

A VERY GOOD BOOK

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker
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“Call me Ishmael.” These are the best opening lines of a novel ever written. You might disagree but I think I feel safe in saying they’re the best opening lines of a novel ever written by an author who attended All Souls. Herman Melville did attend this church. I say that it is the best opening lines because it’s a short yet complex statement. Call me, Ishmael. Not that the person’s name is necessarily Ishmael, just that one should call him by that name. Why Ishmael? Who is this Ishmael? If you hadn’t read the Bible, from the beginning you would miss the subtleties of *Moby Dick*. In fact you might miss most of the subtleties of *Moby Dick*, one of the greatest American novels ever written. In fact one would miss the subtle and not so subtle references to a large part of a number of English language novels without a knowledge of the Bible. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* to name just a couple. The list is very, very long. It isn’t just novels either, it’s poetry, music, song, art, you name it and we find the Bible and its influence.

And it is not just our artistic endeavors that are influenced by the Bible. Our thinking, whether we are conscious of it or not is deeply affected by the Bible. Our ideas about some time in the distant past when we lived in harmony with nature, has not a shred of basis in fact, but is rather an influence of the Biblical story of Eden. Once there was a time when all was good with the world, and then somehow we messed it all up. The fact of the matter is that nature has never been all that kind to us, which is why we learned how to cultivate plants and build houses.

Let’s not even begin to talk about what we think happens after we die. Descriptions of heaven and hell abound in our heads no matter how hard we work to get rid of them. Just pick up almost any copy of the *New Yorker* magazine and you’ll find a cartoon about heaven and they are all based on a description of heaven, mostly from the Revelation to John. Everywhere we look we are surrounded by this Book.

Yet when it comes to actually reading the Bible and knowing what is in it, we are woefully ignorant. Not only are we woefully ignorant, we at times seem to be gleefully ignorant. A young adult member of this congregation when she saw my sermon title and figured I’d be preaching about the Bible said “no way am I coming to church for that.” And she’s not here this morning. We almost pride ourselves in not knowing the Bible, as if to read it is to surrender our precious hold on reason and logic.

At best we might read it as literature, but mostly we just ignore it. We seem to think it has no influence on us and therefore there is little or no reason to know anything about it. We might

dust off a few passages here and there at Easter and Christmas, but other than that, if we even own one, it sits on our shelves untouched. I would even venture to guess that there are fair number of people here who don't even own a Bible. If you don't own one take the one from the hotel the next time you're on vacation, that's why they put them there. It's how I got my first Bible.

The Bible is the most influential book in Western civilization and very few of us read it. Imagine how you would feel if someone told you that he or she had never read *Moby Dick*. You would think that at the very least they were uneducated. So why then is it okay that we not read the Bible? Our fourth source urges us to correct this notion by stating that we draw upon "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

Of all of our sources, this fourth one has caused the most controversy. From the very beginnings of the merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists, we have argued about this source. Originally, the six sources were not separate from what we now call the seven principles. The original document that contained our principles, in part read that the UUA would covenant to

"Cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man"

That statement almost caused the merger not to happen at all. It was only after a compromise brokered late at night that the wording was finalized to allow the merger to proceed. The first draft of the statement, that was passed, did not contain the words Judeo-Christian heritage, it only spoke of "love to God and love to man." This upset the Unitarian Christians led by the former minister of this church, Walter Donald Kring who wanted the original American Unitarian Association wording "which Jesus taught as love to God and love to man" and it upset the humanist who didn't want it at all. As it stood, there was enough dissent that it was doubtful that the Unitarians would vote for the merger with that particular wording. Yet they were stuck because a motion to reconsider the statement had already failed. Donald Harrington of Community Church had suggested adding the words "from our Judeo-Christian tradition" but the motion failed. So now they had a statement they could not agree upon, and no way to fix it.

The rules of the merger said that both the Unitarians who were meeting in one place and the Universalists who were meeting in the same city, but another location, had to agree on the exact same language and if they could not the merger would not proceed. The brokering came late at night, when the Universalists, who had already passed the statement, were convinced to vote to reconsider in order to help their very contentious Unitarian brothers and sisters. This opened the door for the Unitarians to take another vote and this time it passed with the wording "the Judeo Christian tradition added." Notice it was *the* rather than *our* Judeo-Christian tradition, which

made the humanists happy and the Unitarian Christians, while not exactly happy, at least not unhappy enough to vote no to the merger.

In the end they recognized that Jewish and Christian teachings, which primarily come from the Bible, very much inform our theological ideas. These teachings are not the only source but they are there, and yet we are still resistant to reading these books. Last year, when Chelsea Vaughn approached me to start a Bible Study group, I thought what a great idea. It took me less than a New York minute to say yes. In the year plus that we have been meeting, a hearty group has read the Bible with minds towards understanding what this text has to say to us today as it has through out the centuries. We have a lot of fun and laugh a lot. We've even come up with some brand new insults to call people but I won't share them with you this morning. What I think that has surprised us sometimes is how much its wisdom still speaks to us and sometimes how it doesn't. But what I think has been most surprising is how much we enjoy reading it.

