

An Incomplete Truth

February 24, 2008

In Peter Gomes' recent book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, the author tells of an incident that happened on a night flight from Boston to London. It was a Saturday, and Gomes, a preacher and a professor, was scheduled to preach at a London church immediately upon his arrival at Heathrow Airport. Midway across the Atlantic, they encountered significant turbulence, and passengers were told to remain seated with their seatbelts fastened.

Gomes was more concerned, he said, about his sermon the next morning than the turbulence, so he got out his notes and his Bible and began reviewing what he was planning to say. The woman beside him had been quiet up to this point of the flight, but he could tell that she was observing what he was doing with his Bible. Finally, somewhat nervously, she asked, "Do you know something that I should know?"

As Gomes reflected on that experience, it occurred to him that the woman's words reflected a fairly common perception—that the answer to any dilemma could be found in the Bible. I suspect you've heard of people who, when facing a major decision or when seeking direction, will simply open the Bible at random, point to a verse, and believe they've found the answer they were looking for. Gomes writes, "To many people the Bible remains a book of magical properties: taking an oath or swearing on a stack of Bibles is meant to assure the truth, for example, and a Bible in the drawer of a hotel bedside table implies not only the presence of the Gideons but a formula for relief in moments of temptation or desolation."

That seems to me to be just one of the ways in which the Bible is misunderstood. Many people don't read the Bible at all, claiming that it's difficult to get through. That's usually after they begin at page one and try to read it like a novel. The Bible wasn't put together that way. It's comprised of 66 books from different writers, composed at different times. As a result, it's not uncommon to find things that seem to be in conflict with one another, and even writings that don't seem to fit with the overall message of the Bible as a whole.

While the Bible is a powerful tool and a word of hope for many of us, it can also be misused and even abused. Take, for instance, the passage in I Corinthians that says that women are to remain silent in church. I'm sure you can see that I've never bought into that notion, but there are many who do.

In fact, I recall a time when there was a national convention of a rather conservative branch of Christianity meeting in Indianapolis, and their convocation had just reiterated its stance that women could not and should not be ordained. A reporter from one of the news channels came out to St. Luke's, and because I was the only one of the two women clergy present at the time, she interviewed me for a little segment on their news cast. You can probably imagine

how firmly I came down on the other side from the convention attendees, so I was eager to see the piece when it aired later that day. As it turned out, they had also interviewed a participant from the conference, and shared with him some of what I had said about women in leadership in the church. His response? "She's wrong."

The reality was that the two of us were miles apart when it came to our understanding of reading and interpreting scripture. His was a literal interpretation, and that was it. I, however, had studied the historical context of the time, and was aware that Paul was addressing a larger issue that really had very little to do with women. I also knew that it was important to put any single passage in the context of the Bible as a whole. To isolate one verse to further one's current opinion or perspective, and to emphasize it above the overall intent of scripture is simply not a faithful way to read the Bible.

Our Bible passage for today offers us a bit of a different way to think about scripture. Our version from The Message reads like this: "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way."

This passage is found in a letter to Timothy, supposedly from Paul. However, for a variety of reasons, scholars are relatively sure that Paul was not the author. Regardless of who wrote the letter, the basic sentiment has to do with holding onto to the real intention of the Scriptures, affirming they are both God-breathed and useful.

What is that saying to us? Where do we fall when it comes to reading and understanding the Bible? What is its place in our lives? Is it at all relevant to our living, and if so, how?

In order to begin dealing with those questions, I feel it's only fair to share my personal understanding of The Bible. If you've been around here for a while, this may be repetitive, but I believe it bears repeating. When our Bible passage says that scripture is "God-breathed," I take that to mean God-inspired. In other words, what we find in the Bible is understood as being imbedded with the spirit of God; the intention is not that they be taken literally and out of context.

There are, however, those who are firmly convinced that everything in the Bible comes directly from God, as though every word were God-dictated. People who fall in that camp tend to believe that there are no errors in the Bible, and that every word is literally true. In fact, you may have even seen or read about a man who decided to try to live the Bible literally—taking every single thing verbatim—no interpretation, no modification. That's an extreme example of literalism, and in my mind, almost points up the fallacy of believing the Bible literally.

As you've probably figured out, that's not where I am. I do believe the Bible is God-inspired, and at the same time I'm certain there are errors in it—errors that just simply happen in the process of translation. Language is always inadequate, and translating from one language to another, while also trying to convey the original intent and context of a passage is an extremely

difficult task. I have trouble believing that mistakes did not happen.

Furthermore, it's evident that I do not read the Bible literally. In fact, I don't believe anyone does, despite any claims to that effect. We all bring our own filters and experiences when we read anything, including the Bible.

In addition, I believe the Bible is a human composition, and consists of numerous writers telling stories and sharing experiences. For me, the Bible contains human accounts of spiritual journeys, of people's attempts to connect with a power greater than themselves, and of the times when they claimed to have known that presence and power firsthand. That can account for some of the inconsistencies, since the various writers are coming from their own place and time based on their own experiences.

It's amazing to me how heretical the words I've just spoken would seem to some, as though I'm somehow lessening the impact and significance of the Bible. That's not my intent; rather, it's just the opposite. I'd like us to get in touch with the full richness that we have at our fingertips when we delve into the Bible. That richness appears in the various parables, stories that Jesus told, in some of the myths that were adapted by our forebearers, by some of the metaphorical understandings that enrich our lives.

You see, the problem that many of us have when it comes to the Bible is that we either accept what the literalists claim to be true, or we have to land on the side that says the Bible contains nothing of value for us. It seems to be either/or, but I don't believe it has to be that way. John Spong, in his book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, wrote, "I want to place the biblical and theological debates that are commonplace among scholars at the disposal of the typical churchgoer." I think that's a worthy goal, because it is in the wrestling and the questioning and the disagreements that what is true for us becomes more evident.

I also believe it's OK to set some things aside that we find there, especially if they become stumbling blocks to our relationship with God. I'm aware that I've shared this with some of you in the past, but that became real for me years ago when I read Leslie Weatherhead's book, *The Christian Agnostic*. The point he made in his introduction really struck a chord with me. It was the encouragement not to let passages that stumped us or shut us down to stifle our reading and study of the Bible.

Instead, he urged his readers to take the things that seemed to bet in their way, and put them in a metal box "awaiting further light." That was such a freeing thing for me to hear that I began to envision a shelf upon which I could place all my questions and uncertainties. To be quite truthful, my shelf continues to be laden with those things that are "awaiting further light," but they no longer get in my way when it comes to connecting with God.

That's the kind of thing I wish for all of us when it comes to reading the Bible. When we can set some of those stumbling blocks and perplexing sections aside,

we become more open to the segments that speak to us and enlighten us. When that happens, I think we will discover that there is a timeless quality to the Bible, as we read the stories of people sharing their lives and their faith journey; we may even come to realize that many of those stories sound remarkably like our own. They connect with us in a way that extends beyond time and space, and touch us with their universal flavor.

When we read the Bible with our minds and spirits open to what we might learn about ourselves, others and God, our lives are transformed. We are changed in seeing how lives hundreds of years ago are relevant to our lives today. All that and more happens when we dig deeper, and go beyond the simple words on a page. The Bible comes alive in a way that does, indeed, shed light on our lives, and offer us guidance for a better way to live. We find there hints of how we can connect more closely with God, and how we can live our lives in a more loving, generous and affirming way. Then and only then will we come closer to the truth.