is <u>always</u> interpreted is to stand against all the reactions to the “modern” and to make a fundamental statement about meaning in the life and ministry of the church. Among other things, it invites us to look back over two millennia to learn how scripture has been interpreted and how we do so today.

The two Greek words, ***hermeneutics*** and ***exegesis*** point us to two distinct approaches. Exegesis identifies a collection of ways to get at the structure and context of biblical texts. In a slim volume I had students read in my Homiletics course at The School for Deacons a dozen forms of critical analysis

are introduced. They show us how to assess a text for its form, various components of language(s) used, its likely historical origins and context, its authorship and original intent, to name a few. Exegesis plumbs the riches of context. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, addresses the bigger picture. What is the overall stance, point of view, or lens through which the text was created, but more importantly through which lenses is the contemporary reader engaging the text?

If it helps, a couple of simple examples. In the latter part of the 20th century, an approach to scripture emerged that looked for the place and role of women, or the conspicuous absence thereof, and, more broadly, the expression of the feminine. It became identified as a "feminist hermeneutic." No one claimed it was the only point of view nor that it was a "truth" that overrode other truths. It was asserted that it gave us all a fuller understanding of scripture and another way in which ancient texts can speak to contemporary experience. At the turn of the previous century, Albert Schweitzer launched a 'quest for the historical Jesus," which had its own, inherent hermeneutic implications. But, more than that, he posited that the most important element of Jesus' message was the coming of end times and a *parousia* or second coming. He consistently applied an "eschatological hermeneutic" to the Gospels and Epistles which yielded its own, distinct Christian voice or understanding in Schweitzer's historical time and place.

In the same way that there is no one literal, or inerrant, or "the plain meaning" way to read and understand the Bible, there is no one hermeneutic that is THE way to read, understand, and learn from scripture. It is important, however, that we become aware first of all, that no matter who we are or where we are "on our spiritual journey," we bring our own, unconscious hermeneutic to scripture. Ironically, it may be that we are fully schooled in a lot of sophisticated linguistic and conceptual tools in our education, life, and work, but, in the area of religion, have internalized an odd collection of propositions, including some of the claims of literalism, (and some that turn out not to be found anywhere in the Bible), that we have picked up along the way. We come by some of these from the very well-intentioned (and pedagogically appropriate) simplified and implicitly literal teaching in Sunday School. Being intentional about our hermeneutic stances is an essential part of becoming mature Christian persons in our increasingly secularized environment.

Again, with some irony, various secular academic disciplines have recently turned to hermeneutics to translate their work into a constantly changing 21st century context. Philosophy and some of the social sciences are now trying "philosophical hermeneutics" as a key to interpretation. The loss of absolutes that marks post-modernism leads some to seek meaning in narratives in context. The telling of the who and why of our selves, or of others studied in our several environments will point to basic underlying meaning. You could unbundle that sentence to note how much it looks like it describes parables told *in situ* by Jesus to communicate Good News.

Looking back, we find ready affirmation of John Kater's BFO statement in the earliest writings we have from the emerging Christian community. From the very beginning, when the Bible for Christians was much of what we now know as the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), there were several known and accepted ways to understand, i.e. interpret, the texts. As letters and Gospels were written and circulated, eventually being codified into a New Testament, the same approaches continued to be used. With various emphases and the occasional new wrinkle this was true until the 'fundamentalist' reaction of the latter 19th century, described above.

To give you a brief sense of the varieties of hermeneutic in the early church we can look to two identified "schools" of theology, one in the community in Antioch and the other centered in the great Greek intellectual hub of Alexandria. The Antiochene school approached scripture more "literally"

and/or historically. Theirs is not the 19th century use of literal but simply a pointing to the story as told. The historical approach appreciated the unfolding of texts over time and, most critically, held that some texts were more important than others. In Alexandria scholars emphasized more an allegorical approach as the way scripture teaches. They also valued a mystical hermeneutic for which scripture was, like the visual icon, a window into a deeper reality and inexplicable experience. The philosopher/theologian Origen was perhaps the most articulate champion among those we call the early church fathers (or the Patristic era), of a multifaceted exegesis of scripture. He has been discredited for some of his ideas and his rash act of self-mutilation, but his framing of the interpretation of scripture has endured. So, from the beginning, and throughout Christian history, there have been many different, valid ways to "see" scripture and thus, to interpret into a contemporary context.

These four—'literal', historic, allegorical, and mystical--and more, have been actively embraced through centuries of Christian history. Scripture has always been interpreted, explained, appreciated in a variety of ways. A multi-faceted hermeneutic approach has always been seen as enriching and deepening understanding and faith itself.

In addition to looking into scripture, a hermeneutic (or several of them) have also been ways of looking at and explaining church and the social, economic, cultural, and political context in which it exists. It is this application of a hermeneutic that leads me to posit a hermeneutic of Orders, and then a specifically diaconal hermeneutic. But we have a couple more steps to take before we get there—which we will do next week. At this moment, turn to the discussion topics so we see how we are doing so far.

A Footnote of sorts: Why Brueggemann?

We are invited to read Walter Brueggemann.s *The Prophetic Imagination*, as an integral part of this course, albeit we will be directly wrestling with it in the latter sessions. Why have I chosen to do that? Apart from the stance that I think every deacon should read, mark, and inwardly digest the amazing work found in *The Prophetic Imagination*, whether or not they are taking this course, I think my attempt to posit a diaconal hermeneutic is a modest exercise of the prophetic imagination.

Hubris on my part, but it provides a framework that rescues the concept from being "just my idea."

I think the diaconate, in the renewal that began in TEC in the mid-20th century and culminated with the 1979 BCP and its huge gift of the current Baptismal Covenant, has a distinct prophetic dimension. Thus, learning from the experience that begins with Moses and works to this present moment, is essential for a full understanding of deacons, *diakonia*, and the praxis of Good News in the 21st Century.

There is a second Brueggemann book, also pretty compact, called *The Hopeful Imagination.* If you are intrigued by the book we are all going to read, you may want to get this one as well. In it the author drills down into the works of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—each writing from a different stance or situation—to address the core message introduced in *The Prophetic Imagination.*

So let's see where this journey takes us.