

That's not what I was told
Wisdom from the First UU Bible School

FIRST UU SERVICE

Sunday, March 1, 2020

“My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.”

— John Dominic Crossan, [Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus](#)

GATHERING

Entering Song

We welcome you

Greeting Each Other

What journey has brought you to this place this morning?

Hymn

#179 *“Words That We Hold Tight”*

Bringing in the Light

Chalice Lighting

Unitarian Universalism draws wisdom from sources with ancient roots. May this flame remind us of the campfires around which our ancestors gathered to tell stories as they sought to explain the mysteries of the world around them. The seeking continues.

Time for All Ages

Adapted from: [The Good Samaritan](#), by Mary Berendes, illustrated by Robert Squier

Singing Our Children to Class – Arc of Love

“Sheltering Arms of Love” by Nancy Starr

CENTERING

Musical Interlude

Caring Meditation

As we move into the silence, contemplate the fact that all of world's major religions have at their moral centers some version of the Golden Rule. This is not coincidence but a recognition by the founders of these faith traditions that we need each other – even people we've never met – to make it through life.

Moment of Silence

Choral Anthem

9:00 - "Deep Peace" by Brian Tate. Spirit of Life Choir. Michaela Jones-Brown, director

11:00-"Jauchzet dem Herrn" (Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy), Chalice Choir, Brandon L. Moss, director

GOING DEEPER

Reading 1 –

As Unitarian Universalists, we live out our 7 Principles within a “living tradition” of wisdom and spirituality, drawn from sources as diverse as science, poetry, scripture, and personal experience. The fourth source in the list is Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. What are these teachings and where are they to be found?

From the Gospel of Matthew, circa 90 C.E., Chapter 22, verses 34 – 40: Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

From about 70 B.C.E., seventy years or so before the time of Jesus, Jewish tradition holds that the great Rabbi Hillel was challenged to summarize the wisdom of the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel's response – while standing on one foot? "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary; go and learn."

Reading 2 -

From Introduction to the Bible by Christine Hayes, Yale University Press, 2012.

When it comes to the Bible, modern Americans are at a distinct disadvantage. They know both too much and too little.

They know too much because they live in a society in which references to the Bible -- positive and negative -- are frequent, creating a false sense of familiarity. They know too little because they have not read it, or have read only selected portions of it, or have allowed others to read it for them through the filtering lens of later theological doctrines or political opportunism. And that's a pity because the Bible, by which I mean the 24 basic books common to all Bibles (equivalent to the Jewish Tanakh or Hebrew Bible and to the Protestant Old Testament) is deserving of the same careful attention and close reading that we regularly bestow upon other classic texts.

SERMON

From the first reading we find the “Golden Rule” restated in both the Old and New Testaments of what we know as The Bible. But is this rule really the totality of Judeo-Christian wisdom contained in that tome as these ancient authorities claimed? Nothing else? Our second reading suggests that there is

more. Indeed, when we as Unitarian Universalists choose these particular statements from Rabbi Hillel and Jesus of Nazareth to represent the wisdom of Jewish and Christian traditions, are we not being as selective as those who found authority in Biblical scripture to justify slavery, claim special salvation, or argue for limiting the rights of women?

We'll come back to that question, but I think a little closer look at this compendium we call the Bible is in order. I have had the privilege of co-leading two separate Bible study classes here at First UU, the first with Chas Williams, and most recently with both Chas and new member Ron Payne. This may be a strange avocation for a self-identified atheist, but I have had a long fascination with the Bible and its influence on Western Culture.

First off, the Bible is not a book – although it is composed of pages set between two covers. Rather, it is a library. The Old Testament contains narrative texts, legal texts, philosophy, cultic instruction, erotic love poetry, songs and more. Many of its mythic tales likely have antecedents going back to the Stone Age. The New Testament largely chronicles the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, and several of his followers from multiple perspectives. Because it is not a single book, the Bible – Old Testament and New - does not have a uniform style or message. It was compiled and edited over a span of 1500 years by people responding to a wide range of issues and historical circumstances. Old Testament texts were written in ancient Hebrew; the New Testament writings were originally penned in Greek. The Bibles we have available to English-speaking audiences are translation from these older languages, or translations of translations. The result is several thousand editions of the Bible with both major and minor inconsistencies, and none wholly reflecting the earliest texts.

