

“The Word Is Near You”
February 21, 2010

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

Phoenix Affirmation Two:

The call to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves is a call *to listen for God’s Word, which comes through daily prayer and meditation, studying the ancient testimonies that we call Scripture, and attending to God’s present activity in the world.*

The Bible [neutrally]. The Bible [with curiosity]. The Bible [with force]. The Bible [with puzzlement]. The Bible [with disdain]. The Bible [with rolled eyes and disinterest]. The Bible [with affection]. The Bible [with awe].

The Bible ... one large book, many, many different attitudes. One book, countless different and contradictory attitudes – in the world, in this country, in and among different churches, in and among the members of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, United Church of Christ.

Some folks look to and read the Bible and find reasons to condemn lesbians and gay men, to dismiss other religions, and to reject the theory of evolution. Others look to and read the Bible and find reasons to cherish lesbians and gay men, to honor other religions, and to welcome the insights of science. Some folks look to and read the Bible and find a “prosperity gospel” that urges believers to seek their own personal gain because God wants them to be rich, while others look to and read the Bible and find a gospel of justice that calls them to seek the welfare of others. And then, of course, yet other folks look *at* the Bible, *refuse* to read it, and dismiss it all as a bunch of ancient drivel.

So what’s a person to do? What’s a church to do? What’s a congregation like the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC, to do? Well, let’s be honest here ... one thing this congregation could do would be to decide that it doesn’t want to be a Christian church anymore. It could withdraw from the UCC, it could remove the cross and all other things Christian, and then it could leave that pesky, odd book called “the Bible” behind.

Perhaps for some of you that’s a disturbing, even shocking idea, and yet perhaps, for others, it is an intriguing, even attractive idea. Please understand. I am not proposing this morning that this congregation become a non-Christian community. I am not saying I believe this congregation is called to become a non-Christian community. I’m not mentioning the idea of leaving the Christian Church with a capital “C” because I think it’s a good idea. No, the reason I’m mentioning the possibility is to remind all of us that no one and no-thing, not even the weight of history, is forcing this congregation to be a Christian church. I mention it to remind us all that this church is a Christian church because it continues to embrace Christianity, not because anyone or anything is coercing it to do so. And unless and until this congregation decides to move in a sharply different

direction away from the Christian tradition, leaving that pesky, odd book called “the Bible” behind is simply not a genuine option.

But even if this congregation accepts the idea that the Bible will continue to have a role in its work and worship, a whole host of questions about what *kind* of role it will have remains unanswered. Even if you don’t find it pesky, the Bible is an odd book. It’s a collection of many different kinds of writings – poetry, epic history, law codes, songs, gospels, letters, drama. And it was written by an untold number of people from an untold number of different communities, probably during a period of more than 1,000 years. How in the world, then, can we make sense of the Bible, and how can we hear the Word of God in and through it?

These are crucial questions for the Christian church and the Christian tradition in the 21st century. At a time when literal, fundamentalist, triumphalist readings of the Bible, the Torah, and the Q’ran are fueling intolerance and violence, finding and embracing alternative ways of reading the sacred texts of humanity’s many religious traditions isn’t just a good idea. It’s an idea, a *practice* that humanity needs for its very survival.

So it comes as no surprise that the Phoenix Affirmations, the twelve part exploration of Progressive Christianity developed a few years ago by clergy, theologians, lay people, Biblical scholars, and more, would grapple with the Bible and its place in the Christian faith almost in the beginning. The Phoenix Affirmations explore the Bible’s role in the life of Christian faith in Affirmation #2. (As you may remember from last month, Affirmation One describes Progressive Christianity as a faith that involves walking fully in the Path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths.)

The core of the Phoenix Affirmations is simple. The Phoenix Affirmations understand Progressive Christianity as rooted in Jesus’ teaching that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Each of the twelve Affirmations, then, is an exploration of how to live out those commandments of love.

