

BUT IT SAYS SO IN THE BIBLE!

A Service by Barbara W. ten Hove — May 6, 2007
Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

Call to Worship

For generations, human beings have gathered in community to worship—a word that at its root means, “to shape things of worth.” For Christians, what gives shape to worship is most often the Bible. This ancient collection of books (it has never been just one) is used in different ways by different people, but is always seen as something special. It is not just “a book.” It is “the Book.”

Today’s service is an exploration of why (or why not) knowing the Bible matters. For Unitarian Universalists this is not a simple topic, for the Bible has played and continues to play a complicated role in our religious lives. And we tend to be of many minds about how to approach its use in worship and religious education.

Today’s service will certainly not provide an answer about whether the Bible still matters today. But it will hopefully encourage us to reflect on the question.

So in the spirit of inquiry, history and hope, I invite us into worship this morning.

Special Music – *By the Rivers of Babylon*

Reading: A Selection from *Singing the Living Tradition*

Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the Gate of Heaven.

Genesis 28

The wilderness and dry land shall be glad; The desert shall rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly And rejoice with joy and singing.

Isaiah 35

For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come.
The fig tree puts forth its figs and the vines are in blossom;
They give forth fragrance.

Song of Solomon 2

How rare it is, how lovely, this fellowship of those who meet together.

From Psalm 133

Look how the lilies neither spin nor weave, and yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was never robed like one of these.

Luke

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from evil.

Matthew 6

For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

A time to kill and a time to heal;

A time to break down and a time build up;

A time to weep and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn and a time to dance;

A time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to throw away;

A time to tear and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3

What does the Eternal ask from you but to be just and kind and live in quiet fellowship with your God?

Micah

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings, I will not accept them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5

Love one another, because love is from God. Whoever does not love God does not know God, for God is love. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear. Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers and sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us.

1 John 4

Sermon: *But It Says So in the Bible!*

Barbara W. ten Hove

In my third grade Sunday School class, held at First Parish Church (Unitarian) in Lexington, MA, I learned the names of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. For this knowledge I was awarded a gold star.

In my fourth grade Sunday school class, I made an Iroquois Indian rattle out of paper bags and dried beans. Though I did not receive a gold star, I do remember that it was a lot more fun than learning the names of a book, even one as important as the Bible.

As a child growing up in a UU home, I had what might be considered an eclectic religious upbringing. At Sunday school I learned about the Bible, yes, but also about other religions and even about my sexuality. At home, my parents used Biblical references without always noticing they did. As former Methodists they were knowledgeable about what they grew up calling “the Good Book.” My father, who was a minister, knew as much as any UU I have ever met about the Bible—both its background and its stories and its meaning in our culture.

Still, even in my family the Bible was not something we talked about a lot. Though I do remember the dramatic story my Dad told of his first Bible class at St. Lawrence Theological School (his professor threw the Bible across the room!), most of what I learned about the Bible came about through primarily three sources: pop culture (remember Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell?); my friends (the first time I ever saw a crucifix at a friend’s house it scared me to death); or through singing what we in my family called “Jesus Songs” (*Swing Low Sweet Chariot* and *Beulah Land* were favorites).

It was not until I went to theological school myself that I began to learn about the Bible in earnest. But even there, at least for UUs, the Bible was not considered all that important to know. I took one Hebrew Bible course, one course on the Christian Scriptures and took one big test on both (plus the Koran) and I was done. Even though I enjoyed these classes, I did not expect to use the Bible regularly in my ministry and I haven’t. Not that I don’t think the Bible matters or can’t be an important source of religious understanding. I simply see it as one reference among many available to me as a religious leader.

Not knowing the Bible deeply does not seem to be a critical flaw for Unitarian Universalists. While we acknowledge the special role Judaism and Christianity play in our history, we are a non-creedal church that draws from many sources; the Bible is only one of them. Yet, throughout my ministry I have wondered if I ignore the Bible too much. As a document that has spoken and continues to speak to people around the world, it seems only fitting that we pay at least *some* attention to it.

This has been brought to *my* attention most recently through a book written by Boston University Religious Studies professor Stephen Prothero. His book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American*

Needs to Know—and Doesn't (New York: HarperCollins, 2007, source of all quotes that follow below), is something of a polemic against the religious *illiteracy* that Prothero believes permeates our culture. He begins the book describing how most Europeans (many of whom would never set foot in a church door) can name the twelve apostles and the four gospels while most Americans (who go to church in droves) can't. As he puts it, in America, "faith without understanding is the standard. Here religious ignorance is bliss" (p. 1).

He bases this assertion on a short quiz he gives regularly to his students. Asking a few simple questions about the Bible and about other religions, he discovered most of his students—even those who consider themselves deeply religious—failed the test. This religious ignorance began to wear on him and so he wrote this book, calling Americans to task. He makes a significant proposal. He believes Americans must start teaching Bible and religion courses in high school and college. He claims such courses can teach "about religion" rather than preaching a certain faith.

