

READINGS: 02/10/2019 ~ Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Known in Some Traditions as the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time ~ Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13); Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11.

I Traditioned

“For I, Paul, handed on to you first of all, as of first importance, what I, myself, had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that Christ was buried, and that, on the third day, Christ was raised in accordance with the Scriptures.” — 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

When I sensed a call to ordained ministry the first thing I did is I spoke with my Pastor. The first thing we did together is set up a discernment committee at my church. A discernment committee helps guide someone seeking ordination in that process and asks tough questions about what the specific sense of call might be.

Since I had not seen the inside of a classroom for 20 plus years at that point they suggested I take a class at Bangor Seminary to see how the academics went. I took survey course in the Hebrew Scriptures with Dr. Ann Johnston.

For the first paper she assigned she said we could be creative. We could, in fact, write a standard academic paper. Or we could write a play, a poem, do a painting.

The visual works would need a written explanation and written works would need plenty of footnotes. But we could do anything an artist might do.

I was a playwright. I wrote a play, a comedy, based on the story of the Burning Bush. That's right: a comedy based on the story of the Burning Bush. Here's an example of what was in the play.

MOSES: The bush— it burns but it is not consumed. How does that work?

GOD: Yeah.... I have my special effects people. They are very good. Someday I might let a guy named Cecil B. DeMille use them. But right now, they are my people.

The paper came back with an A+ on the top. Ann told me the A+ was because I had used what was in Scripture word for word but just added extra words to it.

I had been faithful to the Scripture, faithful to what the passage said. I had also clearly understood what the passage said. When someone did a work of art, that is what she looked for— faithfulness and understanding.

Ann also explained in writing a play I had engaged in an ancient Hebrew tradition called *Midrash*. That was the first time I had ever even heard the word *Midrash*. I wound up doing my Master's Thesis on *Midrash*.

Those of you who have been here for Christmas Eve or Easter Sunday service know I usually offer a *Midrash* sermon, a *Midrash* meditation, on those feast days. The idea is to retell the story in a way which I hope helps people better understand it.

The best explanation of *Midrash* I have ever seen was written by Roman Catholic theologian Richard Rhor. This is some of that what Rhor stated. (Slight pause.)

Rather than seeking certain, unchanging answers, *Midrash* allows for many possibilities,

many levels of faith-filled meaning relevant and applicable to the reader. This helps build empathy, understanding, relationship with the text.

Midrash lets a Scripture passage challenge you in a spiritual way. This allows a passage to help you change, grow, entice you to respond with questions.

Some of the questions could be ‘What does this passage ask of me?’ ‘How might this apply to my life, my family, my church, my neighborhood, my country?’

Rhor states biblical passages often proceed from historical incidents. But the real message conveyed by Scripture does not even try to communicate events with factual accuracy. The writers of Scripture are not journalists or historians. They are theologians.

Further, since before New Testament times rabbis have used the story telling called *Midrash*, this form called *Midrash*, to reflect on and communicate on at least four levels, the same levels we find in Scripture. The levels are literal meaning, deep meaning, comparative meaning, hidden meaning.

The literal does not get to the root so it is not helpful for the soul and it is the most dangerous level for and to reality. Deep meaning offers symbolic, allegoric applications. Comparative meaning compares different texts to explore new understanding.

Last, hidden meaning— hidden meaning gets at mystery. When hidden meaning is explored with the story telling of *Midrash* that encourages growth, learning and discourages literalism.

This is also clear. Jesus consistently ignored any exclusionary, triumphalist, punitive, texts found in the Hebrew Scriptures in favor of passages which emphasize inclusion, mercy, honesty, something *Midrash* does well— explore inclusion, mercy, honesty— these the reflections of theologian Richard Rhor. (Slight pause.)

And I Corinthians says: “For I, Paul, handed on to you first of all, as of first importance, what I, myself, had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that Christ was buried, and that, on the third day, Christ was raised in accordance with the Scriptures.” (Slight pause.)

Paul here refers to the Scriptures. What Scriptures? The same Scriptures Jesus read, what we today commonly call the Hebrew Scriptures. So Paul is handing on the Hebrew Scriptures.