In our Bible study class we attempt to look at scripture in its historical and cultural contexts, to the extent that that is possible. One thing these classes have discovered is that it's impossible for 21st Century readers to have the same understanding of scriptural passages as did the people who heard them in the 6th Century B.C.E. or the 6th Century C.E. And I say "heard" because, through most of history, ordinary people were illiterate. Literacy was the purview of scribes and priests and monks; even the nobility very often were unable to read.

The stories and passages found in the Bible are set in a restricted area of land in what we now refer to as the Middle East. The early Kingdom of Israel lay at the crossroads traversed by great empires – Ancient Sumer and Egypt, the Hittites and Mitanni, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome. Through much of their history the Israelites lived in a vassal state, subservient to whichever empire was dominant at the time. Being at the crossroads of trade and conquest also meant that the descriptions of Biblical personalities, ritual practices, and even thoughts on the nature of the divine were influenced by contact with other cultures.

The major themes in the Bible draw from earlier traditions; examples include the origin and flood myths of Ancient Sumer, ideas of monotheism from Pharaonic Egypt and Zoroastrian Persia, stories of deities being sacrificed and reborn from the belief systems of Greece and Persia.

The Bibles today, which you can find on the shelves of any bookstore or in the bedside table of your motel room, comprise the two major parts mentioned previously – an Old Testament and a New Testament. What Christians refer to as the Old Testament, Jews call the Tanakh – Tanakh a word standing for Torah (The Laws), Nevi'im (Histories and prophets) and Ketuvim (writings, songs, poems, proverbs, and stories not included in other books), 24 books in all. The New Testament contains 27 books: 4 Gospels (Gospel means Good News), 21 Epistles (Letters); a history of the Apostles, and the Book of Revelation. Seven of the epistles are regarded by scholars to have been written by the Apostle Paul with the others of doubtful attribution to Paul or other anonymous writers.

Dozens of other writings are known from the early centuries of the Christian era, and many more likely circulated among the first Christian churches but have been lost to us. Paul can't have been the only convert to Christianity in the 1st Century who wrote letters.

This raises several questions: aside from Paul, who wrote all of the other Biblical texts (Old Testament and New); who decided what should be included between the covers of this library, and on what basis were these decisions made?

The answer to the first question is easy – beyond the letters attributed to Paul, we really don't know who wrote any of the words that comprise the Bible. In the first 5 books of the Old Testament – The Torah – scholars have identified a variety of writing styles and word usage and have assigned names such as The Yawist author, the Elohist author, the Deuteronomist, or lawgiver, one or more Priestly writers, and the Redactor. Attribution for other books is based on tradition or speculation based on style, language, and reference to historical events as seen in the oldest fragments of texts that have been preserved.

Why were some writings selected to be included in the canon of scripture and others declared heretical or simply left on the cutting room floor? In the case of the Jewish scriptures, were there other ancient legends that might have been considered, or more recognition given to women? In the case of Christianity, could some of the discarded writings be a more accurate reflection of the Jesus' teachings? Just as history is written by the victors, so too the books included in the Bible were selected by committees who were concerned with preserving or promoting certain doctrinal views.

Yet how consistent is the Biblical message? As religion scholar Christine Hayes says, Bible passages are often contradictory.

For example, the King James version of the New Testament has been referred to as a set of texts edited in the 17th Century from 16th Century translations of 8000 contradictory copies of 4th Century scrolls and codices, that claim to be copies of lost letters and other writings from the 1st Century. How useful can these writings really be as guides to life?

The Bible is a collection of writings about the human condition. Again from Christine Hayes, "Biblical narratives are psychologically real stories about very human beings whose behavior can be scandalous, violent, rebellious, outrageous, lewd and vicious. At the same time, like real people, biblical characters can change and act with justice and compassion. Nevertheless, many readers are shocked and disgusted to discover that Jacob is a deceiver, Joseph is an arrogant, spoiled brat and Judah has sex with his daughter-in-law when she is disguised as a prostitute!"