We don't read the Bible as the literal word of God. We are not fundamentalist and we are ready to look at its complexities and its contradictions. The Bible tells us right in the beginning that it cannot be read literally. In the first chapter of Genesis, in the order of creation the beasts of the earth are created before the first humans. Yet in the second chapter of Genesis there is another telling of creation in which the first human is created before the beasts of the earth. So what came first the cow or the man? If you read the Bible literally, as so many fundamentalists and liberal do, the former to find what is true, the latter to dismiss the book outright, you're stuck because you can't really answer the question - what came first the cow or the man?

Just in case you think that the only contradictions are found in the Hebrew Bible, think again. The Gospels that chronicle the life of Jesus are filled with contradictions too. The order in which Jesus does things changes from Gospel to Gospel. In the Gospel of John, Jesus changes water into wine, he doesn't do this at all in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Apparently, John thought Jesus more of a party guy than the other writers. Throughout the gospels there are discrepancies that cannot be reconciled. Paul contradicts Jesus at every given turn. Just look at how Paul and Jesus think of women. For Paul women are to be silent. For Jesus the women are the first to see the him after he has been resurrected and he tells them to spread the news. Both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures are full of contradictions and we are left with the task of trying to find what is fiction and what is truth.

When the books of the Bible were being compiled these people knew there were contradictions, they weren't stupid. So why did they keep them? They could very well have edited out any contradictory statement. There are a lot of theories but I think they kept them as a clue to let us know that we cannot take the book as literal facts but we can find in it truths. They understood that something need not be factual to be true. We modern humans aren't any smarter than they were, we just have more information. If you doubt that, then pick up a paper and read the first page and tell me if you really think we're so much smarter. We still deal with issues of war and poverty and injustice, we're just so much better at killing, greed and deceit. The wisdom we

might find in the Bible can still speak to us today. This is why the book has survived and this is why we still need to read it.

So what is the wisdom to be found in the many pages of the Bible? I think two stories and a passage sum it all up. The first story comes to us from the Talmud, the compilation of Jewish law and stories that was finished around 500 of the Common Era. It concerns two of the leading rabbis, Hillel and Shammai.

A gentile went to Shammai and asked him to teach him the whole of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, while standing on one foot. Shammai thought the man insolent and chased him away with a stick. Well the same gentile went to Hillel and asked the same thing, that he be taught the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel thought about it for a few minutes and said to the man "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary."

The second story comes from the Bible itself and it is about another question. It is from the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 22.

A lawyer, asked [Jesus] a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

Both Hillel and Jesus believed that what we did to our neighbors was most important, both used text found in Leviticus chapter 19, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." When the Unitarians Christians were arguing about adding the phrase "teachings of Jesus to love your neighbor as yourself," they too should have read more than just the Christian Scripture and they would have found that Jesus didn't make up that phrase, he used Hebrew Scripture.

The beauty of these two stories is that Hillel and Jesus read them slightly differently. Hillel emphasizes what not to do, and Jesus emphasizes what to do. Which one is better, well that is for you to decide. There are arguments and good ones for both. Hillel's interpretation cautions against what evils we might do to another person. It does not assume that we know what is good for another person, but that we do know what is bad for us is also bad for them. What we wouldn't want done to us we should not do to another person. If we don't want someone to treat us with disrespect or to take our stuff, we shouldn't disrespect someone else or take their possessions. Jesus' interpretation which is closer to the original text speaks of being more proactive in how we treat another person. If we want to be treated kindly we should treat others kindly. We are to act on behalf of other people. In both cases they talk about relationships between human beings.

Relationships are what the Bible is all about. It spends much more time talking about how we should treat each other than what our relationship with God should be. Even the Ten Commandments, spend more time talking about what we should and should not do to one another than what we should do for God. Of the ten only the first three talk about God, the rest are about us. Honor your parents, don't murder, don't steal, don't commit adultery etc... Relationships.

But I said there would be two stories and a passage. If I had been asked by that gentile to sum up what the Bible was all about, I would have picked a different passage. It would not have come from Torah, the Law, but from the Prophets, in particular the prophet Micah. The text that speaks to me about what the Bible is all about is simple "For what does the Lord require of you? Only to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." I think I could say that standing on one foot, assuming I was not wearing high heels that day. This is the seminal truth of the Bible for me. Do justice, not just talk about it. Love mercy, love the grace shown to you and the grace you bestow upon others. And walk humbly with your God. Your God, however you might define God. Just be humble in the presence of the holy, knowing you are not the end all and be all of existence. That sums it up for me.

There are truths in the Bible that we still need to learn. Not everything in the Bible is true, and not everything speaks to us today. We do have more information than the writers of old. More information about the physical world and more information even about human nature. Does this mean that we should throw out the entire book because we know some of it isn't correct? If we did that, there would be very few books left for us to read. What our fourth source asks us to do, is to look to the wisdom of Bible and learn from it what we can. It doesn't ask us to set aside our knowledge, it asks instead that we seek to find it's wisdom. We can't find that wisdom if we don't read it.

Open your minds and your hearts to these texts that have lasted over two thousand years. There's some good stuff in them. And some really good stories too. It's a good book, it's a very good book.

Amen and blessed be.