

Sunday, January 22, 2017 - Tell Me A Story

Luke 15:11-32 CEB

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

Can I tell you some awkward, honest and weird things today? Because that's how I feel about the Bible a lot of the time. As a pastor's kid and a pastor myself, you might think I have a glowing, positive, walking on air feeling about the Bible. And you'd be wrong.

I've got baggage with this book. It's inspired me, changed my life for the better, helped me to be a more whole and content person filled with a deep trusting joy in God and in people.

AND it's made me cry with frustration and anger. It confuses me on a regular basis. My heart sinks when I see someone use these stories as a weapon to judge and hurt others. Our culture's collective relationship with the Bible has caused me enough damage over the years, that I confess to having a bit of a wall up toward the Bible. Even today - when my job depends on helping you connect with it. Some days my baggage keeps me from opening it and letting God have a chance at speaking a new thing into my life.

So all that to say, it's a complicated book. But it's a compelling collection of stories in our world. Year after year after year, I feel drawn toward its' pages. I'm convinced there's more going on in these stories than what I initially think.

The idea for this sermon series came last June when I watched our church write a variety of questions on a dry erase board in our sanctuary during our Hard Questions series. Over half of the questions dealt with the Bible and how people interpret it so differently. So here we are. Setting aside five weeks to explore our relationship with the Bible. My most simple goal is that we will see the Bible with new eyes and develop confidence in our relationship with it. Some of us come to this book with lots of baggage and unspoken pain or confusion. We'll unpack some of that so we can re engage with these stories and uncover a new connection with God and each other.

Today, I'll reflect on the perspective we each bring to the Bible. We'll look at the story of the Prodigal Son and talk about literalism and wrap up with some solid ground on which to stand.

So what is this book? Physically, the Bible was written over a period of roughly 2,000 years by 40 or more authors using three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek). The authors wrote in different genres and had different vocabularies, personalities, cultural backgrounds, and social standings.

And, the Bible is like a cake. It has all kinds of ingredients in it. It has some story, some poetry, some myth, some history, some legend. It has some technical mistakes. Maybe a letter is messed up here or there. But what makes the Bible interesting is that you don't know how much of each ingredient is in each story. So you dive in. I don't know how much is story, how much is myth or poetry. But God is revealed somewhere in this story and it comes alive when I find myself in these stories.

We each bring our own story to the story of God. We each have a lens through which we see life. My story, my context, shapes how I receive the stories of God. I'm a white, female, mother and wife. I went to seminary for 3 years. This all shapes what I experience when I read a story. I could never assume that how I interpret the story of the Prodigal Son would be the same as how my Kenyan brother in Christ, Kirimi, would interpret the story in his world context. My 5 year old sees things in stories that I would never catch and I love sitting in Bible study with people like Alyce Matson because she sees an angle that I never thought of.

Is it okay that we interpret the Bible differently from the person sitting next to us? Yes, it is. The Holy Spirit is present and active as we read, ask questions and learn together. I'm thankful for a community of faith that celebrates our diversity of insight!

May we be people who breathe in and out grace when we engage with people who interpret stories differently than we do. Because we all come at it from such a variety of life experience.

In fact, some would suggest these are **five basic views many of us have of the Bible.**

Owner's Manual, Magic 8 Ball, Book of Systematic Theology, Science Textbook, Book of Promises (Adam Hamilton)

As you can guess, there are some issues with some of these. But first, let's turn to the story of the **Prodigal Son.**

There are lots of beautiful truths in this story. What it means to find your own way, to stay and be faithful even when it's hard, feeling lost and returning home, shame, forgiveness, taking our relationship with God for granted, celebrating someone who's been found. But today, we look at the story through this lens.

There are two sons with two very different versions of how to be a son. One stays, one goes. One honors his father, one disgraces his father. One wants fairness and punishment, one is overwhelmed by grace.

God loves both sons.

The son who did it the "right" way. And the son who did it the "wrong" way.

Hmmm...I don't like that. Because this story comes alive when we see ourselves in it. And this means I'd need to spend some time reflecting on the times I point to others and say, "Well, God at least I'm not like them. I could be so much worse. I'm following you just fine, but please stay away from that bad attitude I have about this or those mean thoughts about that."

