

Thinking Theologically

(Jonah 1:1-4, 7, 12, 15, 17-2:1, 10-3:2; Matthew 14:13-21; Acts 12:5-11)

Once upon a time, there was a man and woman, good Christian people, who had a baby. They regarded their child as a precious gift from God. So when their child was less than one week old, they brought him to church and dedicated him to God. As the Bible instructed, they reared their child in the fear and admonition of the Lord, faithfully taking him to church and Sunday School. And the boy liked church. When he was in 5th grade, he wanted to be baptized, and so he was. The boy loved God, and he loved his church family. And everyone in the church family liked and loved Johnny. Thus they happily watched Johnny grow into a wonderful young man, a leader in his youth group, serving food to the homeless, going on mission trips.

Then one day Johnny stopped coming to church. No one could understand it. They thought he was on drugs. They thought he was in rebellion. They thought perhaps they had said something to drive him away.

Johnny's parents were embarrassed and confused. They knew he was still a good person, but he refused to talk to them about church, just as he refused to go. Only Johnny's closest friend knew why Johnny had stopped coming to church, for Johnny had confided in this friend.

Johnny had said, "I miss my church family, but I just can't go there and pretend any longer. They all believe in those stories in the Bible. But just think about the story of Jonah and the fish. Come on! A fish swallows a guy whole, and he lives in the belly of that fish for three days. Then he prays to God, and the fish spits him upon the shore, and he goes on with his life. I'm sorry. I feel awful about it, but I just can't believe it. I liked those stories when I was a kid, but now, well, looking at some of those stories as an adult, I just don't believe them. Obviously, I don't belong in a church. Guess I just don't have the faith it takes."

And so Johnny went on year after year, thinking that he didn't belong in a church, choosing being true to what his mind told him but all the while really wishing he could believe in all those stories in the Bible. He and his wife didn't go to church. They never had the opportunity to get in touch with their God-given gifts and use them for a purpose greater than themselves.

Johnny's kids never had the influence of God or a church. They grew up focused on themselves and living their lives for their own pleasure. Meanwhile the church was deprived of Johnny and his wife and his kids and the gifts they could have provided.

But let's venture into the world of what if.....What if Johnny's church had been more open about thinking theologically? To think theologically means to look at a Bible story and to not get lost in the details but rather to step back and see what the overall story says about God.

So, what if Johnny's church had focused more on stepping back and thinking theologically about the story of Jonah and the fish? And, what if Johnny's church had told him that the ancient Hebrews, who first told the story of Jonah around their camp fires and then later wrote it down, probably didn't take the story literally themselves?

The ancient Hebrews told truths about God by telling stories. When they wanted to communicate the truth that God is the creator of all peoples, they told the story of God fashioning a man out of the dirt, a man with the Hebrew name of *adam*, a word that means humanity.

And the ancient Hebrews passed on the story of Jonah to communicate the truth that God is a merciful God. According to the story, God is so merciful that he sent Jonah to offer the cruel Ninevites another chance. Jonah, representing humanity, wasn't nearly as merciful as God, however. Jonah didn't want God to give the Ninevites another chance. So he went off on a ship that was heading the opposite way from Ninevah. But God stopped Jonah by having him swallowed by the fish. When Jonah later grudgingly completed his mission and the Ninevites repented and God was merciful to them, Jonah was miserable and wanted to die, for he didn't want God to be merciful to his enemies. The theological point of the story is clear, when Jonah complains to God, "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2).

What if Johnny had been taught that the ancient Israelites were concerned not with whether the story of Jonah was a true story but rather the story

of Jonah was a story with a truth. Whether they believed it came directly from God or from someone inspired by God or from someone who was sharing a glimpse they'd been given of God, the importance of the story for them, the truth of the story for them, was not in the story itself but rather nestled in the story.

Ah, what if Johnny had known that he didn't have to believe that a man actually lived for three days in the belly of a fish? What if Johnny had known that what was important was that he believed the message in the story--that God is a God of mercy, even toward those we find it difficult to be merciful to, as Jonah did those Ninevites. If Johnny had known that originally the truth of the story of Jonah was not in the details or facts but in the story itself, then Johnny would have felt welcome in the church, and he and his family could have lived their lives growing closer to God and serving God. And how their fellowship would have blessed their church and their community!

Once upon a time, there was a man named Hank. Time and time again, Hank asked his children and his grandchildren to come to church with him. They never did. He went to his grave feeling like a failure, since his church always talked about the importance of sharing the gospel and yet, he couldn't get any in his own family to attend church. At his funeral, the kids and grandkids talked about what a good man he had been but how they never could understand how he could believe those Bible stories--like that story of the chains miraculously falling from Peter's wrists when he was in prison.

But, again, let's venture into the world of what if.... What if Hank's church had been more open about thinking theologically? To think theologically means to look at a Bible story and to not get lost in the details but rather to step back and see what the overall story says about God.

And what if Hank's church had told him about the early church fathers? The church fathers are given a lot of attention because they were close to the events of the life of Jesus and the apostles. Also, they took the lead in defending Christianity against early assaults. And these guys, who were so instrumental in forming the church in those first centuries, actually felt free to interpret the scripture the way the Spirit led them as individuals to understand it. In the early church, different interpretations of scripture

were readily accepted. The early church fathers talked about there being different doors or avenues through which we can enter the scripture to discover the truth about God and thus to draw closer to God.

