

Thursday, August 18 and Sunday, August 21

Discovering Layers

The Letter to the Hebrews 11:29 - 40

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By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Something that Pastor Edward had to do as a part of his ordination process in the past few years, and that I also had to do when I was pursuing ordination sixteen years ago, was to take a series of exams. There are total of five ordination exams for Presbyterian ministers: one on theology, one on worship and the sacraments, two on the Bible, and one on church governance. Most of the exams are taken in the final year of seminary, but one of the five can be taken as soon as an inquirer to ordination feels brave enough to do so.

This exam is called the *Bible Content Exam*. It is 100 multiple choice questions about the Bible. Edward and I both passed the exam the first time we took it, but neither of us got a perfect score.

We actually laughed when we talked about our scores. Edward said he didn't have a clue about the minor prophets, and I apparently had not learned anything from Sunday School about the Epistles.

In the end, we can assure you all that we studied hard in seminary and, based on our test scores, both of your pastors are officially "above average" in knowledge about the content of the Bible.

One of the hints I was given before the Bible Content Exam was how to tell the letters of the New Testament apart. The letters, often called "epistles," each have unique characteristics, just like any letters would.

For example, the author of the letter to the Galatians was *not happy* with the Galatians. He called them "foolish." On the other hand, the Apostle Paul had a special place in his heart for the Philippians, so the letter to the Philippians is full of thanksgiving to God for them and compliments on their faith and work.

One of the ways you can tell that you are reading from the letter that we have shared this evening/*morning*, the Letter to the Hebrews, is that you can feel like you are reading from something

like a *textbook* about the Old Testament. The verses that we shared this evening/morning give us a sort-of Cliff's Notes on the Old Testament.

In the beginning verse, we are reminded about the Hebrews being in Egypt, then came the time of the judges, then reminders of the prophets. It is not an entirely happy history. The Hebrews are reminded that their struggles are not the first time that their people have been persecuted and absorbed in war.

But isn't it a little redundant? Why do we need the Letter to the Hebrews telling us *all over again* what we can read in our Bible by simply flipping the pages to the front sections of the book?

Why couldn't the teachers and leaders of the Hebrews' community simply read to them from the Old Testament, using the original Hebrew Bible to remind and reminisce about their history, rather than telling it all over again in the Letter to the Hebrews?

I know we have some real lovers of genealogy in this congregation. I know we have some folks here at Federated who have done research and digging farther and farther back in your families' histories. And the more you do that, yes, the more you are going to find, but you also might find that the histories people *thought* they knew don't line up with the history you come to find when you start looking.

When Jacob Louis, one of the thirteen European settlers who arrived to the Loup River in 1856, wrote about their first night in this area, this is what he recorded:

We arrived here in the evening of May 29, 1856 and camped for the night on the side of the (Loup) river near Buck Island. There were thirteen in the party, including myself....The land-scape, as far as the eye could see, was unbroken prairie.... On the banks of the Loup...were many trees and during the first month we built a log house...covering it with a roof of grass... it served all of us as a home for several months....during the first summer we broke ground and put in a crop.... Grasshoppers came and saved us the trouble of harvesting...we had a hard time to keep from starving the next winter.....wild game was abundant... and we had plenty of fresh meat. Deer and elk especially were plentiful, and I have seen wild buffalo.... At one time after a prairie fire I saw about a thousand elk in one herd not far from Columbus. The day on which Columbus was born was cloudless and calm...as I look about me and see the great changes which have taken place I know that it was long ago.¹

Great changes did take place. Just a decade after the group of 13 arrived to this area in 1856, there was enough of a town and enough people who considered themselves to be Congregationalist that they were able to found the Congregational Church of Columbus in 1866.

We will celebrate this beginning, and our part in the continuation of that tradition 150 years later, in the month of October.

I found Jacob's words on the website of the Platte County Historical Society. Jacob also appears on the mural that faces Frankfort Square. The website tells Jacob's story in his words, while the mural

¹ Louis, Jacob – founder of Columbus, Nebraska, as quoted on the website of the Platte County (Nebraska) Historical Society <http://www.megavision.net/museum/newsletter.htm> Accessed August 2016

tells a story of Columbus in pictures. The brilliant construction of the Frankfort Square mural is that it shows history in *layers* that the artist painted to look as if they are actually *peeling from the wall*.

On the mural, Jacob is shown with two other men, striding across the prairie. I think *the best thing* about the mural is that it has an image that recognizes that Jacob was a significant *part of* the history of Columbus, but that his story doesn't tell the *whole history*.

To the south end of the mural are painted tepees, to represent the people who **had already** been in this area for perhaps centuries, namely the people of the Pawnee and Oto American Indian tribes.

It was just a year after the group of thirteen Europeans' arrival to this valley that the Pawnee ceded the remainder of their lands in northeast Nebraska to the U.S. government, so perhaps almost all of the tribe had moved from the area by the time Jacob Louis and the other dozen people arrived along the Loup River.

But that doesn't change that the Pawnee and Oto's history was here. As children of God, too, their history is the history of both place and people. Whoever wrote the letter to the Hebrews was painting a kind of mural of history for the recipients of the letter.

The Hebrews had struggle, as we do, to try and make sure we recognize the multiplicity of history, not just tell only the story of who we consider to be "our" people.

If we read what is in the text of the letter to the Hebrews, but *also* understand what happened *between* the lines of the text, we can read the letter to the Hebrews more like the mural in Frankfort Square. There are many layers of history.

