

Sermon: For the Bible Tells UUs So
Kerri Meyer, Director of Religious Education
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From the book of Luke, Chapter 8, verses 4-8:

Now it came to pass, afterward, that He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from town after town, He spoke by a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Jesus of Nazareth had a grip on the finest points of religious education. He knew enough about the attention and retention spans of his audiences to deliver his message through short and relevant similes, through the briefest of parables that still had a beginning, middle and end.

Jesus of the New Testament knew that the best way to teach anyone anything was through story. Those of us working to raise Unitarian Universalist children today have a great deal to learn from his teachings, both in content and method. In the last century or so, our religious education has been low on sacred story, anemic nearly, for a number of reasons – including reason itself. Part of our low-grade, persistent resistance to sacred story is grounded in our humanist commitment to the incisive power of reason and science, the use of which we have to confess is not supported by a canon of myth. When we have taught the myths of the ages, usually in cursory review, we've justified ourselves with one of two pale reasons: Reason #1: Our kids need to read these old stories so that they know what intelligent people don't believe any more, and Reason #2

– well, how else can we expect them to pass the SATs? This arm's-length look at sacred story keeps our children from ever having any stories of their own – and yet, we know in our heart and mind that sacred story is nothing more or less than the millenia-old art of capturing the height and depth of the human experience, for catching and sharing a tiny part of the inexpressible mystery of the holy. All the sources of inspiration for my small struggle with this topic – William Ellery Channing, Sophia Lyon Fahs, Soren Kirkegaard – hold story up as the most elegant tool humanity has for exploring religious truth. With this in mind, Fahs asks us, “What other task would we ask our children to do without giving them the tool with which to do it right?”

We Unitarian Universalists believe that each child is born with religious imagination, with an open heart and mind as rich and ready as the most fertile field, that they have a birthright to cultivate this inner landscape for themselves. We believe that the Sower comes in many guises and is known by many names, bringing always the seeds of wisdom. With each child, all that is needed for the harvest is in place: soil from birth, seeds from the Sower, and we – we must give them the tools to cultivate the wisdom. Tools such as language, music, ritual, silence, story. Story is central in the lives of children. For our purposes, we're going to differentiate sacred story from other stories by the place it holds in the human experience. Kids recognize a sacred story when they see it. They see that it's so important that we celebrate it here at church by telling it, singing it, holding it inside us in silence. They notice that we retell it at home, year after year. My own working definition of myth or sacred story comes from a 6-year old kid: A myth is a story that many, many people love because, even if it's not true on the outside, it's true on the inside.

Deficient in sacred story, we risk allowing the soil of children's religious imagination to dry into hardpan, seeds of wisdom will not take root there. We're using sacred story here at Unity, but I'd like to see us use it even more. And because we know that religion is caught at home, not actually taught at church, I'd like for parents to feel empowered to tell and explore sacred story in your family's spiritual life.

Now, hearing this, most of us nod our heads. Seems like common sense, here. And in our gut, we feel totally okay with this sacred story stuff when we're talking about Native American legends, Roman myths, Buddhist tales, Aesop's fables. I can tell you that

since I've been serving the church, no parent here at Unity has ever taken issue with any story we use in religious education because it was *too Hindu* or *too Lakota*, but I could tell you about a handful of instances of parents concerned that we might be getting too Jesusy, about when I've found Christian-themed story books pulled from classrooms, left on my office chair with a sticky note that reads, "This isn't appropriate for our children." Somehow, it's appropriate for us to, well, *appropriate* the stories of world traditions, and not appropriate for us to give kids Judeo-Christian stories, which historically speaking, are they only ones that were ever ours to give. But around the Bible, we often feel ourselves harden, rock-like, ready to let any stray word from Christian scripture wither and fail.

Why this trouble with the Bible and not with other texts? There are probably many reasons, but the one that I find most compelling is, in fact, our story. For Unitarian Universalists, the Bible was home once. It was home and we had to leave it. It only takes a few years in the desert to believe that you can't go home again.

We are a young faith, child of an old, old religious family. In our adolescence, we have had to push back against our source, to leave home, to differentiate ourselves from our origins. Fahs points out how, for a century, now, our faith has placed a limited value on the gift of religious culture, focusing instead on the validity of our created personal theology: classic marking of religious teenagehood. But we're growing, now, into a maturity of spirit that lets us see ourselves as the faith that we were, the faith that we are now and the faith that we are becoming. *To continue this growth in a healthy way, we can't just keep branching out; we need to reconnect with our deep Judeo-Christian roots, starting with this generation of children. *

Lucky for us, it's not our job to start thinking from scratch here, now in the 21st century. We can be grateful that many Unitarian Universalists before us, with a few centuries of effort, have been able to apply sound reason to this text without having to reject it summarily; they were able to sift the wheat from the chaff, finding kernels of truth that can still sustain us. Three American thinkers have been of particular interest to me in my own learning: Thomas Jefferson, and again, William Ellery Channing and Sophia Lyon Fahs.

