Unity Church of North Easton

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Biblical Wisdom

I struggle when people ask the question do you believe in the Bible. I don't have to believe in it, I know it exists, and I own several copies in multiple translations. It's language fills so much cultural production from the past two millenia that you will struggle to find a town that doesn't have some kind of healthcare or human service agency with the name "Good Shepherd" or "Good Samaritan." When someone sneezes the common phrase is "bless you" even among folks with no discernable religious activity. While our founding leaders purposefully chose to make the nation a secular instead of a theocratic nation with the delineated separation of Church and State, notions of liberty, justice, and equality come from their various Christian traditions. Cultural competence in America includes some passing fluency with the Bible.

Sadly, many Americans, including many Christians, have become very ignorant of the Bible. Some may say they believe in it, want it in our schools, want it in our culture, but then say and do things that demonstrate their profound ignorance of its contents. I can guarantee you that few if any have real scholarship in the bible based on the profound negative emotional reaction most people have when they first engage in biblical scholarship. First of all, the bible is not a single book. It is a library with countless authors writing at their unique time periods. The books of Moses were not written by Moses, the Gospels were written after Paul's letters. Many people think the Gospels are more important since they are about Jesus are actually further removed from his life than the work Paul did with churches throughout the Mediterranean. There are many voices and many teachings and a lot of terror in the texts of the bible but there are some consistent teachings from the earliest of the Hebrew Bible through the end of the Book of Revelation.

The US Council of Catholic Bishops recently came to media attention thanks to our Vice President who has shown his ignorance of Catholic social principles about the religious imperative to care for immigrants. Before Cardinal O'Malley had his administrative responsibilities as a Bishop and a Cardinal, he had been a Capuchin monk. This meant he was caring for minority communities for decades prior to having to clean up the region from its many clergy abuse atrocities. Biblical support for such communities is not some hidden secret found only in arcane research of seldom-read texts. You don't need to go to the Dead Sea Scrolls or Pseudepigrapha, for people who own the Bibles where the words attributed to Jesus are in red, you'll find these messages in the red font.

I'm going to share just one of the many parables where Jesus made this message loud and clear, from the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 25, verses 31-45:

The Sheep and the Goats
31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his
glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the
people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put
the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father;
take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I
was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to
drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was
sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or
thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in,
or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit
you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these
brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the
eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me
nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did
not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and
you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or
needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you
did not do for me.'

I want to highlight the language, *the least of these*, because the Bible is deeply concerned with the least of these. Israel as a nation and the children of Abraham as people were a people of the least of these. Former UUA President, Rev. John Buehrens, chose well that passage from Micah, of what does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly. Israel was never a triumphant empire. In the ancient Near East there were superpowers in Egypt, in Babylon, in Greece and Rome. Notice how getting between Egypt, Greece, Babylon and Rome often means marching armies through the area of Israel, Lebanon and Syria. Ancient Israel was in a precarious location as a crossroads between

these ancient superpowers. Hence their religion was devoted to caring for the lowly, the underdog, the persecuted, the stranger.

All the prophetic texts in the Bible point out to people being humble and faithful being the way to deliverance, where the rulers must care for the poor or else face divine judgment. There are prophetic texts from Egyptian religion of the same time period with very similar language about divine judgment and retribution, but it is not if the rulers malign the poor, but rather if the peasant classes rise up out of their station in opposition to the rulers. Superpowers worship power. It was true back then, it is true now.