Some theologians hold that Biblical narratives are about peoples' evolving relationship with God. My own reading suggests that the many different conceptions of God found in these pages are often just literary props for discussions, songs, and stories about people dealing with people.

This year's Bible study class has taken a topical approach. In our first session we listed issues each person deemed important in our present day lives. Then, the class leaders, Ron Payne, Chas Williams and I, grouped the identified issues. Our first session looked at Climate Change and the human impacts on the environment. We sought out Biblical passages that said something about people's relationship to the planet. The Judeo-Christian viewpoint starts at the beginning, in Genesis with Adam and Eve. God instructs the couple to be fruitful, subdue the world (in the military sense of the term), and have dominion over it. Passages in later books talk about preserving the land that supports you and not

overcrowding the Earth with commerce and buildings. Yet, throughout it all, humans are considered as separate from nature.

Other classes looked at wealth, greed and power; and tribalism.

The class that explored how scripture treats women discovered numerous passages that place women in a subservient status to men. Other writings reflect the ancient fears that accompanied women's menstrual cycle. Yet, with all of the gender bias – and it's very real - some Biblical narratives present examples of strong women who rise to leadership positions, take over in times of crises, or challenge male authority. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he recognizes Phoebe as a deaconess and praises Junia as among the apostles. These examples confirm that many voices went into creating the Biblical library of books, and point to debates that raged during the early years of Christianity, and still rage today, as different editors changed passages or inserted new words to support evolving church doctrine.

Several class members expressed an interest in learning what the Bible says about spiritual practices. In the New Testament, Jesus refuses to answer his disciples' questions about faith and God directly, rather telling them to "look within" for their own answers. However, there is little guidance directly in Scripture for practicing individual spirituality. Biblical references to "meditation" are about paying attention to the laws, or to the deeds of prominent figures. Prayer is equally proscribed. Early Christian church leaders strongly discouraged their followers from seeking their own spiritual answers. Rather, they prescribed a set of rituals, ceremonies, and practices to be overseen by a priesthood, and a uniform Creedal statement to be repeated by all.

What has become apparent to the class is that one can find a Biblical passage to support and be used as authority for just about any political, or religious belief. This is how those who would welcome immigrants and refugees to this country, and those who would exclude them, can call equally upon Scripture to support their causes. The words are there.

This being the case, how do we determine which Biblical passages, if any, are appropriate guides for our own lives? Much the same way as we search for and find wisdom in the works of Shakespeare, the understandings of the universe presented by Stephen Hawking, or the novels of Toni Morrison. Hold them up to our Seven Principles; hold them up to the Golden Rule. Look for those words that reflect our UU values – love, compassion, respect, caring for those in need, and care for our planet.

What sources do you use?

GIVING AND GOING FORTH

Offering

Sailors have an unwritten code. Because the sea is so cold, so wide, and so uncaring, if they ever expect aid in time of need, they must be willing to respond to another's call for help, even if it means putting themselves at risk. Life, too, has its share of stormy seas and, as we are able, we can make a difference to those in need.

This month's share-the-plate recipient is the Lutheran Social Services Choices for Victims of Domestic Violence. In addition to cash or check, you can also give electronically: Text "give" to **614-879-1480**.

Offertory

"Turn, turn, turn" based on Ecclesiastes 3: 1-15 adapted by Pete Seeger and the Byrds

Closing Words

As you go forth today, seek wisdom from the world around you. Take a skeptic's approach and question the authority behind what you are told, but look for those words and deeds which bring people together in our shared journey on this planet.

Song

#318 *"We Would be One"*

Community Moment – Board member

Extinguishing the Chalice

*We extinguish this flame but not the light of vision.
As we go forth, let us heal and transform ourselves
And our world through reason and love.*

Benediction

Ecclesiastes 10:17, from the new translation by Rabbi Rami Shapiro "Blessed is a world led by the wise who master their appetites and consume in harmony with nature."

Musical Benediction