

For the Bible Tells Me So 10-11-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Psalm 119: 1-8

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of God.

Happy are those who keep God's decrees,
who seek God with their whole heart,

who also do no wrong,
but walk in God's ways.

You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.

O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!

Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.

I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.

"Tell me the stories of Jesus, I love to hear; things I would ask him to tell me if he were here: scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea, stories of Jesus, tell them to me." I used to sing those words every Sunday in the opening time before Sunday School at First Christian Church in Creston, IA growing up. Those words touched my imagination

as I pondered, "What stories would I ask Jesus to tell me if he were here?" I'd wanted to hear how much he loved the children and gathered them on his lap. I could just imagine being one of those children, feeling special and loved. I could imagine myself sitting on Jesus' lap as he told me story after story; the ones I had heard in Sunday School, but I was pretty sure he had others he could tell as well - you know, the ones that didn't make it into the book.

That was my Sunday morning. Then, on Sunday afternoon, when we were supposed to be quiet while my parents took their Sunday afternoon nap, I would take our special "Children's Story Bible," make a pulpit out of a couple of chairs stacked up, and tell the stories from my makeshift pulpit to either my older sisters if they'd listen, or if not, to the dolls... they were a sure audience. I thought that's what every child did on Sunday afternoon growing up, but I've discovered that may not be the case. Anyway, the stories of Jesus, as well as the stories of Abraham and Moses and Deborah filled my head and my heart and my

imagination and gave me a great foundation to experience God's love and to understand more about how to live in God's way.

Our children's Sunday morning class is called Godly Play. In that class, children hear the stories of the Bible and are encouraged to use their imaginations to engage the stories and allow the stories to become part of their life and reality; and to become characters in the great story of how it is that people experience God and how that changes lives and restores relationships and heals wounds and frees captives. I don't know if those children go home and tell the stories to their siblings or their toys, but you never know. Just imagine you are a character in one of those great biblical stories! It can open up whole new ways to experience and interpret what is going on in our own lives. It can allow us to see God alive and working creatively among us today.

Earlier this morning we sang a song with the children that has been around for a very long time. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." What a great song that is. It is so simple, yet so very profound. I am loved. I know it because "the Bible tells me so."

But you know, the idea that the Bible tells us stuff can get kind of tricky. It kind of reminds me of when I was a child and I would ask my mom why I had to do something and she would say, "Because I said so." (Mom, I hope you don't mind me telling stories about you.) Well, that may have been all I needed to know at the time, but there comes a time in your growth and development when "because I said so" doesn't work anymore and you really do expect an intelligent answer to your question. I think the same can be true for the Bible. There comes a time when "because the Bible says so" isn't enough of an answer. We need more. Anyone can say "because the Bible says so" to justify all kinds of stuff that is not befitting the living Word of God.

As a child I approached the stories of the Bible with my imagination allowing those stories to engage my heart and my spirit in ways that went beyond the words printed on the pages. Kind of like from the song we will sing later, "beyond the sacred page I seek thee, Lord, my spirit pants for thee, O living Word." But as I got older and more rational in my thought, my attitude and my love of the stories

started to change. It now became harder to get excited about the Bible because I started to read and become more familiar with the parts of the Bible that were harsh or hard to understand. I started to see things in a more literal way and less as story. I tried to ask questions about the moral or how could this have anything to do with God and love, or why is THIS in the Bible? Let's face it, there are a lot of strange and awful things in the Bible. And if I have to believe everything in the Bible is of God, then God doesn't look so good anymore. And if I have to believe everything in the Bible is of God, then why are there conflicting ideas and stories and concepts? And now, instead of opening up my heart and spirit and imagination, the Bible stories start to close things off. And my mind is narrowing and my literalism makes me more judgmental and self-righteous. And I begin to look and feel more and more like the ones Jesus calls Pharisees and hypocrites. And that doesn't seem at all like a good thing. So then I want to avoid the Bible all together because I don't like what it is doing to me. And in the mean time, I become more and

more aware of people who use the Bible as a weapon against other people who are different than themselves. And I see that the Bible can become an idol; a replacement for God. And I think that maybe ignorance is bliss, as the saying goes.

But I can't get away from the fact that the Bible is the sacred book of Christianity, and there is something in those stories that has informed and influenced and filled people for centuries. It calls to us and bids us enter the story of God and God's people. And so I come to the Bible again, but this time having gone through the stage when I take everything literally, I now come to the Bible as an adult who has had enough experience to see how the world is not black and white, good and bad, true and false. And I pick up the Bible again, and I read not just the texts themselves, but also about the context in which the stories originated. I learn about customs and understandings and use of language and metaphor and story and parable and poetry to convey truth that is much more than merely what happened.

The unfortunate truth is that in the last few decades many people have left the church, in part, because they didn't believe the Bible to be literally true. The Bible as a book handed down from God just didn't make sense and the church seemed unable to articulate another way to approach it. In part, because popular culture kept repeating the words coming out of some churches; words that became a litmus test for "true" Christians - words such as: "We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God." In other words, the Bible was given directly to humans in such a way that there could not possibly be any error. There are many Christian groups and organizations who make that statement a test of faith. Not too many years ago a young mom came up to me with a paper from the preschool she was considering taking her children to. In order to enroll her children in this particular preschool, she had to sign a paper saying that she believed the Bible to be the "inerrant Word of God." For many reasons, she declined.

So if the Bible wasn't handed down directly by God, then just what is the nature of the book and how should we use it? For the last several weeks I've been taking parts of the statement on Who We Are at First Christian Church and exploring each section further. In that statement we say, "We are instructed by the Bible, whose message is hope, love, freedom and new life for all, especially the poor, the oppressed, the outsider, and the defeated.... The Bible is a witness or testimony to the experiences and insights of the community of faith as it has encountered God. Though we don't take it literally, we find great wisdom, inspiration and encouragement in this sacred book."

The Bible is a human book, inspired by God, yes; containing truth, yes; timeless, yes. It is holy, not because God wrote it, but because of how it has shaped and guided and influenced a people of God through the centuries. It is holy because it connects us with the divine presence that has been around since the beginning and will continue long after we are laid to rest. It is holy because it shapes who we are, how we see the world, and our understanding of how we should live. It

gives us common stories and narratives that help us make sense of our own lives and how God interacts in the world. Rather than being an instruction book, the Bible is a collection of wisdom, stories, and poems that give us a glimpse at authentic characters with flaws and doubts and darkness, yet who are used for good purposes, who end up being the heroes because they followed their heart or their spirit or the wise one. Once we let go of the idea that the Bible is the "words of God" we are able to allow it to be the metaphorical "Word of God," which opens up so many doors to new meaning and depth. Like in John, when Jesus is called the "Word" we understand that as metaphor and poetry, and the truth that is conveyed by the image of Jesus as the living Word of God. And we understand the truth conveyed by the Psalmist who says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." We know that is not literal. We know it points to a deeper truth that cannot be contained in the words themselves.

It is important that we know the stories of the Bible and allow ourselves to be under the influence of that deeper truth the Bible can

convey once we free our minds from thinking literally about what is being said. Once our minds are free, we can engage our hearts and spirits and imagination once again and enter the story becoming living characters in that great story of God and the people of God on a journey toward wholeness whose destination is heaven come to earth and God's rule of love in every heart and in every relationship and strangers are friends and the lost are found and the bound are free and those in exile get to go home and death and sorrow do not have the final say for love is eternal. Let's walk in the light of God's Word.

Amen.