

They Did Not Understand

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Jesus used this figure of speech, this metaphor with the disciples. But they did not grasp, they did not understand what Jesus was trying to say to them.” — John 10:6.

As you may know, we have Christian Education sessions on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. On Sundays our young folks go upstairs to the Christian Education area and are under the tutelage of Linda Oehme.

Those a little longer in tooth have to endure a session with me. The braver souls among them also visit with me for a different session on Wednesday evenings.

Last year on Sunday mornings those of us of that certain age watched a series of undergraduate lectures in the Hebrew Scriptures given by Professor Christine Hayes of Yale University. These lectures are out there on the internet and they are free. Anyone can watch.

These lectures are a 101, basic level, college course. I suspect many first year students take the course thinking passing it is a piece of cake. They are wrong.

Now, since it is a given this class will have people with many views about the Bible, in the first lecture Professor Hayes lays out the purpose of the course, which is not to change the beliefs people have. Rather, the purpose is to invite students to analyze what is to be found in Scripture and to think deeply about what is found. While that kind of work has the potential to change thinking, it is not the object of the class.

Well, during the first lecture Hayes states she has two daughters one is a teen and one is verging on her teen years. Professor Hayes— a Biblical Scholar— then says she does not let these two young ladies read the Bible.

What is in the Bible, she says, the text, is clearly adult reading. Among other issues, it contains violence of all kinds— economic violence, physical violence, misconduct, abuse. This is not appropriate reading for children. (Slight pause.)

That brings up this concept of *Sola Scriptura*— Scripture alone. One could say this a tenet of the Protestant Reformation. *Sola Scriptura* holds Scripture is the sole rule of faith and practice, one of the main theological points raised by Martin Luther.

Indeed, Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular. For Luther the vernacular was German. This helped Scripture be more accessible for many, at least for those who read German.

However, one of the things we do not realize about the era in which the Protestant Reformation happened is literacy rates were low. Among adult males the rate in the 1500s ran about 20%. Among women it was lower. Hence, even in a vernacular translation, those who read Scripture were among the few and were fairly well educated.

In fact, when Scripture was read from the pulpit in the church served by Calvin in Geneva— and Calvin was in the next generation of reformers after Luther— when was read from the pulpit in the church served by Calvin in Geneva it would be read in the original languages— Hebrew and Greek. A translation would not be read.

An assumption was being made that all those in the pews listening understood those original languages. These were highly educated people. (Slight pause.)

When I talk to people about how to read Scripture I always say you should never read Scripture without a commentary right next to you. I never read Scripture without a commentary right next to me.

Do I know more about Scripture than the average bear? Probably. Even though I have a Master of Divinity Degree, I do not presume I know what a passage means simply by reading it. At best, that would be ego-centric. So I consult commentaries.

To be clear, I am not saying you should avoid reading Scripture. You should read Scripture; we all should read Scripture. Reading Scripture should be a part of our daily prayer and practice. I am simply saying to read it without bringing some understanding beyond one's own grasp of what's there is simply unwise.

You see, the last time I looked the Bible is not Aladdin's lamp. And God is not some kind of genie who grants wishes based on what you think the words say, especially since the words we read are a translation from ancient languages.

To treat Scripture and the reading thereof as if it is a simply a straightforward process is akin to treating God as a genie and Scripture as the lamp you rub. And that is a very, very, very secular way of looking at Scripture. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the Gospel according to the School of John: "Jesus used this figure of speech, this metaphor with the disciples. But they did not grasp, they did not understand what Jesus was trying to say to them." (Slight pause.)

The Hebrew Scriptures— which by the way, that's the only Bible Jesus knew— the Hebrew Scriptures have many images of God as a shepherd. Hence, the question which immediately comes to mind for me is why do those who listen have a hard time grasping the shepherd metaphor. Indeed, the next sentence after today's assigned reading says (quote): "I am the good shepherd." (Slight pause.)

Let's explore this a little. We find a number of "I am" statements in John. The "I am" statements are found only in John, one of the things which sets this Gospel apart from the Synoptic Gospels. But the question still remains: 'why are those who listen confused?' (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest one reason those who listen to Jesus might be confused has to do with the object of all the "I am" statements. And for the record, these statements are I am 'the gate,' 'the bread of life,' 'the light of the world,' 'the door,' 'the good shepherd,' 'the resurrection,' 'the life,' 'the way,' 'the truth' and 'the vine.' In each of these the object of the statements are not the point being made by this Gospel.

The important part of these statements is "I am." "I am," as you probably know, is, effectively, the name of God. I want to suggest those who listened to Jesus both understood this but did not want to understand this.

You see, for a good Jew in New Testament times the issue was not that Jesus might be the Messiah. Any Jew could have processed that. For a good Jew in New Testament times the issue was how was one to connect God and the Messiah?

And that's where the "I am" statements become difficult in this era, in this place. As to why any Jew would have trouble with the "I am" statements, Jews maintained that there is one God and that God is one.

And even if you argue the "I am" statements did not *clearly* equate God and Jesus, the "I am" statements imply an equivalency. For a good Jew in New Testament times to draw an equivalency between God and anyone was

heresy.

Indeed, in the Gospel we commonly call John, Jesus is consistently pictured as being divine. And even if you argue this was not a heresy for a good Jew in New Testament times— if you make that argument— it certainly came right up to the line that would make folks really nervous. (Slight pause.)

All that brings me back to the thought that we might need a commentary near us when we read Scripture. Why. Why? We have our own modern heresy.

We tend to treat Scripture, we treat what is commonly referred to as the Word of God, this collection of canonized books... like it is God. The Bible is... not... God. (Slight pause.)

Now, my bet is some of you are thinking the argument I'm presenting is an argument that effectively says Scripture needs to be studied and, therefore, Scripture is only accessible to academics or people who are in some way elite. And how can that be? After all, we are not all academics and God does not favor the elite! (Slight pause.)

I need to make a distinction. Scripture is not faith, itself. And more to the point, just as Scripture is not God, Scripture is not faith in God. We should not treat Scripture like it is God or treat Scripture like it is faith in God. That is when and where we get lost— when we treat Scripture like it's God or treat Scripture like it's faith in God. (Slight pause.)

Now, this poses yet another interesting question: what is the practice of faith about? Is the practice of faith simply about what we find in Scripture? Or is the practice of faith about us living in our time, knowing and believing in God, Who is in our world and relating to our world? (Slight pause.)

A famous Biblical scholar of the 20th Century, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, said this: "God is hiding in the world. Our task is to let the divine emerge from our deeds."

And indeed, our task is to seek the will of God in our world and to act on the will of God. And that is what real faith is about and that is what faith is really about.

Can we learn about God from Scripture? Yes. But I think we can learn a lot about God by being faithful and striving to do the will of God in this, God's world.

Or as I said at the end of my comments last week, the God of Covenant is a God of forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity and love. If we are faithful *and* have faith in the God of Covenant, we can come to a real understanding of what Scripture actually says rather than what we think it might say.

Why? How can we come to that understanding? Forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity and love are not just central to Who God is. Forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity and love should jump out at us from every page of Scripture when we do understand Who God is. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "A quote that has been attributed to many people says we need to have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. It does not matter who said it. The point is when

we deal with the world around us, the real world, we need to reflect the forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, freedom, equity and love of God.”

BENEDICTION: Let us rejoice for Christ is risen. This service of worship is over but our service in the name of God continues outside these doors. And may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.