

Opening Our Minds

One of the raging debates among different Christian denominations is how to read the Bible.

Is it, as some say, the infallible, inerrant, word for word dictation of God to humanity?

Is it a handbook for living, so that any question of money or marriage or job or rearing children can be answered in it, no different than your car's owner's manual?

"Got a problem?"

"Just look here for the solution!"

Or is the Bible something else; something not so easily defined; something that calls us to explore its complexity (and our own), to sit with its vagueness (and our own), to wonder at its mystery (and our own)?

I raise these questions because of our Gospel lesson today.

We know that Jesus teaches in stories and parables in order to crack open our usual way of seeing, our usual way of hearing, and in that cracking open, to catch glimpses of the Reality, the capital "R" Reality, that we call God.

Well today, rather than using words to do the cracking open, the Word himself appears to stunned disciples; the same Jesus, yet different; able to touch and speak and eat; yet also able to appear out of nowhere and walk through walls; the Word, with a capital "W," is doing the cracking open by his unexpected and baffling presence.

In their state of confused joy; of disbelieving belief; Jesus opens the disciples' minds to the way Scripture, the Bible, is to be grasped.

Scripture, Jesus tells them, tells us, is to be read, interpreted, understood, studied, prayed through, considered, reflected upon, mulled over and pondered NOT with the eye of one seeking specific answers to all of life's specific questions; nor with the eye of one seeking certainty in all things; but rather, Jesus says, with the eye of one peering through the lens that is the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

Hear this again: The Bible, if we dare pick it up, is to be read, interpreted, understood, studied, prayed through, considered, reflected upon, mulled over and pondered -- through the lens that is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Well, what on earth does that mean?

Perhaps it means that when some have used the Bible to justify, say, war and killing; and heaven knows the Old Testament often reads like General Patton's memoirs; reading those passages through the lens that is Jesus helps us to see that while war may have been part of the evolution of the people of God, in Jesus, death is defeated, forgiveness and love of enemies is granted to us all by the grace of God (if only we will open ourselves to that grace), and the promise of new life after death ends all claims that to fight and kill is somehow consistent with our faith.

There are those who point to places in Paul, or letters attributed to Paul, justifying slavery or the second-class status of women.

Heaven knows how much suffering those words have caused through the years.

But seen through the lens of Jesus, we can know that some statements by Paul, or those who purported to write in Paul's name, are simply wrong; because Jesus welcomes everyone, especially the marginalized, the outsiders and the weak, making the last first.

While different people, particularly the know-it-all religious leaders or the self-satisfied folks in power or those enslaved by their money, often close the door on Jesus; Jesus never closes the door on anyone who is willing to enter the Kingdom.

And then there are those who play what some call Bible Bingo; picking up stray sentences from scripture to justify all kinds of nonsense: like, God wants you to be rich; or God is on OUR side; or believe the way I do or you are lost.

Today, Jesus opens the minds of the disciples, and your mind and mine, and says: "Come, here is the true way to read the scriptures; not through your own biases or rose colored glasses, but through my life, my death, my resurrection."

Understanding scripture through the lens that is Jesus means seeing life from the perspective of the suffering, the misunderstood, the hated; and from that place, one can no more imagine our Lord condoning slavery or the second-class citizenship of women than one can imagine Jesus taking up a gun and firing away.

Our viewpoint is determined by our standpoint.

Today, with the apostles, we stand with Jesus the crucified one, the slaughtered lamb; and from that standpoint, we can now read and understand and apply sacred scripture in its deepest truth: that God calls us all out onto the stormy sea of life; and for reasons we shall never know in this life -- except perhaps in

briefest glimpses – he beckons us – in all things – amidst all things – throughout all things – to trust that God is God.

And that trust means accepting that much in our lives, our suffering, our losses, the suffering and losses of those we hold most dear, and our joys, are mysteries that we may never fully understand.

One author says that God has us on a “need to know program.”

We are, in other words, given insight only into what we need to know, in God’s opinion, at any particular time in our lives.

Why?

I don’t know!

But all the evidence points to the truth of that claim.

In opening our minds to the Scriptures, we begin to see that God acts in history on behalf of the needy, (that need includes not just life’s basics, but those in need spiritually, emotionally, psychologically as well as physically); that God uses people who seem utterly weak (Moses was an incessant stutterer), that those God sends out may suffer great hardship (the prophets were often tortured and murdered), and that God chooses people who seem most unlikely to further the divine plan (like Tamar who seduced her father-in-law, giving birth to the boy who would be in the lineage of Jesus—like Ruth the foreigner whose grandson would father King David—like King David, whose murderous adultery with Bathsheba gave birth to wise King Solomon—like Peter, so quick to deny and run and hide—who found his voice and his courage--like you and me, in all of our lack, yet called to witness to the gospel).

“This is the way that God chooses to act in the world,” Jesus says, “trust it.”

It is that trust that allows us to welcome the stranger, even if sometimes the stranger is dangerous; it is that trust that allows us to feed the hungry – even if sometimes the hungry we feed are lazy or undeserving; it is that trust that allows us to meet violence with love; attacks with reconciliation; hatred with understanding.

Standing there in his scars, in his wounds, Jesus shows us that if we are willing to go *through* the danger, *and not around it*, we like him will find not destruction, but a completely new, unanticipated, transformed, and yes, resurrected creation.

How can this transformation be described?

Let's bring it close to home.

Kathryn Huey gives a wonderful example:

"I'm reminded," she says, "of the powerful experience of watching the YouTube video of a Scottish woman, humble but hopeful, on a talent show several years ago.

Susan Boyle stunned a disbelieving crowd that had already judged her undeserving of their affirmation because of worldly standards that determine how a "star" should look and speak.

Middle aged and stocky, bushy eyebrows and rough around the edges, Ms. Boyle didn't look like anyone's idea of a singer, much less a singing sensation.

Cutaways of the audience showed folks sneering and laughing at her, fully expecting an embarrassing train wreck to unfold before them.

Some shook their heads in disgust.

And yet, three notes into her song, there was a mass transformation of the crowd, their hearts moved by her exquisite voice, completely unexpected from an unemployed woman whose home was a humble village in the middle of farm country.

Their (our) categories didn't work anymore.

On a dime, the crowd pivoted from cynicism and disbelief to wholehearted support, embracing this woman and her dreams.

Millions around the world have joined them, not able to explain what happens in their hearts and minds as they watch this unfold, over and over again.

The goodness of this woman's gifts, given by God, made her radiantly beautiful in the eyes of those who watched and listened.

But the transformation was of *their* hearts and minds, not of her, for she left the stage the same beautiful but humble woman who had walked out onto it, claiming her dream of being a great musical star.

Only now, the people had eyes to see that loveliness.

The risen Jesus enters our lives and turns us around, too, when we're jaded and critical and judgmental and closed-off.

On a dime, with Jesus, everything is different." *The Text This Week*, 4/22/12.

This is resurrection!

And so it is, with newly opened minds, we can say, together with Peter:

"The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus.... To this we are all witnesses." Acts 3:13; 15.

Thanks be to God!

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