Literacy and Faith: Understanding Understanding

Literacy is a topic close to my heart – as a classroom teacher in the past and at the present time in my work with teachers and their students. Do children understand what they read/see/hear/experience? How do we know if they understand? What are they really thinking? How can we, as adults, become better listeners to understand what they are meaning?

But...literacy is not only a 'school' issue.

Literacy has very much to do with any aspect of life and certainly is connected to church and to faith and living out one’s faith. To think this through in a more thorough way has been a good experience for me.

My thinking this morning focuses on the ‘understanding’ part of literacy and the understanding of the process of understanding. I'm not going to focus on the understanding of any particular issue, but in a sense I will focus on the process of understanding any issue. What does it mean to understand and how do we get to that point? Is there a definite point of understanding? Why do we think the way we do? Why does it matter to think about it?

When I think back to my own Sunday School and church experiences as a child, literacy/understanding was pretty cut and dried. SLIDE Here we are in a small town in southwestern Manitoba – I have fond memories of Sundayschool here. Moving upstairs in the church was a bit of a different story. We were told what was important – if we didn’t believe this, well, you knew where you’d end up someday. There was this man who would preach often. He would tell us what the truth was – in a very loud voice and with many hand gestures – quite frightening really. I often wondered why he would yell at everyone every Sunday. SLIDE Besides, everything was in German so there was another layer to get through. When we amalgamated with another church we received a report card in Sunday School which was based on memorization, recall of details, and behavior! Participation was based on answering questions with the right answer, and if you weren’t confident in answering in German, you knew you’d get a low mark there. Getting a report card at school is one thing, but when you get one at church, it could really affect your life and afterlife!! The emphasis was more on knowing than understanding. Then there were the times when the Sundayschool class was held in front of the whole congregation – stressful for everyone I think. Maybe it’s an excuse, but I really don’t feel that this helped me to become Bible-literate.

We could spend a lot of time talking about what literacy is. Traditionally, literacy has been thought of as the ability to read and write, but the understanding of literacy has expanded. Literacy goes beyond the skills of reading and writing and involves critical thinking about what one hears/sees/reads and applying those skills
and knowledge. There are many types of literacy – some have nothing to do with reading print. For example, visual literacy - making sense of images around us. We often have banners which someone has created and which we then interpret in our own way. The visual displays at the front of the church represent some meaning and each of us interprets it in our own way. Having said this about making sense of things we see and hear, my focus this morning is mainly about making sense of what we read, and specifically about reading Scripture.

Literacy is also contextual. When we read something, for example, when we are reading Scripture, it is important to understand the time and place out of which it was written and to which it was addressed. Our own context – our time and place, also influences our understanding of what we read.

Literacy matters to churches because the reading, writing, listening, and viewing that takes place in churches serves as ways to attract, minister to, and educate its members. It matters because the literacy experiences we have in church influence the ways we think, talk, and live out our faith.

Let’s think about knowledge, skills and understanding and to help illustrate my point, we’ll do a short activity. Read the following passage to yourself and then I will test you on your understanding.

SLIDE of passage. Slide with questions that are of a low-level/literal type.

Now talk about it in your groups. What understanding do you have of this passage?

Your understandings probably varied. Demonstrating that you could come up with an answer previously showed that you have the skills to read and the knowledge to find an answer to some rather literal – low level questions. But understanding is more than knowing how to reproduce information. I also suspect that your understanding may have changed and grown as you talked with other people. If I had given you more time, your understanding might have deepened because understanding takes time.

We use the word understanding often. One Sunday morning I started to keep track of how many times the word was used during the service. Not having a pen and not having enough fingers, I gave up. However, it was used numerous times. We use the word often but what does it mean? What is understanding?

