

(Re)Turning to the Bible

Readings: 'At the Smithville Methodist Church' by Stephen Dunn
'Teaching a Child the Art of Confession' by David Shumate
'God wrote a book' by Cynthia Rylant

Our religious education leaders are teaching their first classes of the church year right now. Curriculum has been prepared. Volunteers have been recruited. Attendance lists have been organized. Supplies supplied. Classrooms cleaned. Snacks have been purchased and double-checked against allergies and intolerances... and yet our leaders are nervous.

They are nervous because of the content of those classes – our Jewish and Christian heritage. This is the most emotionally challenging topic we address with our children. One would think that sexuality would be harder, but here it's the Bible. In other UU congregations I know, parents have withdrawn their children from religious education classes when this has been the topic. That hasn't happened here, as far as I'm aware, but our religious education leadership has heard these stories and is nervous.

To address some of this nervousness, Diane asked me to talk to you all about why we are focusing on our Jewish and Christian heritage with our school age children this year. I'm taking that charge and expanding it. Why are we teaching our children this? Why might all of you want to engage with Jewish and Christian traditions, especially biblical texts?

Of course, each of us brings our own story, perspective, and faith journey to this. There are those of us who identify as UU Christians or Jewnitarians who are already deeply engaged in these traditions and texts... I hope you hear this sermon as affirmation of the path you are on. There are those of us who have been deeply wounded by some Jewish and Christian traditions, in our families of origin and otherwise. Some of us have been abused by people who claimed the Bible or God wanted the abuse. This invitation to turn or return to the Bible, might not be the right invitation to you at this time either. Your health and healing matter more than any suggestion that I might make this morning.

That leaves the rest of us. Why might it be worthwhile for us to turn or return to the Bible, to join our children in learning about the Jewish and Christian traditions? I have a series of reasons to offer this morning.

Reason 1: Turning or returning to the Bible can help us better appreciate and understand the arts. Our culture and many other cultures are permeated with biblical allusions. When you know the stories, you will have a better understanding of literature, theater, visual art, and more. As someone raised without a lot of biblical knowledge, I remember being intensely jealous of my classmates in high school English who could effortlessly point out the biblical parallels in the books we studied. Knowing the Bible allows one to understand the arts on a deeper level than is otherwise possible. That is good for us.

Reason 2: It can be interesting to study the Bible in an academic way. As someone who was raised in our tradition, my Bible classes in a Christian seminary were my first serious engagement with the Bible and I loved it, which really surprised me. Most of my seminary professors and fellow students were rooted in the black church tradition and mainline traditions, which include Presbyterians, Methodists, United Church of Christ, Episcopalians, ELCA Lutherans, with a smattering of others, like me there too. The institution, my professors, and my classmates all took the Bible seriously but not literally and engaged it

in ways rooted in the liberal Christian theological tradition. Liberal doesn't mean the same thing in theology that it means in politics. Liberal Christianity incorporates the use of reason and the teachings of science in coming to theological truths. Unitarian Universalism emerged from liberal Christianity.

Liberal Christians like those who taught me and learned alongside me study the Bible using literary analysis, historical research, and scientific understandings to better understand the Bible. Typically, liberal Christians do not approach the bible guided by dogma, but with curiosity; eager to see what they might discover, not searching for affirmation of what they already believe. They analyze the Bible using the same literary analysis approaches that others bring to Shakespeare and compare and contrast the Bible to other ancient writings in the Near East. They use historical information, much of it from archaeological work in the Near East, to understand the context in which the texts were written. They believe in science, including evolution, and seek to reconcile the mythic truths of the Bible with the scientific truths that were not known by the communities that shaped and recorded biblical texts.

This is in sharp contrast to fundamentalist approaches to the Bible, which include the belief that every word in the Bible is a direct transmission from God and that all the stories in the Bible occurred in history. Liberals would say that the Bible is 'divinely inspired' but not 'the literal word of God.' The Bible reflects an ancient people's best understandings, but was not dictated word-for-word by God. I cannot tell you the number of times my professors spoke about what a biblical passage likely meant to its original audience and then challenged us to think about what that might mean for us today. Liberals believe that the truths in the Bible are moral truths, truths about the human condition, and truths about the revelation of God to humanity, but that the Bible is not a historical record, though some of the stories are rooted in historical fact. The stories in the Bible not need to have actually happened in history to be true and worthy of study and reflection. For most of human history, the Bible was not thought to be a historical document. People understood the difference between mythic truth and history. Fundamentalist approaches to the Bible, including the belief that the Bible is historically true, are a modern creation – Fundamentalism began in the early 20th century, largely as a reaction to Liberal Christianity which began about a century earlier. This liberal Christian way to study the Bible is what we will be doing with our children, and it is how I approach the Bible. If you would like resources to engage in this sort of Bible study, please let me know. I would be happy to direct you.

Reason 3: We might want to return or turn to the Bible here at People's Church because we strive to be good at talking about hard things here. We offer comprehensive sexuality education rooted in science and our values. We talk about money a lot. If we don't talk about our Jewish and Christian heritage with our children and with each other, who will? We want to be in the room when our children are learning these things. We want to be there to support one another on our spiritual journeys.