And then I could spend time reflecting on the choices I've made and how God wants to overwhelm even me with grace. Hmmm.

So even in that story alone, I would catch a couple interpretations that would come alive in my life. You would likely find something else. And when you read it again in a year, you would find something even more different. Because we bring our own story to the story of God. And our story changes! This is a grace we find in our relationship with the Bible.

Now let's chat about unintended consequences of our different perspectives. Let's talk about biblical literalism.

Before the Protestant Reformation, the final authority and source of information in religious matters was the church, with its ancient traditions and living experts. When Martin Luther and friends opposed the teaching of the Catholic hierarchy, they needed a superior authority to appeal to, which was provided by the Bible. Fair enough. But in defending the Bible from the Catholic church, evangelical Protestants made the Bible the very heart of their faith (Tompkins).

In the 2,000 year history in which the Gospels have existed, the idea that what you are reading in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is literal and inerrant is a little more than 100 years old. We saw it

build momentum as a backlash to Christian liberalism and the Scientific Revolution at the end of the 19th century ... by a group of American Protestants who began a movement that was launched by a series of tracts that were written called 'The Fundamentals' and that is where we get the term 'fundamentalism' from. It's a very new phenomenon (Aslan).

One practical problem is that the Bible, unlike the church, can't answer questions, clarify earlier statements or mediate disagreements or deal with new developments. So those in search of religious certainty have to find it all in the text. If the earth was created in six days, then that's the fact, end of story.

Professor Reza Aslan shares a helpful perspective: "The gospel of Matthew says that Jesus was born in 4 B.C. The gospel of Luke says Jesus was born in 6 A.D. That's 10 years difference! Which one was right?" "Now, let me ask you a much more important question than which one is right," Aslan states. "Do you think that the church fathers who in the fourth century decided to put both Matthew and Luke in the canonized New Testament didn't bother to read them first? They didn't notice that they have different dates for Jesus' birth? They didn't notice that the gospel of John absolutely contradicts the entire timeline of Matthew, Mark and Luke? They didn't notice that there are two completely different genealogies for Jesus in Matthew and Luke?"

"Of course they did!" Aslan responds. "They didn't care, because at no point did they ever think that what they were reading was literally true."

Why didn't the discrepancies bother these church fathers? In short, to them, **fact did not equal truth.**

"We think that truth and fact mean the same thing," Aslan explains. "Indeed, science tells us, 'that which is true is that which can be factually verified.' **But that's not what the ancient mind thought.**"

"They were not as interested in the facts of Jesus' life as they were in the truth revealed by Jesus' life. When they constructed these stories about Jesus, if you asked them, 'Did this really happen?' they wouldn't even understand the question. What do you mean did this really happen? You're missing the point! The point isn't 'Are these facts true?' the point is, **'What does this story reveal about the nature of who Jesus is?'**"

This past week I got to spend a lot of time at one of my favorite places in the world. The ocean. The seagulls, crashing waves, cool white sand, kids building epic sand castles sand pipers chasing the water. 80 degrees and sunny. It was good. I could have spent hours counting the waves, determining their exact spacing between crashes on the beach, taken the temperature of the water, developed a hypothesis about the chemical make up of the water or used a special device to measure underwater saltiness, temperature pressure and the speed of underwater sounds. And then expected those things to give my life meaning and direction.

I did not do that. The ocean called to my soul though. So I answered. I got up early and walked by it. I patiently watched the sun rise and set over it. I stood on the same beach that Aaron and I did 15 years ago when we were just friends. The ocean called and I answered. It's a truth in my life that gives me meaning and direction. I especially connect with the presence of God in those places. Can that be proven with facts? I don't think so. There are things in your life and mine that are deep truths, not a scientific fact that can be proven on paper.

One other practical problem is that for more moderate Christians, Christ is the heart of the faith, and the Bible offers information and ideas about him and is one of the things that point us in his direction. It is a Word of God. But if the Bible itself is the heart, then to read it is to enter the Holy of Holies,

making it much harder to accept any normal human ambiguity or inaccuracy in its words (Stephen Tompkins).”

