

God Wants You For A Sunbeam

Jesus loves me! This I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little ones to Him belong
They are weak, but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus love me!
The Bible tells me so.

This song implanted in me a very clear teaching about both the primacy of Jesus and the trustworthiness of the Bible. I knew this song by heart by the time I was four years old.

There is another song I'd like to tell you about. I learned this song a couple of years later. Like the "Jesus loves me this I know" song, I also learned, or was taught, this one in the church of my youth. My experience with this song illustrates very well what happens when a person or a group of people stay at a pre-critical and naive level of development. This is the song:

Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,
To shine for Him each day;
In every way try to please Him,
At home, at school, at play.

A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
Jesus wants me for a sunbeam;
A sunbeam, a sunbeam;
I'll be a sunbeam for Him.

Here is the background to my pre-critical, naive and literal understanding of this song:

My father had gone to work for his father. My grandfather and his two brothers had gone into business together with their father in a small town in Tennessee. The business was more of what we might know as a General Store. They sold everything - farming equipment, buggies, guns, plumbing supplies, fine china, hardware, gardening products, including seeds. I thought the store's advertising slogan was clever: "We furnish the home."

By the time I was six we had moved to Columbia, Tennessee where my father's father had opened a furniture store. It still continued to sell everything for the home. No longer guns and plumbing equipment. But carpeting, furniture, wall decorations, refrigerators, stoves and small appliances. One of the products they sold, indeed I still have the one that belonged to my grandmother, was a Sunbeam Mixmaster. I could not, as a small child, for the life of me figure out why it was that God wanted me to be a Mixmaster.

The more I stay with this religious/spiritual journey, the more I see that my calling, and I want to convince it to be yours as well, is in fact to be a sunbeam: to light up or enlighten not only my life and mind but the darkened places in this world, the places where we live out our lives as well.

In walking through the space I'm calling "the gap between 'the no-longer' and 'the not-yet,'" I am not simply interested in pointing out the dangers and limitations of religious illiteracy, especially as it shows up in Fundamentalism. I am also interested in building up, in contributing information and knowledge that can lead us and those we come in contact with to experience and live fuller and more abundant lives; lives that clearly shine forth beams of peace, love and joy. Richard Rohr says clearly, "New beginnings invariably come from old false things that are allowed to die."

I do think it is important for us to know something about our past, especially the religious past that has done and continues to be so divisive and damaging in so many places.

So far I have said that one of the biggest "no-longer" realities that affects the church, indeed many people who have or want nothing to do with religion, is the fact that a "theistic" understanding of God is no longer intellectually credible. I

intend to return in a future talk to say more about how the notion of God developed in humans and how an on-going evolutionary understanding can provide us with a hopeful future. At the moment I simply want to repeat: God is not a Being! God is Being Itself. Remember, please, something you have heard from me before and will hear again: The central truth of and for spiritual practice is “paying attention” and developing the resources to be present to “what is.” “What is” is a code phrase for “Truth.”

Last week I talked about how it came to be that “Christian Fundamentalism” came into being and introduced what the five fundamentals of Fundamentalism are. Though there have always been people who have held very rigid and righteous religious positions, the word “Fundamentalism” did not get introduced into the English lexicon until the early 1900’s. Fundamentalism, Christian and otherwise, is growing in our world today. Fundamentalism is harmful because it always has to have an enemy that it seeks to kill. Character assassination is also a form of murder.

Today I want to say more on how it was that biblical literalism, taking the Bible as a literally true document, came to be. We’ll also talk more about this next week.

However it shows up and in whatever religion the driving force behind Fundamentalism is a quest for security. Bishop Shelby Spong in his critique of Fundamentalism refers to it as a “pathetic quest for security.” It is “pathetic” in the sense that in order to hold to any of the tenets of Fundamentalism a person has to close her or his eyes to the truth of “what is.” At the heart of Fundamentalism is the conviction that humans have, I mean “have” as in “actually possess,” an ultimate, unfailing and, most importantly, unchanging source of truth. For Protestant Christian Fundamentalists that source of truth is the Bible. Up until what is referred to as the Protestant Reformation the infallible source of the truth was the Pope.

Whether it is the Pope or the Bible, there is a militant and martyr’s attitude about this claim of infallibility. Literalists live as if, at least when it comes to their religious convictions, change is not a fact of life. Fundamentalists claim that they are firmly on God’s side, or more truthfully, that God is on their side while everyone else is on the side of godless corruption. The issue changes from

generation to generation but the process remains the same. We will come back to the current issue before we are done here today.

