

## **“Banned Books and the Bible”**

John 1:1-5 (Inclusive Bible)

In the beginning, there was the Word; the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God. The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being. In the Word was life, and that life was humanity’s light— a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.

Genesis 19:30-37 (The Message)

Lot left Zoar and went into the mountains to live with his two daughters; he was afraid to stay in Zoar. He lived in a cave with his daughters. One day the older daughter said to the younger, “Our father is getting old and there’s not a man left in the country by whom we can get pregnant. Let’s get our father drunk with wine and have intercourse with him. We’ll get children through our father—it’s our only chance to keep our family alive.” They got their father drunk with wine that very night. The older daughter went and had intercourse with him. He was oblivious, knowing nothing of what she did. The next morning the older said to the younger, “Last night I slept with my father. Tonight, it’s your turn. We’ll get him drunk again and then you sleep with him. We’ll both get a child through our father and keep our family alive.” So that night they got their father drunk again and the younger went in and had intercourse with him. Again he was oblivious, knowing nothing of what she did. Both daughters became pregnant by their father, Lot.”

“In the beginning, there was the Word; the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God.”

Strung together, the Word becomes a story, a story we love to tell. It is a sacred story, in which the Word is present.

The late Eli Wiesel said: **“God created human beings because God loves stories.”**

Writer, Charlie Fink adds: **“Stories are how we make sense of our lives and of the world.”**

I agree. A long time ago, long before people knew how to write, they created and told stories to help make sense of the life and of the world. These were passed down from generation to generation, some becoming sacred in their telling, giving meaning to the lives of the people who heard them.

Stories were and still are how we communicate with others. Stories help us process what has and is happening in our lives and world. They help to shape us as individuals and as a community. This has always been so.

Stories, in the many forms they take, help us understand the meaning of life and death and grief we all experience.

They show us what kindness, compassion, mercy, and goodness and love look like in our lives and in the lives of others.

Stories also reveal to us our human fallibility, our brokenness, and the evil and harm we can do to one another, while lifting up our need for forgiveness, grace, mercy, reconciliation, and healing.

In short, stories tell us what it means to be fully human.

So it baffles me as to why some people want to “ban” books written about what it means to be a human being?

Yet, ever since stories have been told and then written down, some people have sought to ban them from being shared with others because they are somehow offended by another person’s story.

There is a long history of people who have sought to ban books, and book banning is seeing a revival in our own nation. There is a concerted effort by some political and religious leaders on local and national levels to have books banned based on their own morals and judgmental views of other people and history.

Harvey J. Graff, writing in Publishers Weekly, says: **“Banning books is an effort, unknowingly, to resurrect the early modern Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation against both radical Catholics and early Protestants, which attempted to halt unauthorized reading, including curtailing the ability of individuals to read for themselves.”** (December 31, 2021)

Under Hitler, books were banned and burned categorically by the Nazi government if the authors had Jewish lineage, communistic or pacifist sympathies. A person found to have any of these books or materials could lose their German citizenship or worse, be put in a concentration camp or killed.

Perhaps one of the most interesting attempts at book banning, while attempting to bind multiple sacred books of scripture into one book, happened at the Council of Nicaea around 397 CE.

Religious leaders, under the Emperor Constantine, came together, and created what we know as the Bible.

While there was some agreement on which books to include in the "Canon," not everyone was in total agreement. Some disagreed over which Gospels should be included. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John made the cut. The Gospels of Thomas, Judas, Peter, and Mary Madeline didn't make it.

We tend to divide the Bible into the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the New Testament, but did you know there is actually another section known as the Apocrypha, which means "hidden". It contains writings by multiple authors, written a few hundred years before Jesus, and after the Hebrew Scriptures were finalized as the Torah.

The Bible and the books contained within it has always been controversial because of its content, and because of that, it has been deemed dangerous, inappropriate, and too explicit due to violent imagery, and stories of rape, incest, adultery, domestic and sexual abuse, murder, mass killings of children, women and men, exploitation and enslavement of people.

We sing the old Sunday school song, **"the B-i-b-l-e, yes that's the book for me; I stand alone on the Word of God - the B-i-b-l-e"** but we really don't read all of the Word of God, we just cherry pick the stories or parts of the stories we want to read to our children and ourselves.

We love the cute story of Noah's ark and how God saved the animals from the flood, but we never really point out that God committed mass murder, the genocide of every man, woman and child who lived. We also very seldom tell the story of how Noah, when the flood ended, got drunk and naked to the embarrassment of his sons.