Biblical literalism is an assumption that many people (non-Christians and Christians alike) have picked up along the way and I've seen it keep us from an engaging faith journey where questions are welcomed and there's space to explore what else is going on in these stories. I have friends who've been clearly told to not question what they're taught about the Bible. “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” Over time, this view of the Bible can cause unintended consequences.

Some of you may consider yourself a biblical literalist. That's okay. Some of you are not. That's okay. As long as we are intentionally exploring our relationship with the Bible and challenging the assumptions we made in other seasons of our lives, then that means our faith is alive and well. The grace of God finds us in many ways.

Now that we've explored biblical literalism and some of the issues it presents, let's look at one way forward when it comes to engaging with the Bible.

On Friday, we took one last ride in my father in law's boat around the harbor by their home on the Gulf Coast. I forgot my sunglasses in the flurry of life jackets, water bottles, sunscreen and children. At first I thought, “no big deal.” But then I quickly realized the sun was incredibly bright. I could hardly see anything through my squinting. I resigned myself to putting my head down while my hair whipped around and knew I could at least enjoy the breeze. There was beauty all around me but it was too much for my eyes. I had to disengage.

Then my mother in law lent me her sunglasses. I slipped them on and my eyes relaxed immediately! The breeze felt great and my body melted into my seat. I could see!

We each have a lens through which we read the stories of our Bible. We have our own assumptions and perspectives. A great step a faithful disciple of Jesus can make is to name their assumptions and intentionally choose their framework or their lens. Because every single one of us has a lens, a pair of sunglasses through which we see the Bible. We just don't usually name and claim it.

Some of us have the sunglasses we picked up as a child and are still wearing those. We struggle to understand these stories in our life today because we read them differently than we did as a 10 year old.

Some of us assume everyone else has the same sunglasses we do. We're shocked to hear that someone else would interpret a text or story differently than we would.

Some of us are so busy worrying about other people's sunglasses, that they've stopped engaging with the Bible in their own journey.

These sunglasses or lens are what scholars call a hermeneutic. It's an intentional filter. Jesus used a lens of compassion, love and justice. Jesus helped his disciples and the crowds see the forest instead of the trees. It allowed the spirit of the law to trump the letter of the law.

Some folks use a lens that emphasizes the Gospels or they may call themselves “Sermon on the Mount Christians,” which means they prioritize those teachings as central. Some are “Red Letter Christians” and they give greatest weight to the words attributed to Jesus.

I saw it modeled in my home at an early age that we could use a lens of love to interpret the Bible and our faith. If the good news is all about loving God and loving people, then that's one way to filter the

stories of the Bible. A lens of love would lead us to ask, “How are we to understand this section of scripture in light of the primary truth that God loves us, wants us to love God and others?”

Chip and Joanna Gaines are the hosts of the popular HGTV show, “Fixer Upper.” They have a lens of love. Chip recently said, “Our family wants to fight for a world that knows how to lovingly disagree. We believe it starts when we operate from a position of love in all things. If your position only extends love to the people who agree with you, we want to respectfully challenge that position. We propose operating with a love so real and true that you are willing to roll up your sleeves and work alongside the very people that are most unlike you. Fear dissolves in close proximity. Our stereotypes and vain imaginations fall away when we labor side by side. This is how a house gets unified.”

Regardless of what lens you discern, there is one question that helps us cut to the end goal of all Christian faith. As your pastor, one of the best ways to know if each of us are growing in faith or not is to ask one of John Wesley’s questions: **Did the Bible live in me today?** If I had to choose between you knowing lots of information about the Bible or living out the truths of these stories, I’d choose the second one every single time.

So friends, what we’re really doing is offering grace...even to our relationships with the Bible...and to each other as we engage with it.

If these conversations are something you want to explore more, you’re invited to join us on Monday nights here in the lobby at 7pm. Or check out all our groups that meet in the Discipleship on the Coast book or on the website. This book binds us together as a community. Let us commit ourselves to learning its’ truth and allow it to seep into every corner of our lives.

Amen.