The layers of the persecution and wars and exile that the letter talks about – AND the resulting cross cultural exchanges that the letter too easily ignores – meant that the Hebrews' history had as much multiplicity as any people. The author of the letter of Hebrews might not like that, but it is in the Old Testament to which the author refers.

The Hebrews were defined by their place in the land around the Jordan River, but they had been in exile from there, and had returned several times in the course of their history. Each time, they recorded new history and interpreted the past in new and different ways.

In 1957, many Congregational churches, including the Congregational side of the Federated Church, joined the United Church of Christ. We often call the United Church of Christ by its acronym, the "UCC."

Earlier this year, the United Church of Christ made a statement about history. Following its General Synod last year, the UCC is calling for rejection of what has historically been known as the "Doctrine of Discovery." Let me read from the United Church of Christ website to give some background:

Many Americans grow up learning that this continent was "discovered" by Christopher Columbus. The concept of discovery, as if the land was empty prior to arrival and its indigenous inhabitants were somehow "less than" the explorers is, at its heart, racism and cultural superiority. The doctrine of discovery, a concept of public international law expounded by the United States Supreme Court in a series of decisions, originated from various church documents in Christian Europe in the mid-1400s to justify...European monarchies as they invasively arrived in the Western

hemisphere. [The Doctrine of Discovery] theologically asserted the right to claim the indigenous lands, territories, and resources on behalf of Christendom, and to subjugate native peoples around the world. The U.S. Supreme Court used the doctrine to assert that the United States, as the successor of Great Britain, had inherited authority over all lands within our claimed boundaries. To this day courts continue to cite this legal precedent [which dates back to Great Britain in the 1400s]... [meaning the Doctrine of Discovery can be used to] invalidate any native claims to property and resources.²

So that it doesn't seem that this is a lecture more than a sermon, here is where we find why it is a religious issue if we say that America was "discovered" by Europeans. The reason that the United Church of Christ has gotten involved in this historical debate is because *church documents* were the original basis for what has been used as legal precedent.

We have a history we don't know about in more ways than one. And churches' part in history can make a big, big impact.

Churches in the UCC are being called upon to make sure we tell the story the way that the Frankfort Square mural does, showing many layers of history.

Is it just a debate about a word? Does the word "discover" make that much difference? Obviously, for those men in 1492 who were just crazy enough to get on a ship bound for land they didn't even have accurate maps to find...those men that our local school mascot refers to as "Discoverers," certainly thought they made a "discovery" when they found lands and people that Spanish and Italian Europeans had never encountered before. For every single one of those 13 who stopped at the Loup River in 1857, they thought they had discovered something because every single one of them had been born in Europe.³

None were natural born American citizens, *and yet the Homestead Act made land available to them, but not to Pawnee or Oto who were born here.*

Church documents from nearly 600 years ago set the precedent for this history.

Like the Hebrews who were struggling to understand how their history of faith related to their present day questions and challenges, we cannot understand one another without making a real effort to understand *ourselves*.

When the letter to the Hebrews recalls that "*By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.*" it can be understood as God choosing the Hebrews over the Egyptians and also choosing Hebrews over the Canaanites of Jericho.

² http://www.ucc.org/justice_racism_doctrine-of-discovery Accessed August 2016.

³ <http://www.megavision.net/museum/newsletter.htm> From the Platte County (Nebraska) Historical Society website: "**Founders of Columbus:** The people listed below represent the original members of the Columbus Town Site Company that founded Columbus in Platte County during the year 1856. The original thirteen that arrived on May 29, 1856: J. P. Becker, Frederick Gottschalk, Jacob Guter, John Held, Jacob Louis, Henry Lusche, Carl Reinke, Michael Smith, John Wolfel (all born in Germany) m Anthony Voll (born in Bavaria), John Browner (born in Ireland), Charles Bremer (born in Prussia), and Vincent Kummer (born in Switzerland)." Accessed August 2016.

It can *also* be understood as history revealing the consequence of the Egyptians keeping a whole tribe of people enclaved. It can also be understood that the Hebrews did not respect the Canaanites and set a course for millennia of wars that continue today.

It's not as simple as right and wrong. In *both* religious *and* secular events, there are many histories in history. What we can learn from scripture is that – throughout history – anybody can be *BOTH the Hebrews AND the Egyptians* at different times and in different places. The Bible has many, many layers – we have to turn the pages again and again, back and forth, and keep the dialogue of faith alive.

American Christians have not always been and are not now the Hebrews of our whole history. We have also been the Egyptians, who have kept slaves and who have built up a rich nation. Like the Hebrews, we have been *both* the underdog of history and the masters of all we survey.

As people of faith, every day, we have the opportunity to choose to consider ALL underdogs our neighbors, and all of scripture – Old Testament and New Testament – are very clear on how EVERYONE is supposed to treat our *neighbors*.

The step forward that one of our historical denominations wants to make in this reconsideration of the Doctrine of Discovery *cannot right* all of the wrongs of the past.

What we can do is tell history *from more of the perspectives* of those who lived through it. Our voices can make up the mural that peels back layers of the story.

Now, as we live and record our lives, more so on Facebook and in emails than we do in long-form letters, we are still like those writing to the Hebrews. It is *not* redundant to tell again our history.

We not only know more, but more importantly we grow in love of neighbor and teach the coming generations that there is always more history to be learned, and more love for neighbors that we can give.

Thanks be to God. Amen.