I decided to see what Prothero had to say. What I found most interesting was the history of religious education in America and how much our own Unitarian Universalist faith impacted it. The story begins with our Puritan ancestors and their deep commitment to understanding their religion through direct contact with its most important document—the Bible. In order for this to happen, people had to learn to read it. Literacy is one of the great results of what became the Protestant church. Men and boys, then women and girls, had to learn to read in order to understand the Bible. And it was the Bible that taught them. The New England Primer, a book used to teach children to read in the 18th century, taught the alphabet through Biblical stories. "A: In Adam's Fall, we sinned all. B: Heaven to find; the Bible mind. C: Christ crucified for sinners died" (p. 72). And so on.

Children growing up in America in its formative days were taught such things at home and in their church. As early as the mid-17th century, Prothero tells us, Puritans "recognized not one clerical office but two. Each congregation was to have, in addition to a pastor, a teacher" (p. 67). This teacher taught the children to read by teaching them to read the Bible. And so American children were Biblically literate, knowing the stories and personalities of the Bible well.

This, according to Prothero, was a good thing. He argues that even though Protestant Christianity had its prejudices and used the Bible to justify such things as slavery, anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism, knowing the Bible is still something critical that Americans once had that is now lost. His chapters about the history of the movement from Biblical literacy to illiteracy are provocatively titled *Eden (What We Once Knew)* and *The Fall (How We Forgot)*. To Prothero, the end of religious literacy began when *our* religious ancestor, Horace Mann, helped to create the first public schools in America.

Horace Mann, as many of you know, was a Unitarian. In the mid-19th century, he sought to create schools that could educate everybody (all boys who were white, that is, but at least it was a start). As a Unitarian, he believed in "Golden Rule Christianity" (p. 95) and though he assumed the Bible would of course play a part in every boy's education, he also believed, and these are Mann's words,

that “in every course of studies, all the practical and perceptive parts of the Gospel should be sacredly included and all dogmatical theology and sectarianism sacredly excluded” (RL p. 95).

This noble ideal was not quite as noble in reality. Horace Mann’s Unitarian Christianity was still quite Christian and very Protestant. And although America was less pluralistic in his day than ours, there were plenty of Catholics and Jews, among others, who were excluded from Mann’s idea of religion. And even among Protestant Christians, there was enormous diversity. Baptists, Methodists and others were not in agreement with what they considered the watered down Christianity of Horace Mann. Along with Catholics, they resisted his attempt to make public education religious without doctrine.

When it seemed that Mann’s philosophy was going to prevail, his opponents (at least according to Prothero) decided it was “better to secularize the public schools than to let Mann’s Unitarianism prevail” (p. 97). Thus, by the late 19th century, most public schools quit using the Bible as the primary source for learning. What Prothero calls “Godless schools” (p. 98) became the norm in America and fewer and fewer students learned either from or about the Bible.

Now you may be asking yourself, “What’s the big deal?” Isn’t it a good thing to get religion out of the public schools? Aren’t we better off with secular education? I admit I asked myself those questions the whole time I was reading Prothero’s book. Does it really matter that religion, in particular Christian religion, was separated from public education? And shouldn’t we, as a non-creedal, mostly post-Christian religion support the secularization of our nation?

I will answer that, but not just yet. Let me reflect a bit on Prothero’s major point. He believes, not without some justification, that Americans’ woefully inadequate understanding of both the Bible and the sacred works of other religions leaves us at an enormous disadvantage in this world. He quite cogently lays out how religion has moved from something one knows about to something one feels. He suggests that when the Bible and religious education were moved out of schools, it was supposed to be replaced by religious education at home and in congregations. But he claims that in neither place have we done a good job educating our children about the Bible and other important religious knowledge.

Now, you may think he is talking here about secular Americans or even about us as religious liberals. But, he is also talking about evangelicals and other conservative Christians. He writes, “In a 2004 study of Bible literacy among High School students, most evangelical participants were not able to identify ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ as a quote from the Sermon on the Mount” (p. 7).

That many conservative and fundamentalist Christians are almost as ignorant of the Bible as liberal Christians, Jews, Muslims and even Unitarian Universalists is stunning. Why? Because the Bible is so often used as a club by people who *think* they know what it says, but usually don’t. For example, many conservative Christians get terribly righteous about how bad homosexuality is without knowing that Jesus says absolutely nothing about it in the Bible.

But religious liberals can fall into this trap, too. I know I occasionally talk about Christianity and Jesus as if the Christian religion is all about love and good will. It doesn't take more than a cursory glance at Revelations to show differently.

And our knowledge of the scriptures of other American religions is even sketchier. Prothero, despite what I see as a Christian bias in his work, does challenge Americans to learn more about other world religions. Though many of us practice yoga or meditate, I suspect few of us in this room can list the holy books of Hinduism and Buddhism. And there is no question that our large scale ignorance of Islam has led to hatred and violence.

