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“Context and the Search for Truth and Meaning” Tom Wagner

As advertised, I plan to discuss context in relation to news media, sacred texts and history. People familiar with my sermons and essays know that I strive to connect my subjects to broader streams of literary and historical context. Discerning context does not require highly specialized training, though practice is helpful. It is an interpretive skill commonly taught in grade school. Think back to when we learned to read and were still adding new words to our vocabulary. Teachers advised us to look to the surrounding text for clues to the meaning of unfamiliar words--before pulling out a dictionary. We can apply a similar approach to current events, scripture or history. Admittedly, in an age of memes, sound bites and big lies, discerning truth and meaning may be more challenging. Yet, taking current events, Bible verses and historical episodes out of context has long been a way of manipulating reality.

First, let's turn our attention to the news media. While many people may consider it mere background noise, it is something that touches our lives daily. Perhaps the most useful college course I took as part of my Peace Studies major was titled “Current Issues in Peace & Justice”. Students chose to follow several news sources on a particular topic throughout the semester, and periodically shared our observations in class. The primary lesson I gained was to consult a variety of news sources, heavy on print media and lighter on the electronic forms. Just as eating a variety of foods makes for a healthier diet, following multiple news sources may grant us a more complete picture of reality. As matters stood during my college days over 40 years ago, print was preferable to broadcast news for the simple fact that print provided more content, and hence more context. Most radio and TV news programs typically consisted of headlines plus a few top paragraphs from longer wire reports. That is not to completely dismiss broadcast media, but simply consider its limitations. Choices in our current media environment are more challenging with the rise of cable news and the internet, and more importantly a greatly diminished print media. Far fewer journalists work in newsrooms and leave us with far less coverage, especially on the local and regional levels. While I am forced by circumstances to access some news online, I continue to choose written articles and essays over videos.

Many of us may remember Paul Harvey, a widely syndicated radio broadcaster from the 1950s into the early 21st Century. During much of that era, he presented a daily feature called “The Rest of the Story”. In each brief episode, he would read little known background details about an event, historical figure or a current newsmaker, without revealing the identity of the subject until the end of the program. Generally, I found his story telling entertaining and occasionally informative. I was less impressed with Harvey's “News and Comment” program, which aired weekdays at noon. In a 15-minute broadcast, he delivered headlines, product endorsements and anecdotes, giving listeners very little indication when he was switching from one genre to the next. Though Harvey held a few independent opinions, his right-wing bias remains widely acknowledged.

Lois' dad, Lew Jancek, use to tell how he discovered Harvey's bias through an anecdote in which the broadcaster failed to tell “the rest of the story.” At the machine shop, Lew and fellow workers often listened to Harvey over lunch break. During one program, Harvey told a story of a worker who asked his employer to provide a motorized devise so he could get around the plant floor more efficiently in performing his job. Harvey implied it was a ridiculous request and that the worker was simply lazy. Lew later learned missing details from another source. In addition to radio and TV newscasts, Lew subscribed to The Muskegon Chronicle and The Detroit Free Press among other print sources. The worker in the story had experienced an on-the-job leg injury, and had suggested the motorized devise as a way he could continue performing his duties. [I suspect this was in the early 1980s, before the passage of the Americans with Disability Act (1990)]. Not only did my father-in-law stop listening to Paul Harvey, he told his co-workers why.

Turning to sacred texts, I've often heard people say one can argue nearly any point based on the Bible. Granted the Hebrew and Christian scriptures contain numerous voices collected over several centuries. However, I suspect that people fit scripture to their own prior beliefs primarily by quoting single verses or