Reason 4: Knowing the Bible allows us to partner with others to do the work of justice. This week, I gathered with a number of clergy in town to talk about homelessness and what we might be able to do to care for our neighbors who experience it. We had a short worship service and the reading was Isaiah 58, which includes the line 'if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted... your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairers of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in.' (58: 10, 12 NRSV) Our final hymn today paraphrases that. As I sat with my ministerial colleagues hearing this text, I could feel its call echo across 2500 years, from a time when the people of ancient Israel were holding competing visions of what it would mean to make Israel great again and the prophet said justice is what is necessary to restore any greatness. Knowing all that makes us better partners in the works of love, which none of us can accomplish alone.

This also matters, for example, when the attorney general of our country references Paul's letter to the Romans in the New Testament to justify separating immigrant children from their parents. It is important to know that yes, that Epistle does include the verse 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.' (13:1, NRSV) But knowing enough about the Bible to know that's an egregious misinterpretation is important. Paul, one of the most important leaders in the early church, was writing to a community of Jesus followers in the heart of the Empire who were struggling to exist. They had been expelled from Rome in the 49th year of the common era and were allowed to return six years later, just before Paul wrote to them. He was suggesting a survival strategy for a people likely to suffer for their faith, people much closer in position to the immigrant families than Attorney General Sessions. Just a few verses later, the letter spells out what law should look like, 'The commandments...are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.' (13:9-10, NRSV) 'Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love is the fulfilling of the law. 'That is what Paul calls on the early followers of Jesus to do...

In his quotation, Jeff Sessions misread the Bible and leaders from the Catholic, Quaker, African Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, and many many others Christian denominations told him so. If we want to make justice roll down like waters, we need to find our Jewish and Christian allies in the work. Having an appreciate understanding of their tradition and texts – and the ability to quote, in context, a few passages that might inspire us to do the work of love and justice makes us more powerful and more effective.

Reason 5: Studying the Jewish and Christian tradition might make us kinder and more understanding to the Jews and Christians in our lives. When I was 11, I had absorbed some of the anti-Christian attitudes of the Unitarian Universalist congregation that raised me, and was loudly proclaiming that Jesus wasn't real to people in my life, likely causing harm to the Christians I knew. One of my religious education teachers heard this and took me aside. 'Rachel, you might not agree with some things some Christians believe, but Jesus was real. He lived. You saying he wasn't real is both false and hurtful.' My immediate response was probably dismissal, I was 11 after all, but that conversation stuck with me. Knowing more won't necessarily make us all kinder, but it is part of the process.

I worry that, because so many of us here grew up in Christian traditions and left them, in combination with the reality that the loudest Christian voices in our media are often hateful, we are giving our children a false understanding of the depth and breadth of the Christian tradition. Both Christianity and Judaism include a wide variety of ways to live and social teachings. Our children and youth will learn this in their classes, through panel conversations with members of our congregation who identify as Christian, conversations with Christian and Jewish leaders, and visits to Jewish temples and Christian churches. This is so important, especially for our queer children. Our children who are queer worry that Christians hate them – and this year, they will learn that some Christian churches welcome LGBTQ folks into all areas of congregational life, including the ministry, and some deck themselves out in rainbows every June for Pride. Our children who are curious about the Bible and wonder if their spiritual journey might lead them toward Christianity or Judaism will know that that doesn't mean that they have to start hating someone – or start hating themselves. These are real concerns among our older youth and it breaks my heart.

Reason 6: Turning or returning to the Bible might be good for your soul. The oldest stories in the Hebrew Bible have been told for over three thousand years. They have been told and retold because they matter,

because they speak to the human condition in new ways again and again, because we can interpret and reinterpret them in new ways – like Bobby McFerrin's beautiful re-working of the 23rd Psalm that we just heard. Hearing the gender of God changed and knowing that McFerrin wrote it about mother's love helps me hear the old familiar text in a new way. It moves me. Engaging with the Jewish and Christian tradition might move you too... it might become a part of your spiritual practice to engage with biblical texts, images of the stories, music from the Jewish and Christian tradition, prayer practices from those traditions. Even though many of us don't identify as Jews or Christians, there are pieces of those traditions that might enrich us, help us grow our souls, help fuel us for the journey ahead.

And my final reason for engaging these traditions in our church is to make it clear that Jews and Christians are a part of our community. Some of you are Jews and Christians. I am so glad you are here; I am so glad you endure some of the slights that you receive. Your presence enriches us all. We need to make this welcome clear for the people who hold these identities now and for those who might come later. They might be visitors, but I am especially thinking about the children that we raise here and those of you gathered with us now. Some of you and some of our children will become Jews and Christians in the years ahead. Jewish and Christian truths will stir in your hearts and help you make sense of our beckoning and baffling world. When that happens to them and to you, I do not want you to experience that discovery as something that separates you from this church community. I don't want anyone to think that falling in love with the Bible or the Jewish tradition or the Christian tradition means there is less room for them here. That is not who we say we are – it should not be who we are. So let us turn and return to the Bible, knowing that the truths that it holds have spoken to people for thousands of years – and there might be some truth there that stirs in our souls too.

In all we do in this place, May we seek truth.

May we practice kindness.

May we do the work of love, which none of us can accomplish alone.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.