

Jan. 24, 2010

Ecumenical Sunday
International Welcoming Church Sunday

Title: Reading the Bible - a spiritual experience.

Hebrew Scripture, History: Return from Exile-Reading the Scriptures.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-11

New Testament, Gospel: Jesus reads the Scriptures in the Synagogue.

Luke 4:14-21

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to be the faithful growers of the spirit who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth, as without light nothing flowers. Amen.

The topic for today is the reading scripture. As people of faith, it is a good idea to read the Bible. Who can argue with that? For Martin Luther reading the Bible cured his depression when he discovered the overwhelming love and mercy of God. With that, great joy, love and laughter filled his life and shaped his character. "Read the book," he said. "Don't let someone else tell you what is in it," he warned. "Read it yourself." He believed in the power of the bible to save lives which convinced him to translate the bible from the Latin into the common German language so the people could read it themselves.

That's how Protestants became known as 'the people of the Book.' We believe the Bible is THE central component of our faith. Not the pope or bishops, not rituals or Holy Communion, not creeds or teachings of the church, not church laws or regulations, but, for us, it is the Bible that is the core of our faith.

I know it may sound old fashioned or demanding, but I have to ask the question: Are you reading the Bible? For faith development, moral values, spiritual well being and peace of mind - are you reading the Bible these days?

Well, we all know that this is what we 'should' be doing, but it isn't all that easy. In all honesty, reading the Bible isn't very entertaining. Most of us would rather read a modern novel, adventure story, or biography. The bible isn't as helpful a self-help book or a slim spiritual guide book. These days, reading the bible loses out to watching television or using the computer. These activities are much more relaxing than sitting down to read the 'big book.'

So what is a pastor going to do to encourage folks to read the bible. One thing we do here at our church is give a bible to people who join the church even if they have one. We give the Good News version which is a modern 'easy to read, easy to understand' version. Some say it lacks the poetry of the King James Bible and the accuracy of the Revised Standard Version, but if it helps to make reading the bible 'user friendly' than this is a good thing that we do. It also has pictures, which I like.

We have Bibles in the pews which are the Revised Standard Version. Each week the page numbers for the scripture readings of the day are printed in the bulletin. So I encourage you to open them up and follow along each Sunday. When you do, you will become more familiar with the books of the bible, chapters and verses. In addition, there is something special about holding the book and turning the pages yourself - that something special is opening up the spirit of the living God.

The book isn't a science book - although some would want to tell you that. It isn't a book of philosophy, or a researched history book, or a presentation of systematic theology. Some would say it is a 'code of conduct' book - just follow the rules and you will be a 'good' person which then means salvation is yours. If it is rules you are looking for the bible is full of them. But, who decides what rules to follow? When rules were appropriate 2,000, 3,000 years ago, do they make sense today? When does following the rules slide into the literal translation of the bible? Do all rules, all commandments, all words of the bible carry equal weight in our relationships with each other and with the Divine? If not, which ones are most important? That's the big debate that is going on in our churches, in politics and in social reform in our country today - how do we read and understand the authority of scripture.

Many people have given up reading the bible. They would say it is old fashion, old thinking and the bible stories are full of punishment, pain and sorrow and that the God of the bible comes across as cruel. What about the innocent people who weren't allowed on the ark, Abraham willing to sacrifice his own son Isaac to the Lord, the crucifixion? And rape, murder, war and the abandonment of the poor, sick, widows, orphans and foreigners. It's not all nice stories that end well.

So what are we looking for when we read the Bible? Peter Gomes, in his book *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, writes: "What makes the bible interesting and compelling is the company of human beings who play their parts in the drama of the human and divine.... The Bible is filled with the companionship of the confused and seeking, men and women made of the most ordinary stuff who often fail to understand, who make mistakes, whose humanity is transparent, but who encounter the living God and whose lives thereby are changed."

So then, what can we expect to find when we read the bible stories? People just like you and me. We meet them in their times of suffering, their times of confusion, their times of accomplishments and their times of joy. Compared to other types of literature, this is an 'everyday' book with no secrets withheld.

People share their inner most fears - I am just a peasant girl and you are asking me to give birth to the Messiah? They ask the most embarrassing questions - Can I sit on the right hand of the Lord because I know you love me the best? They do silly things - David dancing nude with joy in front of all the people when the lost ark of the covenant was found. (It really upset his wife.) There are heroic acts - The midwives fooling the pharaoh. Deborah leading the army against the

enemy invaders. Peter and Paul, Lydia and Priscilla preaching and organizing the early church. And tender moments too - The old couple, Abraham and Sarah, laughing over having a baby. Jesus having dinner with the tax collector, Zaccheaus. Paul baptizing the gentile, Cornelius. Dorcas sewing clothes for the poor.

When reading the bible there is always the question of interpretation. What lens do we use to look at the scriptures? What resources are available? Who do we listen to? To interpret is to make meaning out of the stories. What did it mean to the people who lived it, who wrote it? What does it mean to us today?

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in the 1700's, talked about four components to the interpretation of scripture. These have come to be known as the four-legged stool of bible study. They are: the bible, tradition, reason and experience. With this approach all four legs are equal in importance. This moves us beyond trying to live into an ancient interpretation of the bible. Or, worse yet, a stagnant interpretation where you can never ask any new question. We believe that God is still speaking - speaking to us through the bible, through the traditions of the church, through reason and personal experience. What a breath of fresh air that is!

Peter Gomes is still more direct in his approach to bible study when he writes, "God has given us a mind, the church has given us the benefit of its teachings, and the best of biblical scholarship has given us unparalleled resources with which to assist our understanding. It is not piety but arrogance that refuses to take advantage of these opportunities." Our method of bible study is one of exploration, asking questions with a big dash of common sense. Through it all we remember that, for us, the bible is the record and story telling of the human encounter with the Divine spirit.

Today we had two bible readings - one from the Hebrew scriptures or the Old Testament. And one from the gospel of Luke in the New Testament. What is so interesting about these passages is the biblical task put on display for all to see - the re-interpretation of holy scriptures.

From the first reading the people of Israel are just returning from over 80 years of exile in Babylon. Nehemiah is the governor of the people who are seeking community solidarity, direction, and purpose to their new lives. The writings of Moses, what we know as Torah, the first five books of the bible, are opened up and read to the whole community. The people were confused and overwhelmed with the rules and demands made on them as people of faith. But then Ezra, the teacher, steps in and 're-interprets' the readings, drawing a bigger picture of God's forgiving love, caring love and community love. They are so over-joyed with this good news that they have a community-wide party.

Jesus picks up this Jewish practice of re-interpreting the scriptures which is formally called midrash. He quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah and claims that he has come to "bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, return sight to the blind and set free the oppressed." What he leaves out is the threatening statement, "the day of vengeance of our

God.” This is Jesus himself practicing the re-interpretation of the text. Here is a clear instruction for us not to be afraid to do the same.

Kate Huey, a UCC pastor, calls this speech by Jesus his ‘inaugural address.’ It is given at the very beginning of his preaching where he lays out the main themes of his entire ministry. This becomes the blueprint and purpose of his life and teachings. It is his strategic plan, we would have to say. Jesus was familiar with the stories of the Hebrew scriptures, the words of the prophets, the ten commandments and most likely the poetry of the psalms. Yet, it is this passage that he claims as the focus of his ministry. May we accept his blueprint as the guide of our own bible study.

The great wonder of the bible is that it is always calling us forward into the future. A future of peace, harmony and kindness that is expressed in the bible. We do this knowing that the kingdom of God is experience every day through the presence of God’s grace. Everyday stories - that’s what the bible is all about. Amen.