

The Bell Tower

Newsletter of the First Congregational Church of Hatfield, UCC

2022

August

No. 8

"I'm not in your book club"

I respect the Bible as the revealed Word of God. I try to read it daily. When I was in seminary, I attended Marywood College in order to also take academic classes on the Bible. My teacher was Fr. Robert Barone, since passed away. Fr. Barone taught what is called the historical critical method of biblical interpretation. Barone was a dedicated student of the famous New Testament scholar, Raymond E. Brown. This method accepts biblical inspiration, but reads the text critically, which does not mean disapprovingly. It means analytically. It reads the text as written by particular human authors who share their religious experience through the filters of their own lives, experiences, culture, time and even biases. With a better understanding of what the biblical author was trying to convey in his (and I'm afraid they all seem to be males) mind, we are then better able to interpret the biblical Word for our time.

Once I moved to western Massachusetts, I enrolled in the graduate program at Smith College, and they were wonderful to me. Their graduate department in Religion and Biblical Studies is geared to people who are locked into the area and who wouldn't be able to pursue a degree elsewhere. My two teachers were Rev. Bruce Dahlberg, since passed away, and Rev. Karl Donfried. My thesis was based on a couple of Greek words in 1 Thessalonians.

I set this out before you to lay some groundwork for what I will say. Very few members of the congregation have shared in our Bible study group. We are closing in on the end of a survey course based loosely on the Massachusetts Bible Society's "Exploring the Bible Series," which has taken us to every book of the Bible. If you want to see what it's like, we meet three times this month, all online, no need to even leave the comfort of your homes.

Anyone who has shared in these discussions, knows that I do not read the Bible literally. The inspiration in the Bible is found in the living and active Word of God (Hebrews 4:12), not in the

words locked in the written record that convey the Word. As noted above, those words are irreplaceably essential, the biblical words cannot be ignored, but they lose their meaning if we imagine that the Word dwells in the past and not the present, and that it cannot lead us to the future.

I cannot take seriously the idea of talking serpents and donkeys, apocalyptic beasts, nor do I feel the need to perform biblical acrobatics to erase any biblical discrepancy or contradiction. I do not feel the same antipathy toward Edom as does Obadiah whose book does not have one marking in my personal Bible. Also, I cannot abide the antiquated social mores of literally thousands of years ago that would sanction slavery and women's subservience, simultaneously condemning how people choose to love while glorifying war and violent retribution. If you follow these, then you must ban polyester, football, tattoos and divorce. It's not the words that matter in the end; it's the Word.

However, there are multitudes of proponents who favour the convenient (read: when it suits them – they would never tolerate a generous social compact that benefits the poor or abandon their guns) literal interpretation of the Bible, and they are vocal, caustic, judgmental and benighted. They have turned the book I cherish from inspiration to desperation as they cling to a world that will not last, and should not last.

And in the process, they have turned countless thinking, compassionate people against the Bible. I saw a picture of a woman protesting in front of the Supreme Court that is actively breaking down the separation of church and state. In a church newsletter I will not reprint her sign. However, the sign screamed in anger: "I'm not in your book club," and then with vulgarity basically, "I don't care what the Bible says." Her anger is misdirected. It's not the Bible. The cause of her anger are the ones who lock the Bible into a past that needs to remain in the past.

Israel and its sacred text (our Old Testament) celebrated covenant not power, stood up for the weak, and professed a God who loved His people and dwelt among them. Jesus was a religious and social activist in so many ways that either the political or religious leaders were going to have to shut Him up. This is the Word, and it is so obscured by the oxymoronic Jesus-and-guns-preachers and “Christian nationalists” that its inspiration now sounds unfamiliar.

Stranger Things is a supernatural thriller on Netflix. When they dropped the closing episodes of this season at midnight one night so

many people had stayed up to watch them that they crashed the Netflix server. In general, people are less averse to the supernatural than I am, but the Bible has become so much a tool of separation politics that it is losing its supernatural aura – it’s a “book club” to many.

This is why we need to read, study, preach and live the Bible as the living and active, still speaking Word of God according to the example of Jesus’ life because if we don’t then we cede the Bible and the Word to those whose gospel is filled with anger, judgment and just words.

AUGUST EVENTS

Tue. 2 nd	Online <i>Exploring the Bible</i> study group from 7-8:00pm.
Wed. 3 rd	Rev. Randy will attend the Northwest Committee on Ministry chair meeting from 1:30 – 3:30pm.
Tue. 9 th	CROP Hunger Walk rally at the Greenfield Methodist Church at 6:00pm.
Mon. 15 th	Online meeting of the Church Council at 7:00pm.
Tue. 16 th	Online <i>Exploring the Bible</i> study group from 7-8:00pm.
Sun. 21 st	Rev. Randy on vacation; Deacon-led worship Service at 9:30am.
Tue. 23 rd	Monthly online meeting of the Board of Deacons at 6:00pm.
Tue. 30 th	Online <i>Exploring the Bible</i> study group from 7-8:00pm.