One of my literacy heroes is a woman by the name of Ellin Keene. I’ve read her books, and heard her speak. She has explored understanding in a very extensive way. She tells a story of working in a grade 2 classroom in Mississippi with a dozen teachers observing her as the “expert”, demonstrating how to confer with students – listen, ask the right open-ended questions, respond to students about their thinking and find out more about the children as readers. So a conversation began with Jamika, a timid-looking little girl who wasn’t saying much. When Ellin asked the
question, “Do you feel like you understand the book?, Jamika was anything but timid and replied with, “All my life (all 7 years) there’s one thing I don’t ever understand. Y’all say that – my teacher, my mom – y’all say does it make sense and if it doesn’t you should get another book. This was actually a long rant and she ended with “But, none a y’all ever say what makes sense mean.” By now everyone was leaning in to hear what Ellin had to say. She is not the type of person who lacks words, but this time she could only stare for a moment and then reply with “Ah, well, ah, you know, hmm, you see, ah...I’ll have to get back to you, Jamika!” So understanding understanding is not that simple. So how would you have responded to Jamika? What does understanding/making sense mean?

I think it is helpful to differentiate between knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

Having knowledge is being able to collect, remember, and access information. E.g. You can "know" the Scriptures. But, it is possible to have knowledge and lack understanding and wisdom; to have the facts, but have no clue as to the meaning or what to do with this knowledge.

Understanding is the act of being able to abstract the meaning out of information - seeing through" the facts to the what, how, and why. Understanding produces "rules of thumb" or principles.

Having wisdom is being able to apply the understanding now. Those with wisdom know what to do next; they seem to know which way to go. They do the right thing. In contrast, there are many who have great knowledge and understanding, but consistently do the wrong thing. Wisdom is the goal.

(Reference: www.acts17-11.com/know.html)

I think all of us are capable of having knowledge and understanding and wisdom in certain areas.

Now – going back to understanding understanding.

What happens in our minds as we go through the process of understanding what we read, what we hear or what we see? What happens when we interact with print, visuals or oral messages?

- We can experience empathy for characters, settings, situations, conflict. We bring our own experiences, knowledge and biases forward.
- We can experience a memorable emotional response – we make connections to our own lives. Perhaps it’s a passage or a verse or quote that we connect with – that has meaning for us.
- We can experience the aesthetic – picking verses or quotes/lingering with a passage, appreciating the language used etc.
• We ponder/reread/think further. What speaks to us personally? We wonder about what we don’t understand.
• We can find ourselves thinking about the message when it’s not in front of us.
• We evaluate the author’s intentions. What was he/she trying to tell us? Who was this person? What was her/his perspective/worldview?

You could probably come up with other things that happen in your mind as you try to understand something.

Secondly, What happens in our lives when we understand? We act on our understanding.
• We show a willingness to keep on understanding, to explore other perspectives, to think beyond, to examine our own biases and perspectives.
• We engage in conversations with each other.
• We pursue compelling questions.
• We experience insight.
• We experience a desire to act.

(Thanks Ellin Keene, To Understand)

What does this have to do with faith? Suzanne Rumsey, in her article Faith in Action: heritage literacy as a synchronization of belief, word and deed, describes faith as a literacy practice. She describes it as a cycle. Reading Scripture can lead to action – doing what the scripture says. This then leads to deeper faith and understanding which in turn causes one to go back to Scripture. Returning to the text can cause one to think further, more deeply, and perhaps from a different perspective. Altering one’s life ways based on what one reads and understands in the Bible is evidence that a person understands what she has read. The cycle continues. I think it’s important to also recognize that we have many other texts which influence us – Sundayschool materials, hymn books, Bible devotionals, sermons, electronic resources, videos and so on and of course, the implication is that we choose carefully. But that’s for another time.

So if faith is a literacy practice, what are the implications? Why does it matter to think about it? What do we do about it?

We are challenged to keep exploring and thinking, listening and talking and trying to understand.

Readers, viewers, listeners bring different perspectives, experiences, beliefs and ideas so not all interpretations are the same. Perhaps you experienced this when you discussed the passage I asked you to work at understanding. What’s the right interpretation? Is there only one?
We know that a belief that one can interpret the Scriptures differently from what traditionally has been done can alienate people from their community or family.

Just think of what the responses would be if I asked you to say what the theme of the Bible is. We would probably come up with many themes or sub-themes and we might be able to prove it as A theme but not THE theme.

Quote by Neil Gaiman: **SLIDE** If you are pointing out one of the things a story is about, then you are very probably right. If you are pointing out the only thing a story is about you are very probably wrong – even if you’re the author.

But if everyone has their own interpretation, does this mean that ‘anything goes’?