even phrases while neglecting the larger context. Several weeks ago, Sue McIntire sought my comments on a Bible quoting meme someone had sent her. It made an anti-immigrant point in a photograph of a page from the Bible, highlighting two verses: "Foreigners who live in your land will gain more and more power, while you gradually lose yours. They will have money to lend you, but you will have none to lend to them. In the end they will be your rulers." [GNTA] It included a comment: "THE BIBLE SAID IT ALL" in all capital letters. The quote was from Deuteronomy 28:43-44. My first question was how do these verses fit into the larger context? The passage is from the book of Deuteronomy, the 5th book of the Hebrew Bible and the last book of the section known as the Torah, which can be translated as either law or teachings. At the end of the previous book of Numbers, the people of Israel have temporarily settled east of the Jordan River, in anticipation of entering Canaan after wandering the Sinai desert for 40 years. Much of the following text in Deuteronomy is cast as a farewell address from Moses, resuming the narrative with Moses' final days at the end of the book. Ch. 5-28, including the meme post, recap the laws or teachings received at Sinai/Horeb. These chapters restate many passages from Exodus and Leviticus. I should note that these laws or teachings included not only religious rituals, but also rules for social relationships. Some of those passages very specifically concern treating foreigners well.

Ch. 28 serves as the conclusion to the recitation of the law. The chapter emphasizes the conditional nature of the covenant by listing 6 blessings for obedience (vv. 1-6) and 6 parallel curses (vv. 15-19) for disobedience. The lists of blessings and curses are both followed by commentary. Commentary on the curses is significantly longer than that concerning the blessings. The verses from the meme, vv. 43-44, come from the lengthy commentary on the curses. Israel's disobedience to the covenant would result in the destruction of their nation. It's a theme echoed by the Prophets in an attempt to understand the demise of both Israel and Judah centuries later. The weight of injustice can bring down a society.

Now I want to turn to a New Testament passage commonly quoted out of context. Folks often recite the grisly phrase, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" to justify returning violence for violence. While the saying does have Hebrew Bible roots, which I will discuss in a moment, the most popularly quoted and shortest version comes from the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-42. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." [NRSV] The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth as the long awaited messiah of Israel. This passage comes from the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew Ch. 5-7, the first of five teaching discourses in the text. Our quote is part of a section beginning in 5:17 where Jesus assures his listeners, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill." He then proceeds through a series of teachings each prefaced with the words, "You have heard that it was said....But I say to you...." Fulfillment of the law referenced in v. 17 may be seen as less the creation of a new ethic, but a fulfillment of original intentions. While many readers consider turning the other cheek as a weak response to violence, alternative voices have seen it as an assertion of one's dignity in a land under foreign occupation. The "second mile" reference later in the passage is based on a law permitting Roman soldiers to demand a person carry their bags for a mile. Taking the intuitive to carry it the extra mile could put the soldier in legal jeopardy.

Jesus was likely referring to one of three passages from the Torah using the "eye for an eye" language: Exodus 21:24-25, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. Though embedded under different topics, each passage includes more detail than Jesus' quote. The longest, Exodus 21:24-25 reads "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" [NRSV] This list makes it clear that the intent was to limit bloodshed in a society where blood feuds were common. The Torah clearly limits violence to a proportional response. That said, my upbringing comes closer to a quip attributed to M. K. Gandhi "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind." Moving on to history, I'm going to focus on what may be considered an obscure encounter between a well known American historical figure and my own faith tradition, the Dunkers, also known as Brethren or more specifically the Church of the Brethren. For much of the 20th and now the 21st centuries Brethren

authors have often quoted an excerpt from The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. Generally, they have presented it as early evidence of Dunker noncreedalism, something Unitarian Universalists would applaud. The fact that Franklin even recognized the existence of a small, plain, pacifist sect has encouraged its continued use. Plus, it is one of the few times Franklin had anything positive to say about German immigrants. Dunker historian, educator and Pennsylvania Governor Martin G. Brumbaugh (1862-1930) first quoted the excerpt in the late 19th century with some minor editing. Yet his was a fuller version of the quote than used by many later Brethren authors. I'm going to read Franklin's original two paragraphs because it gives clues to his purpose for telling the story. Please bare with me as I wade through his 18th century grammar.