Now, there is no adequate translation for the words we translate as “I handed on.” The closest we can come is to say “I traditioned,” which is not good English. That’s why we don’t translate it that way. However, to say “I traditioned” does make sense in a peculiar kind of way.

To illustrate what that means, here’s an example I’ve used before. We all have family traditions. But do we do things the same way our grandparents did? No. Why? We took those traditions and made them our own.

And what has Paul done with the Hebrew Scriptures? Paul has explored those writings and now understands them in a new way. That brings up something I think is often misunderstood about this passage. (Quote:) “...that Christ died... that Christ was buried...

that... Christ was raised.” (Slight pause.)

What is Paul doing here? Is Paul saying this is a prophecy found in the Hebrew Scriptures? I think we often take it that way. But is that what the Apostle to the Gentiles is getting at? (Slight pause.)

First, let’s state the obvious, something noted when this passage was introduced. It is not the Gospels but the letters of Paul which are the earliest writings found in the New Testament.

The apostle here quotes an early statement of faith which pre-dates Paul’s writings. Hence, the passage may reflect some of the earliest testimony about the resurrection.

Next, we need to realize Paul’s writings say precious little about the life of Jesus. In fact, the statement of faith found in this passage is one of the few places Paul says anything about the fact that the even Christ lived.

That having been said, Paul takes what the Hebrew Scriptures say about the Messiah—not what is said about Jesus but what is said about the Messiah— Paul takes what the Hebrew Scriptures say about the Messiah and expounds on that. And exactly what *is* said about the Messiah?

Promises are made about the Messiah. Do note, these are *not* prophecies about the Messiah. These are promises.

Paul then sees the promises about the Messiah and the reality of what happened to Jesus as one. Paul takes what was handed on, the promises about the Messiah, and traditions them, made them his own, brings understanding to them, passes that on.

Paul’s thinking is clearly in line with what the Hebrew Scriptures say. So Paul has done nothing radical but is simply being a good theologian. And in so doing Paul practices *Midrash* because Paul’s project is to explore meaning.

In that exploration Paul thereby allows, encourages growth, allows and learning. Therefore, just like Jesus, Paul does not settle for mere literalism. (Slight pause.)

I want to suggest we need to make Scripture our own. We need to try understand what Scripture meant in ancient times, in the time when the Hebrew Scriptures were written, in the time when the New Testament was written.

And then we need to try to understand Scripture for today, for our time, for us. Just as Paul did and just as Paul encourages others to do, we need to make Scripture our own. (Slight pause.)

So, what is a call to ministry? Perhaps a call to ministry is about *Midrash*, at least in part. Perhaps a call to ministry is about making Scripture our own.

I find it interesting that we, in the Protestant tradition believe we are all called to ministry, for we say we are called to be a priesthood of all believers. And yes, we are, thereby, called to make Scripture our own.

Making Scripture our own does not break with tradition. Indeed, do you remember what

Ann Johnston, my Hebrew Scriptures professor, told me about why I got an A+? It was because I had been faithful to what the Scripture said. I might add I had been faithful to what the Scripture really said.

So how can we be faithful to Scripture? We can be faithful in the same way Jesus was faithful. We can be faithful by understanding that we need to emphasize inclusion, mercy, honesty— oh, yes— love. We need to emphasize God's love for all people. Amen.

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

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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: "I have told this story about Ann Johnston, my Hebrew Scriptures teacher, before. Another student said to me, 'All Ann ever wants us to do is re-write Scripture.' 'No,' said I. 'Ann wants us to be able to talk about Scripture using our own words. Unless you use your own words it won't make any sense to others. That brings me back to the priesthood of all believers. The purpose of talking about Scripture, using your own words, is not to convert anyone. The purpose is to support one another, care for one another, share the love of God with one another. When we do that we are ministering to one another, loving one another and doing ministry which is what being among the priesthood of believers is about."

BENEDICTION: God heals and restores. God grants to us the grace and the talent to witness to the love God has for us. Let us be ready as we go into the world, for we are baptized in the power of the Spirit. And may the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.