Every year Jews celebrate Passover, related to the book of Exodus, where Jewish people who had gone to Egypt for famine relief were then made to enter slavery and Moses rose up to lead them from Egypt to the promised land of Israel. The story talks about it taking forty years in the desert. Forty is a biblically important number implying completeness. Forty years in the desert wandering between Egypt and Jerusalem, forty days in the wilderness for Jesus where he receives his temptations, the number isn't necessarily literal so much as a description of a complete amount of time. Jews knew what it meant to be foreigners, what it meant to be immigrants. Close to a thousand years later, Babylon conquered Jerusalem and sent its upper classes into exile, since holding the children of leaders and merchants as hostage is a good way of ensuring their cooperation. There are psalms of lament from that time period, we will be singing a musical adaptation of one of those songs as our closing hymn. To weep at the Rivers of Babylon is to weep as an immigrant where you are asked to perform for your captor's mirth. The parallels between then and now don't take a lot of imagination.

Eventually, Jews returned from their Babylonian exile and the nation was conquered again by Alexander the Great and once again by Rome which led us to the time of Jesus. When we hear language like Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus of Galilea, it doesn't make a lot of impact. We are divided from there by two thousand years and thousands of miles. When the parable of the Good Samaritan is told, and we hear about the Jericho Road, we miss the cultural nuance of the Jericho Road, of what it means to be a priest, a Levite, or a Samaritan. When we hear the psalm say I cast my eyes up to the hills, from where does my help come? We don't know what is scary about the hills. You see, the ancient kingdom of David and Solomon split into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. Jerusalem was the capital of the united kingdom and the southern kingdom. After Solomon died the united kingdom was split in two, the northern kingdom was reviled by the southern kingdom and you see in biblical texts a strong condemnation of that kingdom.

I have a lived example of the problem of perspective. When I was in grad school, one of my friends was a fellow student who was from Scotland. He and his wife moved over for his master's degree and he rented his apartment online. Back then rent prices in proximity to campus at BU were in the ballpark of a thousand dollars a month per room. He saw a two-bedroom apartment on the commuter rail in Lynn for $800 a month and went with it. If you don't know Boston, and don't know the commuter rail, and you don't know Lynn, you don't

understand what a horrible idea that decision was. He and his wife heard shootings pretty regularly, would do their best to be at home behind a locked door by 8 pm most evenings, and that year of the lease was not the American experience most would hope for. Context and area knowledge matters. It matters today, and it matters in biblical stories.

In the times of Jesus the people from the ancient and multiple times conquered northern kingdom were known as Samaritans because that land had been named Samaria just as the southern kingdom was known as Judah. Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan is doing the equivalent in America of saying the Governor and the Archbishop of the Boston Diocese pass by a man beaten on the road in Chelsea or Lynn. The Jericho Road was a road through the hills where bandits could easily hide and then ambush and attack people. It was from Jerusalem to Jericho. These highly influential and successful people saw the beaten and bloody man on the side of the road and just walked on by because they were worried about their lives, safety, and social standing. It was the equivalent of an immigrant, one of the people described as criminals, defamed as mentally ill, who spends his own money, uses his own clothes for bandages, who care for this beaten down person on the side of the road whose own culture despises this good-hearted stranger.

Recently, we heard a politician describe certain Christian leaders as engaging in the sin of empathy. If you look in scripture and in the tradition of the religions of the children of Abraham, you will find that there is no sin of empathy. All of the religions of the children of Abraham point out the moral and spiritual value of charity and empathy. They are not just for the family, not just for the neighborhood or town, but for the world. The children of Abraham have known exile, struggle, suffering, and defeat at the hands of superpowers. They know that mercy, charity, and hospitality are key to their survival through the thousands of years of their existence between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and certain core values between these three traditions are lost on the present day.

Our moral and spiritual duty is part of this legacy. We don't center our Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence, and Generosity on love without the moral and spiritual teachings coming from scripture on the divinity of love. We don't uphold justice, equity, and transformation without the bold voices of historic prophets who called out the social iniquities of their day and forthtold the ruin that would happen if those actions didn't change. Let us hold onto these strains of wisdom, study them, and equip ourselves because the language of faith, the language of spirituality, the language of morality is as needed today as ever. We can never cede the language of faith to those who wield it as a weapon of dominion instead of a community of moral and spiritual uplift.