Our faith tradition, as it says each week in your Order of Service, draws from many sources. Jewish and Christian teachings are our heritage and still meaningful to many within our churches. You may not realize it but every single word that Kathleen and I read earlier came directly from our hymnal. All that Bible stuff is in there. All the music we are singing today is biblically based—and in our hymnal. Whether we like it or not, the Bible still plays a huge role in both our faith (why do we always celebrate Christmas yet only occasionally acknowledge Divali?) and in our culture (Moses is always on display at the Capitol in DC).

So does this mean courses “about religion” should be taught at the public school and college level? Prothero thinks so. As he puts it, “the costs of perpetuating religious ignorance are too high in a world in which faith moves, if not mountains, then at least elections and armies” (p.145).

I don't think Prothero is entirely wrong about this. As Unitarian Universalists, we rightly understand the importance of education and the role knowledge plays in the development of religious ideas. Our religious ancestors started the first Sunday schools, the first public schools, plus numerous colleges, and even today we are considered among the best educated of all religious people.

Does that mean we know more about the Bible and other religions than most? I'm not sure, but I would be surprised if we didn't score a bit higher on religious literacy tests than most. That said, we still have a lot to learn about religion—others' and ours.

But is public school the place to do it? Despite Stephen Prothero's arguments, I am not convinced. Teaching about religion is very hard to do. And most of those who would sign up to do it are likely to be people whose bias would inevitably creep into the course. I know my bias would.

Yet, I would not oppose courses in public schools where religious leaders could be invited in to talk about their religion to students. I have done this myself in public high schools. I also think that denying religion's role in history and art is counterproductive. Sometimes those who advocate the sharp separation of church and state push too hard to ignore religion and the part it plays in so much of human history and culture. And I would agree with Prothero that most liberal arts college students should take at least one course in the Bible and another in World Religions. This would go a long way toward increasing Americans religious literacy.

And here at Paint Branch I hope we will do a better job of exposing ourselves and our children to the literature and history of world religions. I encourage those of you with children to not fear teaching them at home the stories and ideas that emerged over time from sacred literature—in particular the Bible. And I hope that all of us will continue learning as adults, so that our own lives can be enriched by these interesting, difficult, inspiring, infuriating texts, one of which we call the Bible.

Unlike Prothero, however, I do not fear a post-Biblical world. In many ways, we'd all be better off if we gave up on ancient texts and let more modern ways of thinking guide our lives. Change is inevitable and I believe the writers of the Biblical texts would be astonished at the power generations of humans have invested in these words. We can find meaning in them still today, but I believe it is perfectly appropriate to re-imagine what that meaning might be. My father always said if we believed every word in the Bible as written we'd have to accept that God sends bears to eat children and Jesus walked on water. But he also said if we ignore the Bible we lose the great stories of Noah's ark and the loaves and the fishes to name just two. And we could not fully understand the power of some images that still resonate today.

Like Job, we may feel God's spirit emerging in a thunderstorm. Like the Jews by the River of Babylon, we can feel the loneliness of exile. Like Mary, we may trust the spirit of life growing within us. Like Jesus, we may discover that one young child can open hearts and feed a multitude.

These Biblical stories and images *do* permeate our culture and will likely continue to do so for some time. We can rail against them, ignore them or accept them as a piece of the human story. At times I find myself doing all three.

As Unitarian Universalists we are fortunate that our faith rests not on one holy book but on many, not on a creed or a doctrine but on an unshaken commitment to the unity of all creation and the power of love. We are lucky that we can learn from other religions without that being considered apostasy. And we can appreciate the deep ties our faith has to its past even as we move forward into an unknown future.

One way we can acknowledge our commitment to diversity is to use music from a variety of different cultures and religions. Each speaks to us in various ways. Today's music is chosen from the Biblical religions. The popular spiritual we are about to sing has roots in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Jeremiah, writing in the same era as the Babylonian exile of our earlier song, asks the question, "Will there be a balm in Gilead for those who suffer?"

African Americans often turned to Hebrew Scriptures for stories that spoke of oppression and exile. This song, #1045 in the new hymnal supplement, uses both the Biblical text (though not in question form) and common words that speak of struggle and hope. Though you may find you have theological issues with some of the words in this song, I invite you to sing it in memory of those for whom these words truly meant healing and hope.

Hymn #1045 *There Is a Balm in Gilead*

Closing Words

I may not preach like Peter

And I may not pray like Paul

Still we hope we've shown you,

The Bible can touch us all.

Yes, we know it's one book among many

Still its stories are important to tell.

We're glad our forebears learned from it

That no one is going to hell.

So here's to Biblical literacy

It can't hurt us to know more

But let's learn it here in church

Not through the schoolhouse door.

I'm glad we can learn from its pages

And still argue about what it means

We're Unitarian Universalists after all

And thus we are not afraid to break the rules, learn from other sources than the Bible, seek out new life and new civilizations and just get carried away with how much there is to learn and how wonderful and terrible it all is... (ahem)

And may the Spirit of Life be with us as we continue on the journey.

• • •