

Taking the Bible Seriously

September 19, 2021

I Take the Bible Too Seriously . . .

Thank you so much to Sindy and Anna and Ed for leading the Bible Presentation to our 2nd and 3rd graders this year! In my email to the congregation on Friday, I talked about how, because of COVID, there are a lot of things that are going to be different this ReUnion Sunday, that some of our “beloved traditions” are going to have to change.

I’m glad that this Bible presentation is not one of those things. To ceremonially share the scriptures with our children always brings me joy, and to have our adults hear, too, that the Bible is precious, that it contains stories for us all, and that the Holy Spirit works in its pages and through its words is a message we all need to hear regularly.

Another church that I served handed out compasses, reading glasses, and mirrors along with the Bibles they presented. Compasses, to symbolize that what is found in the Bible can help us find our way. Reading glasses, to symbolize that the Bible can help us see things more clearly. And mirrors, to symbolize both that the Bible is reflective of the time and place in which it is written, and that what we bring to it will be reflected in how we understand it, too.

I’m often asked, “as a progressive Christian, how much of the Bible do you accept to be true, and how do you determine what isn’t?” Folks will often go on, “I suspect you don’t support all the God-sanctioned genocide, misogyny, patriarchy, xenophobia, sex slavery, human trafficking, homophobia, and baby-murdering that can be found within it, so how much can you throw out and still be Christian?” It’s a great question. You’ll notice, we didn’t wrap the Bibles for the kids in scantron sheets or printouts of ordinances. The Bible is a tool. It is a guide.

And nowhere in its pages does Jesus tell us that believing it is literally and historically factual is a prerequisite for following his way. This idea of scriptural literalism and historicity were never the intent of its authors. Rather, it is the written expression of a people’s experience of the Divine, and it contains any number of different genres of literature.

Just as Elizabeth Barrett Browning was not trying to put a number on love when she wrote, “How do I love thee, let me count the ways,” so, too, the poetry of the scriptures is meant to be just that. It is supposed to give us images and metaphors and expression of people’s experience of God. We read in the psalms, “I will raise you up on eagles’ wings,” and don’t literally expect to be carried off by a giant bird, and yet, somehow, over time, a substantial segment of Christianity has tried to tell us that Biblical literalism is central to following the way of Jesus.

Marcus Borg, who was a central figure in the Historical Jesus movement, a group of scholars and theologians who worked to pull away the centuries of tradition that has grown up around Christianity to try to reveal the core essence of Jesus and his teachings, names this movement toward insisting that the Bible is historically and literally true as “post-Enlightenment literalism.” Basically, the church tried to beat the Enlightenment at its own game, telling people to look to the scriptures for proof of truths, rather than staying in our own lane and inviting people into the sacred mysteries of life and into spiritual practices that draw us into mercy and compassion and healing and community.

...to Take It Literally

Now, many of you who have been worshipping with Union for a long time may have thought this through already, but I know that, for a lot of our newer folk, you've been seeking the language and the background to make sense of this. You've known in your hearts that the Bible is sacred, but have struggled in your heads with pieces of it.

To you, I introduce a phrase that is often attributed to William Sloane Coffin (though some question that provenance): I take the Bible too seriously to take it literally. In that one phrase, we are released from the critique that, somehow, literalism is the benchmark, the gold standard. Instead, we are to use it as our compass, our glasses, our mirror, to give us direction, help us see rightly, offer us a reflection that can move us in Godly ways.

One way of systematically taking the Bible seriously is through engaging the Historical Critical Method, a practice that is at the center of the Seminary Secrets series that Julie Harder leads here at Union. With the Historical Critical Method, like those in the Jesus Seminar and Historical Jesus Movement, one works to peel away the layers of interpretation that have grown up around a text, and in turn understand it as its original authors intend. Sub disciplines of the Historical Critical Method also will take into account things like the genre of a text, the historical factors going on when it was originally written, and how a work is structured.

Now, I'm conscious that engaging the Historical Critical Method takes a lot of careful study. It's not a casual endeavor. For the instances in which you don't have the opportunity or wherewithal to do scholarly study, I offer you what I am today dubbing "the Substance of Jesus Method." Ask yourself what the 5 or 6 or 10 things are that Jesus stood for, beyond a shadow of a doubt. This list is not exhaustive.

- Love
- Mercy
- Compassion
- Healing
- Inclusion
- Bringing people into community who had been ostracized for any number of reasons
- The "spirit of the law" over the "letter of the law"
- What the church calls the "preferential option for the poor;" that is, that God has a deep commitment for taking care of those that society does not...

Ask yourself what Jesus stood for, and then look at a Biblical interpretation through those things. If the interpretation upholds the depth of what you know Jesus to be, it is Godly. And, if it promotes hatred, exclusion, rigidity, you need to keep wrestling with it.

John Shelby Spong, the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, who was kind of a rockstar of progressive Christianity, died this week. His "Why Christianity Must Change or Die" is a brilliant, accessible book on how to be Christian while also being a thinking person in the 21st century, and to be both with integrity. Spong leads the charge away from Biblical literalism, instead encouraging us toward reclaiming the role of faith as our encounter with and dance with the ineffable.

Spong says, “The time has come for the Church to invite its people into a journey into the mystery of God and to stop proclaiming that somehow the truth of God is still bound by either our literal scriptures or our literal creeds.” He goes on, “Paul’s command to ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thess. 5:17) is a call to live as if everything we say and do is a prayer, calling others to life, to love, and to being,” adding that prayer is “The conscious human intention to relate to the depths of life and love and thereby to be an agent of the creation of wholeness in another.”

This is where our scriptures today take us. Our reading from the Letter of James offers a beautiful reflection on LIVING the ways of Jesus, and in our Gospel passage from Mark, we read of the disciples being afraid to ask Jesus to explain what he meant when he told them that he would be killed and rise again. If what we know of Jesus beyond a doubt is that he was wise and had people’s healing and flourishing at heart, then we know that the disciples’ fear of asking him questions is misguided, it was rooted in their brokenness (not wanting to look foolish) or their ego (not wanting to look foolish).

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever left questions on the table because of pride? Have you ever not engaged something or someone, not because you didn’t want to know, but because something in you was defensive or fearful? Has that fear, then, led to misunderstanding? Has that fear drawn you in completely different directions than the initial conversation?

What if, when Jesus tells us here to be like the little children, what if he’s telling us to ask the questions that come to mind, not to be afraid of what someone will think, not to let our ego or pride make us defensive, which is going to draw us off into a completely different side argument, when we could be spending our time on something that truly matters.

Conclusion

Friends, as we step into this new program year, there are some things that are going to be different. We’re not hosting social gatherings in the building right now as COVID infections rise and the supply of ICU beds dwindles, and the resumption of our chancel choir is still on hold. But we are still holding Faith Formation and Youth Groups, we are still serving at the NEW Community Shelter, our Visitation Ministry is still reaching out to our members who are unable to be with us, and those who could use a little extra connection to the church. We are still providing an open door to people and groups who other churches often exclude. And, what unites all of this is an understanding of Jesus and the Bible that doesn’t ask you to check your brain at the door.

Blessed ReUnion Sunday, friends, and thank you for joining me on this journey in which we take the scriptures, and our faith, too seriously to take it literally.

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James 3:13-4:3, Mark 9:30-37
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