The church fathers felt that focusing only on a literal approach did not do full justice to the sacred nature of scripture. They claimed that stepping back and thinking theologically, being open, allowed the Spirit to work in a Christian heart because the truth about God was more than one human mind could comprehend anyhow.

Thus, Origen in the third century spoke highly of those who questioned and looked beyond the facts for the truth in the stories. And in the 4th century, the much-respected and highly influential early church father Augustine even said, "The surface meaning lies open before us and charms beginners. Yet the depth is amazing, my God, the depth is amazing! To focus on its meaning is to experience awe--the awe of adoration before its transcendence and love." And in the 5th century, Peter Chrysologus agreed, saying, "The historical narrative should always be raised to a higher meaning...While the literal meaning is an important place for the interpreter to begin, it is perfected by the spiritual understanding that may consist of typological or allegorical or analogical meanings found within the text."¹

What if Hank had been taught and shared with his family that it was originally perfectly acceptable for different people to approach Bible stories differently? What if he could have said, "I personally believe it happened exactly like it says, but good, respected Christians through the ages have felt it was a story that was told to show God's power to deliver. You have to wrestle with the text yourself, and decide what it has to say to you about God"? Hank could have told his family that whether they looked at the story literally or figuratively, when stepping back and thinking theologically, the bottom line, the truth of what it says about God is the same--that God is a God who has the power and the love to deliver his people.

Ah, what a blessing it would have been for Hank and the rest of his family to have been able to explore the scriptures together, to share different

¹ Williams, D.H., Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation

perspectives and understandings, growing not only closer to one another but also closer to God in the process. And what a blessing that extended family could have been to God's church.

Once upon a time, there was a middle aged woman named Virginia who sat in the pew of her church, week after week, alone, wondering why her friend Dorothy wouldn't come to church with her. Dorothy was lonely and depressed. Dorothy would enjoy the fellowship at church, and she'd find meaning for her life. Dorothy did all sorts of things with Virginia, but never church. Dorothy always came up with some excuse as to why she couldn't come to church with Virginia.

But one Saturday morning, Dorothy confided in her hairdresser, "I'd like to go to church with Virginia. She's a good person, and I love her, and I think she's right. I'd probably like the people and the ways I could help at her church. But golly gee, she has no trouble believing that Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish and not only fed 5,000 people but had 12 basketfuls left over--more than he started with! I'm happy for her that she finds such joy in believing that story, but, personally, I just don't get it. If I went with her, I'd feel like a hypocrite."

But, again, let's venture into the world of what if.... What if Virginia's church had been more open about thinking theologically? To think theologically means to look at a Bible story and to not get lost in the details but rather to step back and see what the overall story says about God.

What if Virginia had told Dorothy that she didn't have to believe that the story happened exactly as it says for it to be a true story? What if Virginia had been wise enough to realize that the miracles can be stumbling blocks for people like Dorothy? Perhaps this is why Jesus himself decided in the wilderness that he wasn't going to use miracles. Perhaps this is why Jesus himself said that it was an evil generation that wanted a miracle.

What if Virginia had read the following passage about the Feeding of The Five Thousand from the relatively conservative, highly respected modern theologian William Barclay? "There are some people who read the miracles of Jesus, and feel no need to understand. Let them remain forever undisturbed in the sweet simplicity of their faith. There are others who

read, and their minds question, and they feel they must understand. Let them take no shame of it, for God comes far more than half way to meet the questing mind. But in whatever way we approach the miracles of Jesus, one thing is certain. We must never be content to regard them as something which happened; we must always regard them as something which happens....There are three ways in which we can look at this miracle. First, we may look at it as a simple multiplication of loaves and fishes. That would be very difficult to understand; and would be something which happened once and never repeated itself. If we regard it that way, let us be content; but let us not be critical and condemnatory of anyone who feels that he must find another way. Second, many people see in this miracle a sacrament. They have felt that those who were present received only the smallest morsel of food, and yet with that were strengthened for their journey and were content. They have felt that this was not a meal where people glutted their physical appetite; but a meal where they ate the spiritual food of Christ. If that be so, this is a miracle which is re-enacted every time we sit at the table of our Lord....Third, there are those who see in this miracle something which in a sense is perfectly natural, and yet which in another sense is a real miracle, and which in any sense is very precious....all began to share, and before they knew what was happening, there was enough and more than enough for all....It was the miracle of changed men and women with something of Christ in them to banish their selfishness....It does not matter how we understand this miracle. One thing is sure--when Christ is there the weary find rest and the hungry soul is fed."²

What if Dorothy had heard these words of William Barclay? Barclay's openness to different interpretations of the Bible might have resonated in Dorothy's mind and heart. She probably would have been interested in exploring the Bible with its truths about God. She probably would have been open to coming to church with her friend. She and her world view probably would have been transformed. And, thus, how very much richer their lives would have been, as would have the fellowship and ministry of the church. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; October 4, 2009

² Barclay, William, The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, "The Making of a Miracle"