We tell the story of the young shepherd boy, David, who used his slingshot to kill the Goliath, but leave out the part of him using a sword to cut off Goliath's head and then, with blood dripping from it, paraded it around for all to see.

Abraham was the father of three faiths, but only because he, forced his wife, Sarah's servant, Hagar, to have intercourse with him, (raping her) so he could have a male heir. Then Sarah, in a jealous rage, abused Hagar when she became pregnant and bore a son, Ishmael, forcing them to flee for fear of their lives.

We tell the story of King David and Bathsheba, who becomes the mother of King Solomon, but we downplay that David, already married and with his own concubine, lusts after Bathsheba, who is married to a general in David's military, forcing her against her will to have sex with him, and then has her husband murdered, so he could marry Bathsheba.

In another little-known story of David, he and the son of King Saul, Jonathan, became very close, and I mean, if you understand what the Bible is saying, very close to each other, to the point, in 1 Samuel 18, it is said that David loved Jonathan more than women. I am going to leave that right there.

Then there is the story of Judah, one of the sons of Jacob/Israel, and a brother to Joseph. Judah's son, Er, married Tamar. I bet you haven't heard her name mentioned nor story. Having married, Er, who God deems as wicked and kills him, she is forced to marry his brothers, yes, brothers, until she can get pregnant with a male child. Each brother meets a tragic demise. Her father-in-law, Judah, that Judah, one of the 12 tribes of Israel fame, and for a which a kingdom is named, is abusive of her, as if it was her fault. Forbidding her to take control of her own life and body, Tamar dresses up like a prostitute, disguising herself from Judah, hangs out on the streets, where Judah, seeing her, decides to have sex with her, his own daughter-in-law, who become pregnant with his child.

And then there are the daughters of Lot. As we read this morning, they decide to get their father drunk, so he will have intercourse with them, and impregnate them.

"The B-i-b-l-e, yes, that's the book for me, I stand alone on the Word of God..."

After reading from the Bible, the Holy Book of God, we sometimes say, **"This is the Word of God"** to which people say, **"Thanks be to God!"**

To be clear then, all of the stories of rape, sexual abuse, incest, domestic abuse, murder, drunkenness, violence against other people, are the "Word of God" we give thanks for hearing and believing!

Across the nation and in local communities, elected officials from Governors of states like Florida, Texas and Virginia to school board members, and parent groups are demanding books be banned from classrooms and libraries.

Challenges to books are even taking place here in our state and our own communities.

Those demanding books be banned are doing so because they do not feel that their children and youth should be exposed to stories that talk about rape, incest, inappropriate sexual relationships, men loving men, violent imagery and murder, and history that make their students (and themselves) take a critical look at the role of slavery, oppression and injustices of one race over against another that still are impacting our relationships today.

So books like the Harry Potter series, Angie Thomas' young adult novel "The Hate U Give", John Green's "Looking for Alaska", Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", John Steinbeck's classic "Of Mice and Men", and Maia Kobabe's recent graphic novel, "Gender Queer" have been banned or challenged.

Yet, if parents and community members are demanding books like these be banned from schools and libraries, then, I, as a reader, an educator, and a minister, demand that the Bible, the Word of God, also be banned for the very reason some want to ban these other books.

Let's ban the Bible! Let's demand the Bible and all books that have any images or stories that reflect the multiple offensive and inappropriate images found in the Scriptures be banned from library shelves!

Who is with me on banning the Bible! Can I get an Amen!

Or, how about we not ban any book?

Books, including those that have been banned for all the reasons that I have mentioned, contain words. Words that when strung together, become stories.

Stories that God loved so much, that God created humans, all humans, of all ethnicity, gender, religious and political beliefs, from all walks of life; stories about the good and evil within each and all of us.

Here at Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church, following our reading of the Bible, we say: **"For the Word of God in Scripture, For the Word of God among us, For the Word of God within us, We give thanks to God."**

If anyone, any parent, any community group, any school board member or any other elected official demands a book be banned or raises a challenge to it, then the Bible as the Word of God needs to also be banned.

Because in each word an author has strung together into multiple words to tell a story in book form, a story that reflects the humanness of their characters, even as offensive as it may be to a few of us, tells the story of all of us.

And the story of all of us, whether in the Bible or novel, tells the story of the sacred Word that was in the beginning with God, and in that Word was life, and that life was humanity's light.

That light shines in and through all of us. Every story we tell and every book we read, has the sacred light in it. As much as people try to ban that Light from shining, revealing something of the honest truth of who we are, by seeking to cover it with the darkness of their own prejudices and judgements and self-righteous beliefs, the Word still shines in the darkness and it can never be banned.

Amen