My point at the moment is that ecclesiastical disputes are really about security and fear. Challenge a Fundamentalist's assumptions and see how quickly anger comes to the surface. It is so paradoxical that here and in other places efforts frightened people expend to make the world a safer place only end up making the world a scarier place.

By the way, looked at from a historical point of view what is referred to by some as Christian orthodoxy or the "orthodox point of view" simply refers to the point of view that won a debate, not the point of view that is the truth.

What is now referred to as "orthodox Christianity" evolved out of many early competing factions and they were settled not by appeals to truth, but by those who had the economic and the political power that enabled them to be the winners and thus to write the history of the moment from their point of view.

When the early Christian movement was ordered to get its act together and to come up with one creedal statement that all would abide by, the church in Rome, being the wealthiest and most powerful, won the day. Hence, it is referred to as "the Roman Catholic Church."

I will say this as plainly as possible: Truth is never ultimate. To claim infallibility for any person or for a collection of writings is both ridiculous and delusional.

The Protestant claim for the inerrancy of the Bible developed because the reformers were so busy rebelling against the infallibility of the Pope that they elevated the Bible to the status of "the revealed word of God." One wonders which version of the Bible they had in mind as being inerrant since there were several at the time.

We have a large and diverse crowd who attend these talks and, frankly, I don't know each of your histories when it comes to religion, your religious background or your knowledge of the Bible.

If you don't know much and/or if you have been hurt by or turned off because of experiences you have had with the Bible in your past, I would highly recommend that you get and read Marcus Borg's little book, "Reading the Bible Again For The First Time." (What a great title!) What you are about to hear is not taken from this book. I do want to offer you a quick primer on part of the Bible so that you might better understand some of the conflicts that have been, are being and will be waged in Christian circles today, ending with the current conflict over what is usually labeled the "homosexual issue" today.

Throughout most of human history, the average person could not read or write. That is why the church used art forms - mosaics, stained glass, paintings, the stations of the Cross, music to tell the story of religious history and the Christian faith.

This is why, along with an entirely different system of communication then versus now, when a challenge to perceived truth came about few people were disturbed by it because few people had heard of it. When Copernicus suggested that the earth was not the center of the universe, few were upset because few heard about it. This is also why I claim that literalism prior to the 16th century meant something entirely different than it means now. The people who lived prior to the time of Copernicus lived in a universe that was made up of the heaven above and the netherworld below. Likely to most of them the earth was indeed flat and had four corners.

A century after Copernicus, when Galileo, who was a far more public figure, embraced the thought of Copernicus, he paid for this with a trial and house arrest that lasted the rest of his life.

Why was this so upsetting to the church? Because if heaven was not up, then so much of the church's teachings and stories in the Bible would have to be completely rethought. The story of the Tower of Babel and of Jesus literally ascending into the sky would make no sense.

With the rise of great centers of learning in Europe the church began to lose its power to control truth. Isaac Newton's insights certainly began to change how people thought about the laws that determined how things happened on the earth

and that affected how people thought about what the church had defined as “the miraculous.” Charles Darwin’s work certainly challenged the church’s teachings on the creation story. Humans did not fall from some pristine state but, rather, evolved into being. Consequently the substitutionary meaning given to Jesus’ dying on the cross was at risk, as it should be, of becoming a solution to an incorrect diagnosis.

Freud’s work on the reality and power of the unconscious, especially his understanding of the phenomenon of projection helped thinking people develop a healthier understanding of Sacred Reality as something infinitely more than a parental figure in the sky, especially an angry and punishing parental figure whose desire for humans was to remain fearful, guilty and immature.

The work of Albert Einstein and others, helpfully interpreted for us by people like Teilhard de Chardin and Ilia Delio, opened the door to our understanding that both time and space are relative categories and that since all humans have from the beginning lived in this time and space that every articulation of truth was itself relative and not absolute.

All of this, and more than I can get into here, meant that Christianity’s absolute claims for infallibility, whether in a Pope or a Bible, could no longer be seriously entertained. At least by those who were paying attention to the data.

Each of these points that I just mentioned from the sixteenth century and Copernicus until now has been seen by the power holders in organized religion not as wonderful and freeing insights that could lead to liberation and fulfillment, but as challenges to the truth of the Christian faith. Each of them has created its own struggle between religion and contemporary knowledge.

