

Service delivered by Patience Stoddard, October 18, 2015

READINGS:

From The Baltimore Sermon 1819 by William Ellery Channing

Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books...

Now all books and all conversations, require in the reader or hearer the constant exercise of reason... Human language, you will know, admits various interpretations; and every word and every sentence must be modified and explained according to the subject which is discussed, according to the purposes, feelings, circumstances and principles of the writer, and according to the genius and idioms of the language which he uses.

...

We find too that the different portions of the book, instead of being confined to general truths, refer perpetually to the times when they were written, to states of society, to modes of thinking, to controversies in the church, to feelings and usages which have passed away, and without knowledge of which we are constantly in danger of extending to all times, and places, what was of temporary and local application.

With these views of the Bible, we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and in general to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult and for discovering what is new.

READING: from Reading the Bible Again for the First Time

Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today. And because of the importance of Christianity in the culture of the United States, conflict about the Bible is also central to what have been called “the culture wars.”

The conflict is between two very different ways of reading the Bible. In language I will use later in the book, it is a conflict between a “literal-factual” way of reading the Bible and a “historical-metaphorical” way of reading it. The former is central to Christian fundamentalists and many conservative-evangelical Christians. The latter has been taught in seminaries of mainline denominations for the better part of a century. Most clergy have known about it for a long time. In the last few decades, the historical-metaphorical way of reading the Bible has become increasingly common among lay members of mainline churches.

As we enter the twenty-first century, we need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible. The older set, ground and polished by modernity, no longer works for millions of people. These lenses need to be replaced. The older way of seeing and reading the Bible, which I will soon describe, has made the Bible incredible and irrelevant for vast numbers of people.

This is so not only for the millions who have left the church in Europe and North America, but also for many Christians who continue to be active in the life of the church.

The need for new lenses thus exists within the church itself. The older lenses enabled Christians of earlier generations to experience the Bible as a lamp unto their feet, a source of illumination for following the Christian path. But for many Christians in our time, the older lenses have become opaque, turning the Bible into a stumbling block in the way.¹ Yet not all Christians agree about the need for new lenses. Many vigorously defend the older way of seeing the Bible. For them, what seems to be at stake is nothing less than the truth of the Bible and Christianity itself.

SERMON: WRESTLING WITH THE BIBLE

As I was driving back and forth to the Upper Valley this week I heard a story on NPR which brought to mind the story of Jacob and his inheritance, a particular story from the book of Genesis that at one time epitomized for me my often difficult relationship with the Bible.

It was a movie review about the new Steve Jobs movie. I have a friend in the computer software industry who for the last 15 years or so has refused to buy or use a PC, railing against what he considered the unethical business practices of Bill Gates and Microsoft. He was an Apple fan. And somehow from this I assumed that Steve Jobs and Apple were therefore, a more ethical and less rapacious company and its founder a kinder, gentler leader. Ah, how naïve was I!!

The story that occurred to me was about Jacob, the third of the four patriarchs of Judaism and how he came to get his inheritance.

STORY

Here is a brief synopsis of this story from Genesis Ch . 27 In which Jacob conspires with his mother to pretend to be his elder brother Esau and thereby cheats his brother out of his father's blessing.

I recall my reaction to this story when I first read it. I thought it was dreadful. Clearly this man attained his inheritance through outright lying, deceit and manipulation and this was the man God chose to give the name Israel and whose 12 children gave their names to the twelve tribes of the Hebrew people? It seemed to me the height of injustice that such unethical behavior should be rewarded.

And this is not the only such story in the Bible. In the story I told the kids today, if taken literally, portrays God Himself (and in those times it was Himself] as a terrorist and a murderer.

What are we to make of such stories?

Well, if we expect to take the Bible literally or to use it as a teacher of clear, unambiguous moral codes, or if we expect to find perfect heroes and heroines to serve as role models for ourselves or our children – than perhaps it is good to close the book and try to keep it out of the hands of children and impressionable adults.

Or perhaps what we need to examine is our own expectations of this holy book. What if we understand the stories of our Jewish and Christian ancestors, not as the way things should be, but as the way things often were and still are?

Of the many individuals who have declared their intention to be elected as the next president of the US, there are three people who have never served in a single elected office. And they are doing quite well in the early polls. What is their appeal? They have all been successful in their careers – at least at one point – very successful!

In Western culture and even in our churches, we celebrate wealth and power, strength, confidence, prestige, and victory. We despise and fear weakness, failure, and doubt. Though we know that a measure of vulnerability, fear, discouragement and depression come with normal lives, we tend to view these as signs of failure or even a lack of faith. However, we also know that in real life, naïve optimism and the glowing accolades of glamour and success are a recipe for discontent and despair.

Thinking back to last week's sermon on Columbus, it is apparent that there is a wish within many of us for the good to triumph and the bad to fail which can turn into a tendency to imbue the "winner" with virtue whether deserved or not. "History is written by the winners." And this is true as much for Biblical winners as for military or cultural ones. Just as black and white thinking is dangerous in our politics, it is dangerous in religion as well.

A nuanced, non-idealistic, rational approach to evaluating and understanding scripture is every bit as important as it is when evaluating the record and promises of politicians. There may be, as Marcus Borg suggests, a new recognition of this on the part of mainline liberal Christians, as seen in a number of recently published books such as:

The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart or

Understanding the Bible: an Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and The Religiously Liberal

and the explicitly titled: Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism

This approach to scripture is by no means new, as you could glean from the earlier reading by W. E. Channing almost 200 years ago. It has been part of our UU tradition for nearly 200 years.

I went back to the story of Jacob when thinking of this sermon; and this time my attention was drawn to another part of the story.

STORY

Wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:22-30) in which Jacob wrestles with a man/angel and receives a blessing from God and the name Israel

Led to a change in Jacob. Not only did he have a permanent limp. He had a change of heart.

THE END OF THE STORY

*In which Jacob greets Esau with humility and gifts and is embraced by his older brother.
Genesis (33:1-11)*

Life is not easy this story reminds us. If we are to seek wisdom and insight from the stories in the Bible we must be willing to wrestle with them for a while. To take the Bible literally can be alienating and to look for simple lessons of right and wrong can lead to confusion and frustration rather than wisdom. But as Channing reminded us:

We feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and in general to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult and for discovering what is new.