Affirmation Two addresses the role of the Bible in that way of life head-on. Affirmation Two states that, as we answer God’s calls to love God with all of who we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves, we are called to listen for God’s Word through daily prayer and meditation, studying the ancient testimonies Christians call Scripture, and attending to God’s activity in the world here and now.

So the Bible is there, literally in the middle of how we listen for and hear the whispers of the Spirit, how we listen for and hear the Word of Light and Truth, the Promises of Love Incarnate. The Bible is there, but notice *how* the Bible is there, in this description of a Progressive Christian path of life. The Bible is there, not as the inerrant, literal Word of God. The Bible is there, not as *the* way, but as *one* of the ways we can hear that Word, that Gift. The Bible is there, as *ancient testimonies* of the Spirit’s fullness, presence, challenge, and blessing. The Bible is there, in the middle, as a source of intimacy, knowledge, and encounter with the Divine.

But simply understanding the Bible as ancient testimonies about God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, understanding it as a pivotal way to hear the Word of God still leaves us with a big book, written over 1,000 years by people in different communities with different languages, customs, and cultures. We still have the challenge of how to relate to a book that contradicts itself, that truly, at times, seems to make no sense

whatsoever, and that bears the imprint of many human hands as well as the imprint of the Spirit's presence.

To meet that challenge, the Phoenix Affirmations and the Rev. Eric Elnes, the UCC minister who has been a leader in describing and nurturing the phenomenon of Progressive Christianity, point us back, once again, to the core of Jesus' message, to the centrality of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. They point us to what's known as the Rule of Love for interpreting and living with the Bible. Simply put, if a passage of Scripture seems to contradict the essence of Jesus' command to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves, the passage, or our interpretation of it, may not be – probably isn't – of God. If something in the Bible seems to counsel hatred, violence, indifference, arrogance, or selfishness, we're either reading it wrong, or its presence in the Bible comes from the woundedness, the brokenness, the sin of human hearts and hands.

The Word of God comes through the Bible, and through prayer, meditation, and our attentiveness to the Spirit's presence in all the world. The Word comes as comfort, guidance, and challenge, to make it possible to love God fully and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The Word of God is near, when a lonely teenager, rejected by his family because he's gay, hears the words of God through the prophet Isaiah, "You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you."

The Word of God is near, when a woman beaten down by poverty, unable to buy the things that a materialistic culture tells her she *must* have to be somebody who matters, hears the words of God, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price" ... because the love and bounty of God are gifts, freely and forever given.

The Word of God is near, when a gathered people of God hear this morning's reading from Deuteronomy, which issues a call, a call that repeats itself like a heartbeat, to remember that it is the Lord your God who has given you life, the Lord your God who has liberated you, the Lord your God who has given you an earth that bears abundant fruit. The Word of God is near when a gathered people of God hears those words and moves deeper into living in a state of perpetual gratitude.

The Word is near, when we hear the story of Jesus and the devil in the wilderness, as Jesus resists the temptations to put his own hunger first, to turn his back on God so he can change the world as he sees fit, and to make God prove God's own self. The Word is near, as we hear a story in which one character tries to use Scripture in an exploitive, destructive way – that character would be the devil – while the other character uses it to stay strong, faithful, and humble – that character would be Jesus.

And, my beloved brothers and sisters, the Word is near when a community gathers around the communion table, remembering and reliving Jesus' meal with his disciples the night he was arrested. The Word is near, as we reenact the story that tells us that the very nature of God is to bring us into community, the very nature of God is to love and feed and forgive us, even as we betray, deny, and abandon the very essence of God in ourselves and in the world. The Word is near when we live out a story that embodies the Rule of Love, a story that tells us that the essence of God -- the essence of God that lives within us -- is to give of self, to welcome friend and enemy, and to risk love even in the face of death. The Word is near, to you and to me.

As we move deeper into the season of Lent, may we hear the Word more clearly
and follow it more joyfully.
Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
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