I grew up in Tennessee where, shortly before I was born, the famous Scopes trial took place. Two powerful lawyers, William Jennings Bryan, who had three times been the Democratic nominee for president, and Clarence Darrow, were involved in a trial. A young biology teacher, John Scopes, had been charged with teaching “godless evolution” to Tennessee children. The trial attracted national attention. This fight, though Darrow won, still lingers in the semi-religious phrases “creation science” and “intelligent design.” I remember decades ago when I mentioned evolution in a talk I gave somewhere that someone came up to me afterward and

said, “You know, evolution is only a theory.” The Holy Spirit gave me a response. I said, “So is gravity. Want to step out of window and test it?”

Though we will be talking about this more as we go along, indeed, I’ve talked about it off and on for years, another source that fuels the debate in Protestant Christian circles is what has happened in the last two hundred years in the field of biblical scholarship.

In looking back over my life I have long been curious about why it is that somewhere along the way I began to question the established authority of what I had been told was true. I don’t have a definitive answer for that. I know my brother and I could not have been more different.

I know that even as a child I bristled when I heard a preacher say something was true because, as he would put it, “the Bible says. . .” Internally I began to think, “No it doesn’t. The Bible says what you want it to say. Besides, it was you who picked that passage from the Bible to preach on.”

I instinctively knew that Lot’s wife was not turned into a pillar of salt. You know the story, right? Lot, a figure found in the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures, is allowed to flee the coming destruction of the city of Sodom. They are warned as they flee the city not to look back on its destruction but Lot’s wife disobeys and takes a peak. Wham! She is turned into a pillar of salt.

(I am delighted to tell you that you can go onto the internet and buy a “Lot’s Wife” salt and pepper set.)

At any rate, when I got to a place where I could, graduate school and the seminary, I was excited beyond words to learn of the biblical scholarship that has been going on for the last two hundred years. Christian scholars began to probe the Bible with the new tools of scholarship that were available to them. In light of this scholarly work assumptions about the literal nature of the biblical writings began to crumble.

In the next couple of talks I will go into more specific details about what this scholarship has been both about the collection of writings most people refer to as “The Old Testament” and the Christian collection.

To put it very briefly: the discoveries about how, over a long period of five hundred years, just the first five books of the Hebrew writings, usually referred to as The Torah, came to be and the fact that they were not dictated by God to Moses rendered the claim that the Bible was the inerrant word of God unbelievable. At least to most people.

I do want to tell you a smidgen about this today because it does shed light on the current controversy that is going on in many mainline denominations in Protestant Christianity worldwide. I want to talk a bit about the current controversy in Evangelical Protestantism. Next week we'll go back to the very beginning and see how each generation of Fundamentalism has had its own unique enemy. Fundamentalism always has to have an enemy.

As I indicated, up until the time of this scholarship it was just generally assumed that the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures were written by Moses. Actually, some people claimed that God dictated them to Moses. These writings we know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. What scholarship revealed is that there were at least four distinct sources underlying these writings. None of the sources were as old as Moses who died around 1250 BCE and whose life is really shrouded in myth and mystery. The earliest source for the Torah is around 300 years after the death of Moses. The Torah was written and shaped by numerous authors or sources over a long period of time in response to good times and bad among the Jewish people, times when they thrived and were in charge and times when their very identity was threatened and they were in exile or worse.

During a time when the Jewish people were at their lowest, in exile and threatened with extinction, a group of what are referred to by scholars as “priestly writers” added to the Torah laws that were designed to set Jews apart from non-Jews - kosher laws, Sabbath worship, circumcision and more. These laws were designed to keep Jews separate and to enable them survive while in exile. These rules and regulations were put in a writing we call Leviticus. It is in this collection that you find two of the “proof texts” that those opposed to full inclusion of gays and lesbians into the life of the church quote.

The passages read like this:

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” (18:22)

“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood be upon them.” (20:13)

As I have said, this document was composed in the period of time when the Jewish people were fighting for their survival. This document, Leviticus, was written to shape the Jewish people into a dedication strong enough to continue their existence as a people who were separated from their homeland. The part of Leviticus from which these verses are taken is known as the “holiness code.”

They marked themselves as both holy and different in several ways:

They established the seventh day of each week as the Sabbath and commanded that no work be done on that day.

They adopted the kosher dietary laws which functioned to keep Jews from eating with others.