When I first heard about Mennonite Church Canada’s idea of creating “criteria to guide interpretation of Scripture”, I cringed. The word *prescriptive* came to mind and that didn’t fit with my belief about constructing one’s own meaning and understanding. However when I thought more about it, I could begin to understand what the intent may have been – to create a framework with some underlying beliefs – a foundation. *The wise man built his house upon the rock – a solid foundation.* I have to go back to my background in education. We have curriculum, but the curriculum provides a framework based on underlying beliefs about teaching and learning. Of course, here too, it results in a variety of interpretations. But our practices should align with those beliefs, and we don’t have these underlying beliefs, then anything goes.

So with Scripture, if we don’t have underlying beliefs – the big ideas – then anything goes. Anything can be justified – all we need to say is, “The Bible tells me so.” William Shakespeare said, “Even the devil can cite scripture for his purpose.” The Bible has been used to justify war/peace, slavery/the abolishment of slavery – you name it.

Understanding is connecting what we know (or think we know) to new knowledge/understanding. It’s a process of adapting, modifying, adjusting and accepting. It involves “perspective bending”. I don’t think we can do this entirely on our own. We need each other, we need mentors -- those who are more versed in the Scriptures can challenge us, create new thinking........ and honestly I really need people like Joe or Krista to explain some things to me to at least get me going on thinking about some of those obscure passages - and we need those who can bring real-world experience to help us understand. In her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou meets Mrs. Flowers who talks to her about the wisdom of common, uneducated people whom she honours. She tells Maya to be intolerant of ignorance, but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, are more educated and more intelligent than college professors. In those homely sayings lies the collective wisdom of generations. I think of the stories my parents, who had very little formal education, would tell of their experiences growing up during the Russian Revolution. I loved these stories – they were better
than any CSI episode. We would later realize that through telling these stories, our parents were trying to make sense of things and their place in the world. There was a reoccurring theme of survival and the struggle to maintain a culture and faith during difficult times and adjustment to a new environment.

So it’s messy isn’t it? And scary too because not agreeing can leave us feeling uncomfortable and unsure. Joe in one of his January sermons talked about how we are all different types of thinkers. Some of us are black and white thinkers, some of us are comfortable with ambiguity and messiness and complications. I quote,

Our opinions are limited, our gifts are limited, our truths are limited; we know only in part and we speak only in part. But Love never ends, and in Love are we made complete. In Love, God will be brought forward and lifted up, even in our conflict.

I might add that having access to sermons on our church website is a literacy practice that can challenge us to revisit what was said and to take time to think further if we choose to do so.

Faith moves literacy “off the page”. Reading Scripture is not enough and does not in itself demonstrate understanding. It is through action that Christians show they have understood what they read – and thought about. To be literate in faith, one must show it. To be literate in faith, we must develop understanding ourselves.

Suzanne Rumsey, in her article, says, Cultural Christianity is the most obvious form of passing on a belief system, but not necessarily faith. “I have heard it said that God does not have any grandchildren, only children.” One cannot accept Jesus vicariously through one’s parents or grandparents.

To pass on faith, is to pass on knowledge and belief systems, with the hope that the understanding will develop in the next generation.

Going back to my own church literacy experiences – I don’t think the approach used was the best. The danger of such an approach is compliance, apathy or rebellion and not understanding.

Understanding is complex, but quite fascinating! I do think that Jamika was a very smart girl to say, “none of y’all say what making sense means.”

And the woman in the story that Rick read, was very wise when she said, SLIDE

The secret of wisdom is to be curious – to take the time to look closely, to use all your senses to see and touch and taste and smell and hear. To keep on wandering and wondering. And if you don’t find all the answers, you will surely find more to marvel at in this curving, curling world that spins around and around amid the stars.


And Jenny, in this story, did what children naturally do: stop and wonder and act on their questions. SLIDE
Or, as our two year old grandson would say when asked what he’s up to:

*Doin’ and goin’*

So let’s go Wandering (but not aimlessly) and Wondering (thoughtfully). And Doin’ (acting on our understanding).

In closing, I’d like to read a statement from the Becoming a Faithful Church document **SLIDE**: *It is the Holy Spirit who guides the interpretive community in faithfulness and in faithfully understanding Scripture for our lives. This means that we must continually open our hearts and minds to the work of the Spirit within and among us. Otherwise, “the text is just black marks on the paper.”*