

“Welcoming the Gospel”  
August 30, 2009

James 1:19-22  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Many churches in the United Church of Christ (and other churches in other denominations) explain that they – we – take the Bible “seriously, *but not literally.*”

“We take the Bible seriously, not literally.”

It’s a nice little sound bite, one good way to tell people who know Christianity mostly through bad childhood experiences or through the kind of intolerant “Christianity” that gets a lot of media attention, that there is something *else* one can find inside a church. It’s one way to tell people they don’t have to leave their brains at the sanctuary doors. It’s one way of saying that, while we treasure what our ancestors in faith passed down to us, we also realize that what they passed down was shaped by human limitations, as well as by the Spirit’s inspiration.

If anyone needed a reminder that there’s much to be said for this approach to the Bible, this morning’s first verses from the Gospel of Mark certainly provide one. These verses come along at a time when, here in Sonoma and across the globe, there is yet another new flu virus that can cause illness and death, so that we are repeatedly hearing how important it is to wash our hands thoroughly, like those Pharisees did. These verses come at a time when, if we think back over the last year or two, we can call to mind a number of reminders of how important it is that we wash the food we buy in the market and how important it is that we and the companies that process food wash what we prepare our food in, just like those Pharisees did.

Now, if we were inclined to take the Bible seriously *and literally*, this morning’s encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees could prompt us to make some truly unwise choices about hygiene and food preparation, for Mark quite plainly is holding up the washing traditions of the elders in a negative light. If we look only at those first verses, it can sound as though Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for holding to those human washing traditions that, in 2009, sound like good personal and public policy.

Fortunately, for all of us, people who take the Bible seriously *and literally* often look at the context of a passage, and, in this case, we might all be able to agree that at this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is urging anyone who would listen to focus on the need to be mindful of the intentions of our hearts and how we act on them, instead of focusing primarily on the surface of things. Even so, this passage provides a good reminder of why not taking the Bible literally may be a very good thing.

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From what I know of this congregation, the “not literally” part of “seriously, but not literally” is easy – even necessary – for most of you to embrace. It’s the “seriously” part that’s more of a challenge. In one form or another, I’ve heard these rhetorical questions from a number of congregational members: “Why bother with a book that’s so old, anyway? How can it be relevant any more? ... Wasn’t it written only by men? Why would we want to use that as a guide for anything? ... It’s been used to justify so many abuses of both people and planet. Wouldn’t we be better off if we just left the Bible

behind?” In other words, “Why, in the name of all that is holy, would we want to take this thing *seriously*?”

Not everyone does take it seriously, of course, not even in this church. It’s actually one of the joys of this church and our denomination that we continue to try to find ways to be in loving, grace-filled community in the midst of a diversity of belief about God, about Jesus, and even whether the Bible has any relevance at all.

But many of us here do take the Bible seriously, or at least are willing to *consider* taking it seriously. And why is that? I can’t answer that question for anyone else, and I can’t answer it fully for myself in the space of a few sermon minutes. Discovering all the answers to that question is, in fact, a lifetime project. But what I can do is offer this: I take the Bible seriously because, time and time again, I find that there’s *something there*. Something of the mystery of God, something of God’s love and challenge and call to us all, something that can pull us deeper into a life fully and graciously lived. There’s something there that seeks to transform us and the world, bit by bit, so that *Shalom*, God’s vision of the flourishing of life on earth, becomes a reality, not simply a dream.

And so, as we encounter these words from the Letter of James, “[W]elcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls,” perhaps we can be willing to pause and be open to the possibility that there’s something here we might need. Let’s start with that implanted, powerful word. Weaving together scripture, tradition, and our own experience, perhaps we can give that word a little flesh. Perhaps we can understand that word as the gospel, the Good News that so many have heard through Jesus and through what one of my favorite hymns calls the “Eternal Spirit of the Living Christ.”

Discovering the full content and promise of this Gospel is more than a lifetime project, but, here in this congregation and in other congregations, certain truths of the Gospel consistently emerge as we seek to hear the whisper and word of God in our lives. The Gospel, as this congregation embraces it, proclaims that at the center of life is a God of love, forgiveness, mercy, and justice. This Gospel calls us all to love God, neighbor, and self. This Gospel calls us to care for what Jesus called the least of his brothers and sisters. This Gospel calls us to be faithful stewards of the earth and to treat all people as beloved sons and daughters of God.

