

“THE THINGS WE DON’T TALK ABOUT PART I: THE BIBLE WE DON’T UNDERSTAND”

2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:-13

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On this 4th of July weekend, a piece of Founding Father trivia. Did you know that along with writing much of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson also wrote his own Bible? Known also as *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, Jefferson’s Bible, in the original, was a mere 46 pages long. And, yes, it is in print and available at Amazon. In constructing this work, Jefferson focused only on Jesus, excising the Old Testament and all of the New Testament except for the Gospels. Next he removed all mention of God and all supernatural events—miracles, healings, the resurrection and post-resurrection narratives. Then he sifted through Jesus’ words, deciding which ones were authentically his, an early version of the Jesus seminar. By the way, Jefferson did not think it difficult to extract Jesus’ exact words from the text. They are as evident, he wrote, as “diamonds on a dunghill.” Finally, Jefferson created a narrative of Jesus’ life out of the 4 gospels, merging them while removing all that he considered to be the literary license of the gospel writers. Though Jefferson finished his Bible in 1820 when he was 77, he did not allow it to be published before his death.

When I first read of Jefferson’s edit job years ago, I was offended on the Bible’s behalf. How dare he! Who was Jefferson, one man, to decide what is important and what not important in the Bible? How conveniently easy to just “x” out all those pesky miracles, all the passages you don’t agree with, the parts of the Bible that make you crazy and those that make you angry, saying they’re simply unimportant. But after long consideration, I believe that most of us do very much what Jefferson did when we come to the Bible. We are maybe less intentional in our parsing than Jefferson. We may not even be aware that we are doing it. What we do know is that there are the parts of scripture that we “get” or at least want to get: parts that seem interesting to us, or beautiful, or challenging, useful; parts that are, to use the broad term, inspired. These passages become our de facto Bible. As for the rest, though we may not actually throw them in the trash like Jefferson did, we try to leave them far from us, although doing that may make us uneasy.

There’s a notion out there in the world coming from somewhere—maybe it’s the old faith test about putting your finger down anywhere in the Bible and coming up with something inspirational—but I think a lot of people believe that it’s just them who picks and chooses in the Bible; just me who threads my way carefully, even while thinking that if only I were somehow more religious, or at least smarter or more biblically literate, if I were only more “something,” then all of the Bible would be engaging and seem, well, sacred to me. Have you ever had thoughts along those lines? A lot of people do. And because of that, and because I know there is a lot of scripture tossed in the virtual wastebins of our spiritual homes, I have decided for the rest of the summer to abandon the lectionary when necessary, and focus my preaching on aspects of the Bible that I know are challenging for many people, parts that get cut out of most of our personal Bibles. Over the next two months, I hope to preach about heaven and hell, how we approach stories of war and violence, bodily resurrection, what it means to love God. For my first foray into this biblical reclamation project, this morning I want to talk about the parts of the Bible that are simply impenetrable, opaque, parts that don’t speak to us at all. I’m talking here about passages like this morning’s reading from second Corinthians. Moment of honesty here: how many of you didn’t get a

whole lot out of this passage about Paul's vision of the third heaven and his argument concerning strength and weakness? If your hand's up, you're in good company. Any of you who followed Paul here: you're the minority. Even theologians who love Paul find this one of his muddier arguments. The problem with a passage like this is not that we find it offensive like the battle and violence texts, or that it's theologically challenging like thinking about bodily resurrection—although the third heaven stuff leaves us scratching our heads. The problem with this passage is that it leaves many people saying either “huh?” or “so what?” and we don't want the Bible to leave us with those responses. Right. And when we do have a response like that to the text, or more correctly a non-response, we generally keep it to ourselves. It's just not seen as good congregational etiquette to walk around coffee hour asking people, “Did you get anything out of the Gospel reading this morning?” But maybe we should. On the one hand, I'm being light here, but on the other, for serious reasons, I think that for the spiritual health both of individual church members and of the congregation as a whole, we'd be better off if we did talk out loud to each other about the Biblical stuff that makes us shake our heads, so that each of us didn't think “it's just me” who doesn't get this. There's something wrong with my faith because this passage from the Bible just seems like a bunch of churchy words strung together for not much. In significant ways, the parts of the Bible that just leave us flat are more threatening to our faith than the parts that make us angry or that disturb us. When we're angry or disturbed, at least we're engaged. When the Bible takes us nowhere, especially when we think we're alone in that experience, we begin to fear it will continue to take us nowhere.

So what does it mean for us to live faithfully with the texts that are opaque to us? The motto of Harding Elementary School from my children's school days was “Knowledge is power.” Good line. The Bible is such a complicated book. The more we know about the historical, cultural, and literary context of any particular text, the more likely it is to come alive for us or to tell us at least something. For example, when I read this morning's text from Corinthians, I went immediately to my sources. I learned about Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth and that this second letter to the Corinthians is actually parts of two letters. I looked up other places in Paul's writings where he argues about strength and weakness, boasting and conceit. At the end of all that, the text still didn't sing for me, but I was fairly sure, which I wasn't before, that that was because Paul was having a bad day, not me! And just knowing that Paul as a theologian had both good days and bad days, that's probably worth something. There are some wonderful resources to help us understand the Bible; many of them are even in our church library. Challenge yourself to read one book a year about the Bible. Seriously, the more you know, the more engaging the text becomes.

My second counsel about how to deal with these “I don't get it” texts is to resist the temptation to do a Jefferson. Don't make once and for all decisions about what parts of the Bible are good and bad, helpful and unhelpful. Granted, Jefferson waited until he was 77 to produce the final version of his Bible, but once done, he was done. We are always changing, and the light of new experience or new perspective may bring parts of the Bible that previously meant little or nothing to us into astonishing clarity. Beyond that, I think it's part of a genuine humility of faith, when we don't like or understand the scripture, to always hold out the possibility that the problem could be with us and not the Bible. I certainly know I've changed my mind about a whole lot of pieces of the Bible in my time. Just when I think I've gone as far with a certain passage as I can go, all of a sudden, something shifts, and it changes. The Puritan divine John Robinson will be forever remembered for his far-reaching statement: “there is still more light and truth to break forth from God's word.” More light and truth. Always. So those parts of the Bible you put

away from you, don't put them far away. They may one day become your friends., and what was not clear may be made clear to you. Thanks be to God. Amen.