You may know that in the early 1800s, Thomas Jefferson, Unitarian, took it upon himself to edit the New Testament so that only the sections relevant to an intellectual's review remained. He sanitized it of all things supernatural, leaving only Jesus' life and moral teachings. Unitarian Universalist adults will likely find The Jefferson Bible very useful, there are copies in the Anderson library that you can check out – but I dare you to try to read it to a kid. No miracles, no angels, no devil – no problems. No problems and no interest whatsoever. Reading this with a kid would be sort of like saying, "Let's read Aesop's Fables," and then skipping across pages like this, "Moral: Flattery will never win true friends."..."Moral: Slow and steady wins the race."..."Moral: History is written by the winners..."

Around the same time Jefferson was editing the Gospels, William Ellery Channing, minister of Arlington Street Church in Boston, delivered what we now know as the Baltimore Sermon on Unitarian Christianity. Again, this sermon is worthwhile reading for adults. In it, Channing acknowledges that no book demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible. For his contemporaries, he clarified that Unitarians of the time no longer accepted the Bible as the infallible Word of God, but as a text written by people in a different time and place, containing both divine revelation and human error. So, we have to seek out its meaning, prove all for ourselves and hold fast only to the things that we find good and true.

For certain, Channing would say to us now, we cannot offer our children the Bible as the only or best guide to moral living. Even in the 1820s, at a point in our faith's history before we turned so readily to other traditions for moral teachings, Channing acknowledged that no intelligent person could go to the Bible and find one clear answer about right and wrong. Channing does remind us, however, that the Gospels are a Unitarian's dearest friend, because they reveal Jesus not as a deity to be worshipped, but as a human being who can be understood, honored and, in deep ways, followed. Channing challenged his Christian listeners to show him one – just one – passage in the New Testament in which God is described as being three persons. There isn't such a passage and this simple truth is one worth sharing with our children – centuries ago, it became the foundation of our Unitarian theology.

From our the 20th century, we have the gift of Sophia Lyon Fahs' own succinct yet engaging retelling of the Bible's highlights for children in *The Old Story of Salvation*. Fahs is the religious educator's religious educator, brilliant teacher and pedagogical theologian. In *The Old Story of Salvation*, Fahs treats both Testaments together as a seamless 7-part narrative of God's relationship with the people of Israel. This book is *all story*, meant for children. It retains the heroes, the miracles, the history, the lessons – it has an overarching beginning, middle and end. Fahs tells us with certainty, that if children come to identify with the characters in these stories, their human experience is elevated to the sacred. If you were going to read aloud to children – which is always a good idea – you could try this text. The real help for adults comes in the section following the retelling of the stories: possible responses to “Questions the Story Raises”. These questions get to the very heart of the Unitarian Universalist's struggle with the Bible:

1. How much of this is history and how much is legend?
2. Can a person believe this and science, too?
3. How come miracles don't happen today?
4. When they say 'sin', what do they mean?
5. Why is God always punishing people, and what is Hell?
6. Why does everyone in these stories want eternal life?
7. Does God really choose people?
8. Why did Jesus have to die?
9. What does the word Christ mean?
10. Is there a devil?
11. What do we think about Jesus?

Before any of us, as an adult, engages with children around the stories of the Bible, I think it's crucial that we spend time wrestling with these questions, not because we have to have THE answer, but because we have to at least know our own answers, so that when our kids bring up the Bible on the car ride home, we'll be able to do more than simply sing along in silence.

Where do we start? Which story do we tell first? I have an idea. In one of the Gospels, the Book of Matthew, the Parable of the Sower is followed immediately by another parable, The Parable of the Weeds.

"A man sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

" 'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.' "

I think that this parable should become a liturgical preface for every Unitarian Universalist reading that draws on Judeo-Christian scripture. It serves as a very tidy metaphor for our experience of the Bible. We come to the Bible late in the harvest. Centuries of weeds have been sown, passages translated falsely, ideas edited in and out. The wheat and the thorns are both full grown. We and our children have the task of first collecting and burning away the weeds – and if you've ever grown food or flowers with a child, you know that it takes seasons of our teaching and their learning for them to identify the weeds.

Channing says we'll know the weeds when we see them: he preaches against passages that assign to God "human passions and organs", admonishes us to watch for passages that contradict one another or offend our sensibilities as people who believe above all that God is love. Fahs sensibly warns against stories in which God becomes an ally in acts of violence, or wields forces of nature in punishment of certain groups of people. Me, I cry "weed" at the Bible's exclusively male representation of God and am startled when I see how easily He and His slide off even our progressive children's

tongues; small thing, but I'd rather avoid it. Trouble is, with Channing and Fahs and my own worries and yours if you've got them, all together, we've just eliminated better than 99% of the Good Book.