If we try to boil it down – which is always a risky proposition – perhaps we can understand this Gospel, this implanted word James describes as having the power to save, as the Good News that we and all people are loved beyond our wildest dreams, that the earth is God’s precious creation, and that we are called to live so that every facet of our lives is rooted in love, service, justice, and forgiveness.

If that is the implanted word, if that is the Gospel, what, then, would it mean to follow James’ exhortation and welcome it “with meekness”? With the boldness of the Gospel and the boldness of its claims on our lives, somehow *meekness* doesn’t seem like a very fruitful attitude to have toward it. So, last week, after making no headway with the idea of welcoming the Gospel with meekness, I turned to other translations and found a couple of other versions – welcome the word with humility and humbly welcome the word.

This made a little more sense to me. The Gospel’s claims and its challenges are so bold that welcoming it with some humility seems like a good idea. Still – there seemed to be something *more* in that short passage from the Letter of James. So I went

back to the untranslated text, to the word that's been translated as "welcome with meekness" or "with humility." The word is **δεχομαι**, and I found that one of its primary meanings in New Testament times was "to welcome as a guest."

All the sudden, this text I choose to take seriously but not literally had my attention in a new way. There seemed to be something there, a way of understanding and opening more deeply to God's presence and call in our lives. All of the sudden, I heard James urging that we welcome the Gospel that calls us to love, service, justice, and forgiveness *as we would welcome a guest*.

And so I invite you to join me in imagining this kind of welcome for a Gospel that is both comforting and challenging. Imagine this Gospel in some form coming to your home. Perhaps it is an invited guest, but maybe it's *uninvited*, instead. Depending on where you are in your life and on your journey of faith, you may treat this guest a little cautiously, letting him or her or it talk to you at your doorway, the most public part of your home. And maybe that's where you are in your relationship with the Gospel – ready to engage with it, in a sense, at the edges of your life – how you treat people in public, who you are and what you do in the less vulnerable moments of your life.

Now, let's again imagine this Gospel coming to you, and this time you let it into your home – into the entryway or even the living room. Maybe this represents where you are in your relationship with the Gospel, at the point of opening more of yourself to the blessing of knowing how much you are loved and how much you are, in turn, called to love all of God's creation. You're not yet letting that Gospel guest see and touch all of who you are and what you do, but you are welcoming it as guide and guardian into more of your life.

Now then, imagine this Gospel guest is someone you've come to trust more fully, someone or something you're willing to let more deeply into your life. Maybe you're ready to let the comfort and challenge of this Gospel guest into the more vulnerable and private parts of your life. Maybe you're willing to let this Gospel have the whole run of your home, to behold your deepest wounds and your deepest fears; to touch and transform how you spend your time, your money, and your energy; and to call you to love and serve more freely and more joyously.

If we're able to welcome the Gospel into our lives that fully, so no part of our hearts or our homes remains untouched by the Gospel of love, service, justice, and forgiveness, we can come to learn the truth that the Gospel of John offers, that Jesus came so that we could have life and have it abundantly. If we welcome the Gospel into our lives like a treasured, trusted guest, we can come to learn what it means when Jesus tells his disciples that his burden is easy and his yoke is light. If we welcome the Gospel into our lives like an honored, beloved guest, we can come to learn that all people and all parts of God's creation are truly honored and beloved by God.

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Each of us is different, at a different point on our journeys of faith. And we can all find ourselves at different places of faith and trust, doubt and fear from day to day. We are all finite, fallible works in progress, and, to borrow a line from Alcoholics Anonymous, progress, not perfection, is what human life is about. So don't despair if right now you can only welcome the Gospel of love, service, justice, and forgiveness at your doorstep or even at the sidewalk. It takes time to develop a trusting, open relationship with any guest, Gospel or otherwise. If the doorstep is all you can manage,

then let the Gospel get only that close ... for now. Let the God who loves you beyond your wildest imaginings put your heart and mind at rest, so that you might become ready to let the Gospel into your life a little more, bit by bit.

If you're letting the Gospel of love, service, justice, and forgiveness stand at your doorway, great. If you're letting it come in, look around, and sit down, great. If you're letting it into the nooks and crannies of your life, great. Let it in as you are able, let God's grace open your heart, and then let your relationship with God and the Gospel of love develop in its own time and in its own way. The Gospel is a powerful word, and, if we let it, it will show us the way toward a fullness of life, love, and trust.

Amen.

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