REGULAR GATHERINGS

Sundays: Worship Service begins at 9:30am online and in person. Sunday School begins after the children’s sermon during the worship Service.

Tuesdays: Yoga classes are offered every Tuesday in the church parlor at 5:30pm.

Thursdays: Choir rehearses in the sanctuary at 7:00pm.

CHURCH COVID POLICIES

The Church Council has based its mask policy on the number of cases in Hampshire County. When the cases fall below 10 per day per 100,000 requirement for in person worship. At mask policy is in place to try and keep as well, that all of our worship Services feeling well on any given Sunday, cooperation.



people, we will rescind the mask present, however, the numbers are high. Our us all as safe as possible. Please remember, are live-streamed via Zoom. If you are not please join us online. Thank you for your

BIBLE STUDY GROUP

Our online Bible study group is reading from Luke and John at present. If you would like to join us as we read these distinct accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, we would love to have you join us. Summer reading is an enjoyable luxury that isn’t as readily available the rest of the year. The most read book in the world is the Bible. It has inspired so many other thoughtful expressions. Why would we think it’s made only for Sunday morning? Let’s read the book that literally has changed the world. Send an email to randyc1897@gmail.com for the login. We meet on alternate weeks for one hour. If you have any questions about how Bible study works, send them along to the same email as above.

CHURH DIRECTORY REQUETS

The Board of Deacons is compiling an electronic church directory for our use and is asking all of our members and friends to submit an electronic photo of themselves – individual, couple or family, and to include names and contact information, which would be address, phone and email. The Deacons will then share the directories only

with those who have submitted such information, and will stress that the directories are not to be shared freely. We want to keep contact information for our use only. The directory will not be posted online anywhere.

We ask that you send your photo and contact information to our Head Deacon, Jeff F., at jeffrun82@yahoo.com. Since the directory is electronic, it will be updated periodically. We think this will be good for our church and a welcome tool for our members so we hope that you will all choose to participate.

CROP HUNGER WALK

This year's Church World Service's CROP Hunger Walk will take place on Sunday, October 2nd. The Methodist Church in Greenfield is this year's host thing about CROP is that 25% of the area to support people in need. The world through projects that help in-themselves.

The CROP Rally will take place on church in Greenfield. At the Rally, with the various teams who plan to Would anyone else like to go and help

Lastly, after the 9th, the fundraising materials will be available to anyone who would like to be a part of our team. If you would like to join us, please let Rev. Randy know. And thank you for helping in this act of Christian generosity.

CONFIRMATION CLASS?

Confirmation is the sacred rite of passage in the church. It is when young adults *confirm* what was said for them at their baptisms. It is an oath taken before God, to God. I take this to be extremely important. Plus, a person's word should mean something. If you are 14 or older and would like to investigate your readiness to be Confirmed, I would like to invite you to become a part of the Fall's Confirmation class. Once I receive the names, I will reach out to all of you so that together we can plan how we will meet. I imagine Confirmation will take place in May, 2023.

SUMMERTIME

Summer offers many of us (except farmers) a time to slow down and relax. Many will take vacations during the summer. Church should not be looked upon as an obligation to be endured. I enjoy participating in worship and am uplifted by it. I hope it is the same for you. If you are home, we would love to see you at our church, and if you are away on vacation think about going to visit another church. If something there strikes you as interesting or fun, bring it back and share it with us. I hope your summer schedule is relaxing and fun, and that worship will be a part of it too.

BUDGET PROCESS BEGINS

The article above is about summer. This one is about January. At the Annual Meeting we vote on the budget, and that process begins now. All budgeted church groups are asked to submit their budgets to the Board of Trustees, Ed M. chair, no later than September 1st. Thank you for your cooperation.

GIFT CARDS

Big Y and *Stop and Shop* gift card sales are a continuing fundraiser of our congregation. Please contact Linda M. if you would like to purchase any. The church earns 5% on all sales. Thank you.

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Committee Chairpersons:

Benevolence, Amy N.

Christian Education, Anita W.

Church Moderator, Jonathan B.

Deacons, Jeff F.

Music Minister, Anthony T.

Real Folks Society, Martha Z.

Trustees, Ed M.



congregation. The wonderful collected funds remain in our other 75% is shared around the need communities support

Tuesday, July 9th, in person at the fundraising materials are shared participate. I plan to attend. represent our congregation?