"These embarrassments that the Quakers suffered from having established and published it as one of their principles that no kind of war was lawful, and which, being once published, they could not afterwards, however they might change their minds, easily get rid of, reminds me of what I think a more prudent conduct in another sect among us, that of the Dunkers. I was acquainted with one of its founders, Michael Welfare [Wohlfahrt], soon after it appeared. He complained to me that they were grievously calumniated by the zealots of other persuasions, and charged with abominable principles and practices, to which they were utter strangers. I told him this had always been the case with new sects, and that, to put a stop to such abuse, I imagined it might be well to publish the articles of their belief, and the rules of their discipline. He said that it had been proposed among them, but not agreed to, for this reason: "When we were first drawn together as a society," says he, "it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so far as to see that some doctrines, which we once esteemed truths, were errors; and that others, which we had esteemed errors, were real truths. From time to time He has been pleased to afford us farther light, and our principles have been improving, and our errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we are arrived at the end of this progression, and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge; and we fear that, if we should once print our confession of faith, we should feel ourselves as if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive farther improvement, and our successors still more so, as conceiving what we their elders and founders had done, to be something sacred, never to be departed from."

This modesty in a sect is perhaps a singular instance in the history of mankind, every other sect supposing itself in possession of all truth, and that those who differ are so far in the wrong; like a man traveling in foggy weather, those at some distance before him on the road he sees wrapped up in the fog, as well as those behind him, and also the people in the fields on each side, but near him all appears clear, though in truth he is as much in the fog as any of them. To avoid this kind of embarrassment, the Quakers have of late years been gradually declining the public service in the Assembly and in the magistracy, choosing rather to quit their power than their principle."²

It is true early Brethren resisted adopting creeds in reaction to the formal faith statements imposed by the established state churches back in Europe. They wanted to be open to new truths they could glean as they studied the New Testament together. Yet at the turn of the last century, some church leaders, Brumbaugh being chief among them, were pushing the denomination toward greater assimilation with

the surrounding American culture. The resulting redefinition of Dunker noncreedalism shifted the group ethos from a communal discipline to one of individual conscience.

A point often ignored by modern Dunker authors is that Michael Wohlfahrt had been baptized by the Brethren in 1725, but he soon became an early member of the schismatic Ephrata Community under the leadership of Conrad Beissel, sometimes called 7th Day Dunkers. While the Ephrata group shared many beliefs and practices with the original Dunkers, some of their more unique practices like celibacy, sabbatarianism and kosher diet led to malicious rumors about this new break away sect. That explains Wohlfahrt's complaints reported by Franklin. Wohlfahrt's denominational affiliation may be a minor point, but part of the context to consider.

Far more importantly, Dunker authors have usually ignored Franklin's references to the Quakers at the beginning and end of the original two paragraphs. Curiously, Brumbaugh included the Quaker reference from the first paragraph in his quotation, but it comes off a bit awkward. Opening with, "These embarrassments that the Quakers suffered..." is a clue that Franklin's story is part of a longer discussion. The other difficulty for a Dunker audience is that Franklin is clearly criticizing the Quaker peace testimony, a value shared by both Dunkers and Quakers. Indeed, in the fuller context Franklin used the story of his encounter with Wohlfahrt as final part of a rambling 8-page polemic against Quaker pacifism. Much of the prior material recounts Franklin's struggles to form a colonial militia (or association as he calls it) in the 1740s. It was an era when Britain was at war with Spain. In fact Pennsylvania was relatively isolated from direct attack by other European colonies compared to most English colonies directly on the Atlantic coast. Due to Quaker domination of the Pennsylvania Assembly, it was impossible to pass government funding for a militia, so Franklin used his influence to found a volunteer association, funded by private contributions. The embarrassments referred to had to do with compromises Quaker leaders made when pressed by the British government to help fund military measures. Eventually most Quaker leaders would leave the Assembly during the French & Indian War rather than collaborate with the war effort.

While this may seem like a minor episode in American history, it does add context. Context gives us better understanding and perhaps a measure of empathy. History and other stories told in different voices than the standard dead white men narrative are not simply alternative histories that are easily marginalized. They add to the context and help us gain a more complete understanding of truth and meaning. Even my words this morning should be measured by the larger context of current events, the traditions of scripture and history. They who have ears, let them hear.

Notes

1See Martin G. Brumbaugh, *A History of the German Baptist Brethren in Europe and America*, (Mt. Morris, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1899) pp. 527-528.

2The *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, (NY: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909) pp. 115-116. The longer discussion prior to this quote starts on p. 109.