This is why I find Jesus weed parable so valuable: it's not possible to pull the weeds before the harvest, so we have to take it *all* up in our arms, truth and error, revelation and history, wheat and thorn and *then* with care and reason and love, sort it out and bring the good grain into our storehouses.

Children can learn to do this threshing, this spiritual and moral discernment, but we have to remember that their spirits grow in stages. There are, perhaps, the right stories at the right time. HEY! We have transferable parenting skills in this department. Yeah, the context of these stories is colored by misogyny, nationalism, and racism, and tainted by warfare and slavery, but no more than most of the other stories to which our kids are exposed through books and movies. We never mean to shelter our children from reality, neither do we mean to expose them to more than they can understand while still trusting in the goodness of life. That said, in the Bible, we may find that there are stories that are perhaps not worth teaching at all.

If I drew my line around Bible stories worth teaching, the circle would include a story like Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors, in spite of the elements of slavery, jealousy, and betrayal, because in the end it is a story of grace and forgiveness. My circle would exclude for example, David and Goliath, because even though it is often alluded to in art and literature, I don't find anything in that story that helps a child draw nearer to the Holy. Most of the stories though, even the ones that hold the shadows of human life, still hold seeds of light. It's each of our responsibility to draw that circle for our families and to help this congregation draw a common line for all our children.

Let's weave a little faith development theory into a possible approach to choosing and sharing Bible stories with children. With our preschoolers or young elementary students, I think it's okay to start with the easier stories, easier from a Unitarian Universalist point of view. Fahs says we can select stories full of wonder for the little

ones and save the trickier stories for the time when kids can assume more responsibility for discernment.

Developmentally, kids ages 4-8 are looking for explanations to life, which is still wholly mysterious and wonderful. Their faith is an imitation of their parents' religious language and practice. Story is primary, and the boundary between fantasy and reality is thin and flexible. In their imaginations, cause and effect aren't actually the product of logic.

Wonder is everything. With this age, preschool and early elementary, we might try:

- The Creation Story, leave out The Fall for now.
- Manna in the Desert, keep in the part about what happens when you complain and freak out
- Samuel in the temple – what a tender story of children being called to serve
- Jonah and the Whale
- The Passover story
- The Nativity of Jesus
- Jesus and the little children.
- Zachheus in the tree
- The Loaves and Fishes
- The Good Samaritan.
- Mary and Martha.

After you read the story, be sure to allow plenty of time to wonder with your young child. What do these stories want to teach us about living. What's the most important part of the story for you? Ask who they'd like to be in the story? Be prepared to offer your point of view on any of those questions Fahs names. Let them know that some of their friends see the stories a little differently, but that this story is theirs to keep and that these stories are all ours to share.

Parables are perfect for kids 8-12. Kids this age are looking to religion to help them sort out right and wrong, fair and unfair. Favorites are the Prodigal Son, the Parable of the Talents, even the Parable of the Sower. So are stories with lessons about relationship and belonging: Jacob and Esau. Ruth and Naomi. Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors. The stories that they are collecting with your help are forming your family's

religious identity. Tell them and retell them as your child grows – with each new year, their eye will find new weeds and new seeds.

Around 12 years old, give or take, youth are prepared to critically compare and contrast worldviews. They crave stories that give them an outlook on life. They're forming their own theological questions. They're aware of the intersection of private and public life. It's at this moment that the really challenging stories can be fruitful additions to a young person's religious life. When I say challenging, I suppose I mean the rest of the book. This is the age of discernment and they're ready for these stories, but they'll only know what to do with them if we've given them sacred stories from their early childhood, if we've modeled how we incorporate story into our own religious lives.

Story enriches the fields of our children's hearts and minds. If we dismiss the stories of the Bible as the dust of ages, Fahs says we miss out on the treasure just below the surface. If we deny our children the opportunity to engage the Bible and the latitude to interpret it according to their own reason, then we may as well, as Channing warns us, abandon this book to its enemies. It's tempting to leave this work or reclaiming the Bible to our liberal Christian friends. Some of us might say to ourselves, "If someone really wants their kid to have a progressive take on the Bible, maybe they should be at a UCC church." But this is our work. The Bible is part of our children's heritage. We can give them this gift of our religious culture and remain to our present liberal faith, because we draw equally from other sources of wisdom. Our children know that the Sower has visited every village in every land and they see that a source outside the Bible doesn't relegate a myth to a place among the thorns. In our homes and our Sunday School classes, we will teach our children the truth, that sacred stories come from a hundred holy books and a thousand holy mouths. We will teach them to cherish the stories for what they are on the outside, prove every story for what it is on the inside and hold fast to what is good.

May our hearts always be soft and ready soil, so that whosoever the Sower, we will be the field where the seeds of the ever-growing light might take root, and the fruits of the Spirit yield a hundredfold. Amen.