They elevated circumcision to be the very mark of Judaism.

These passages are certainly homophobic but they also served the cultic need to call the Jewish people, who were aware of the sexual practices of the people around them, into a life of identifiable boundaries.

Like all people the writers of these words could not escape their limitations in knowledge nor their place in history. Usually when scientific knowledge progresses attitudes, prejudices and ignorance of the past tend to die out. This is difficult to accomplish if the cultural assumption is that the words in this particular book cannot be wrong because God is their author. The fact is that almost the only thing the Bible quoters know about the book of Leviticus is contained in these verses.

It is clearly evident in Western society today that the major negativity against homosexuals comes from conservative Christian churches - both Catholic and Protestant. Just this week there was a brief news piece in the current issue of the

Christian Century magazine. The headline read: “Uncertain Welcome?” The article in its entirety reads:

“None of the 100 largest churches in the United States has a policy for welcoming the gay community. Most of these megachurches are evangelical and non-denomination, and they all have a weekly attendance of over 5,000 people. Church Clarity, an organization that ranks churches according to how clearly they communicate their policies to the LGBTQ community, whether they are affirming or not, said that more than half of these churches were unclear about their non-affirming stance and about 35 percent were clear.”

Ordinary Life, and several other groups within St. Paul’s is a member of the Reconciling Ministries Network. No matter who you are, you are welcome here.

In the period of time from around 2002 until 2010 there was a very popular radio show, the only program more popular was the Rush Limbaugh radio program, hosted by Laura Schlessinger. She referred to herself as Dr. Laura and she gave out all sorts of advice. To say she was outspoken would be putting it mildly. She was so conservative in her views that one critic said that “she was to the right of Atilla the Hun.” Another critic, praising her, wrote, “In an age of moral relativity, Dr. Laura’s certitude compels... Schlessinger’s fervor is indisputably evangelical, and her listeners believe her to be a paragon, a beacon of hope and rectitude in a dissolute, degraded world.”

Leading up to the premier of her show, Dr. Laura, she caused a significant amount of controversy by calling homosexuality a “biological error.” She has been quoted as saying that, as an observant Orthodox Jew, homosexuality is an abomination according to Leviticus 18:22, and cannot be condoned under any circumstance.”

In response to this assertion a man, Kent Ashcraft, wrote this to Dr. Laura:

Dear Dr. Laura, Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God’s Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to

be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

Lev 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev 19:27. How should they die?

I know from Lev 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Lev 24:10-16) Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging. Your devoted disciple and adoring fan.

Overwhelming evidence exists today. Sexual orientation is not a moral choice. It is something to which people awaken. The passages in Leviticus used against homosexuality are simply wrong and we should move past them like we have the other laws in the Torah we no longer insist be enforced. Can a person really follow Jesus and still maintain his or her homophobic prejudices? I personally do not believe so. Either we can follow Jesus or we can maintain our prejudices. We cannot do both.

I don't pretend to know the mind of God. But, to some extent on some days I know my own. What I know is that there is a divisive struggle going on in our world and as followers of Jesus we cannot contribute to it. God wants you for a sunbeam.

Nikos Kazantzakis grew up in a family where his mother was a devout Roman Catholic and his father was anti-religion. Kazantzakis wrote, among other things, "Zorba the Greek" and "The Last Temptation of Christ." In the last book he wrote he tells the story of how when he was nineteen he was seeking his meaning in life. He went to visit an old monk who was said to have wisdom and guidance in these matters.

Kazantzakis found him and as they were talking Kazantzakis was taken with the man's age and his wisdom. The monk was eighty.

“Your life must be easy now,” Kazantzakis said.

“What do you mean?” asked the old monk.

“Well, you don’t have to struggle with the devil like I do.”

“No,” the monk. “Satan and I used to wrestle but no more. He is old. I am old. We are both tired.”

“So, you have no spiritual struggle.” said Kazantzakis.

“Oh, yes I do,” replied the monk. “Now I wrestle with God.”

Kazantzakis was somewhat shocked and said, “You mean you wrestle with God and you hope to win?”

“Oh no,” said the monk. “Now I wrestle with God and I hope to lose.”

That is what our spiritual work is about. That we work to be sure that in the struggles we engage in we lose to the right thing.

“On no,” said the monk. “Now I wrestle with God and I hope to lose.”

That is my hope for you and me too.

I’m pretty convinced - God wants us to be sunbeams.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.