

The Sin of Certitude - Becoming An "Opti-Mystic?"

Thank you.

Thank you for being and for being here.

Thanks to Holly Hudley for teaching last week. I have heard so many great things about her talk and they were well deserved. I loved reading it.

Thanks to Tim Leatherwood and his crew. I saw just a few minutes of the class live-streamed last week while sitting in the closing session of a conference put on by the Center for Action and Contemplation, the organization that Richard Rohr started, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The title of the conference was "The Universal Christ: Another Name for Everything."

I have never been part of such a large gathering of people. There were over 2,300 actual attendees. They were from all fifty states and 15 countries around the world. There were another 2,800 on-line attendees from 40 countries. And wrapped up in and by this huge crowd was Holly doing her thing here which was quite fantastic.

Rohr's definition of a Christian is "one who sees Christ in everything and every one."

I got introduced to the work of Richard Rohr over thirty years ago by Marta Day, the wife of a former senior pastor of this church. Wayne Day and I met in a clinical training program and became friends. He is the reason we started attending St. Paul's. One day Marta handed me a set of cassette tapes - remember those?! - and said, "I think you might like these." I did.

I became a Rohr fan and began to read his writings and buy his recordings. There were no on-line daily meditations then. Just dinosaurs. After realizing that the recordings I was listening to were made at conferences Rohr's organization held, I vowed to attend one and, as they say, the rest is history. I have lost count of how many we have attended over the years.

Through attending those conferences I have gotten to meet Rohr personally. I also gotten to meet and develop a relationship with Jim Finley, Thomas Merton's student and biographer. And, I got to meet Ilia Delio and hear her twice and persuade her to come here to speak. As well as many other outstanding contributors to progressive views on Christianity - Rob Bell, Shane Claiborne and many others.

John Dominic Crossan, who has spoken in this room and preached in this church, was also one of the presenters at this conference. I have collected many memorable quotes of his over the years. This one - "My point once again is not that those ancient people told literal stories that we are smart enough to take symbolically. But, that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally." I got some enormously valuable information from him at this conference.

Another presenter was a woman clergy, Dr. Jacqui Lewis, who was as mind-boggling in her own way as Ilia Delio had been to me. She talked, among other things, about the troubled places in our world and in our souls, they are the same, and said, "We have heard, seen, read and learned to speak the language of Empire until we are comfortable with it."

She is one of the pastors of Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan. "Minister for Public Theology and Transformation" is her title. The church's tagline is "Welcoming, artistic, inclusive and bold." And, she was.

And, yes, I did ask her if she would come and speak here. She said, "Yes." Stay tuned for details.

It is so encouraging to attend a gathering like this one. The atmosphere of inclusion and openness is palpable. As I said, encouraging.

In his opening remarks Rohr wondered how it is that in a country that has as many universities and highly educated people as we do, we have ended up in the situation where we are today. One of the things he had in mind is the growing presence of White Nationalism and racism not only here in this country but all over the globe.

The situation in the Methodist denomination caused by the recent General Conference came up and Rohr said, “The poor Methodists. Don’t they know how to read the Bible?” He went on to add that virtually no Christian grouping has a positive view of human sexuality. It is all guilt and fear based. He raised the question, “Who is this God who creates throwaway people and nations?” Later he said, “The Methodists have a Ph.D. in theology but are immature spiritually.”

Jacqui Lewis, who is married to a United Methodist Church pastor, said the outcome of General Conference was heartbreaking but, to quote her, “You Methodists take heart, change is coming.” In the context of that crowd, you could feel it - from the top of your head to the center of your heart. It was encouraging. It is encouraging to know there are crowds of people like that - and like you. Thank you. Thank you for being and for being here.

The conference leaders had made up signs that you could take and put on your table to attract all sorts of people who might share your interests or concerns - immigration, racism, health care, etc. There was one that I thought said it for the Methodist: “United ? Methodists.”

For most of my adult life my passion has been to be doing what I am doing right now. I have been most blessed to have spent most of my life as a spiritual teacher. As I have said many times, the chief beneficiary of my teaching is me. I am working out of enlightened self-interest when I am working to increase the practice of peace, love, joy, patience and humility in the world. We all do better when we all do better.

When Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, Adam turned to Eve and said, “My dear, we live in an age of transition.” That is certainly true for us. We are living in one of the biggest gaps of one order passing away and another not yet being in place that has existed for thousands of years. Living in such a space nationally and globally is creating a lot of fear in people. Keep that in mind because I am going to speak to this issue both today and next week.

I’m using the teachings of Jesus as a guide to traverse this territory. Specifically, I am using the questions Jesus asked of those who encountered him.

I hope you know that this is not only arbitrary but fictitious. We don't have a digital recording of what Jesus said and the various narratives we have of the life of Jesus not only contradict each other but also emphasize different things. That is to say, there is no accurate and certainly no infallible listing of the questions of Jesus.

What I learned very early in my Jesus studies was that some of the words attributed to Jesus he never said, never could have said. Like, for example, the questions we have been looking at the past several times together. Jesus is reported to have asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" And, Peter gives this sophisticated theological answer. At the time Jesus and Peter were alive, that question and its answer had not yet been formulated. It took decades for that to happen. Nonetheless, the question has immense value and importance for us.

Who do we say that Jesus was and is to us?

We are we who answer this question?

And, out of what context, in what kind of world, or understanding of the world, do we formulate our answers?

What's more: we live with the factual and faithful knowledge, at least I hope we do, that whatever answers we come up with will be different five years from now than they are today. Why is this? Because we and the various worlds in which we live and our knowledge of ourselves and these various worlds in which we live is evolving.

When I was an adolescent growing up in the Southern Baptist Church, I was given, in some rite of passage, a "red letter edition" of the New Testament. That is, the words of Jesus were printed in red. Even then I thought, what about the things he did? Those were of equal, if not more, importance weren't they? There was even published back then what was called "a parallel version" of the New Testament. This was an effort to harmonize the different narratives into one consistent story. It can't be done, of course. There are, for example, two birth narratives, one in Matthew and one in Luke, and they are so different that they cannot be put together.

The last truly scholarly effort to create a “harmony of the Gospels” came out right around the time the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library were discovered. It is a beautiful and impressive tome. Even valuable.

Also, about that time, because of the discoveries of these manuscripts, what is called “the third search for the historical Jesus” emerged in biblical scholarship. New documents were found. New archeological discoveries were made. Computer technology was applied to the use of languages. That is to say, advances were made in religious and biblical scholarship just as there were in science and technology.

Then, of course, came the discoveries brought about by things like the Hubble telescope and the insights from people like Ilia Delio, Michael Morwood, Brian Swimme, etc. We haven’t been the same since.

Here is one version of the Jesus narrative from which the question of Jesus I want to look at now comes to us:

Jesus is born and grows up in Nazareth. He apprentices for a while in a carpenter’s shop. The word for “carpenter” in the Aramaic means “day laborer.” He decides he has had enough of this and doesn’t really want to work for a living so he goes off to seminary with dreams of having a job where he only has to work one day a week. Seriously, though I am speaking with my tongue firmly in my cheek, if you read the record, Jesus seems to confine most of his work to one day - the Sabbath. He lays around in a hammock for six days and then, when the Sabbath comes, he gets up and goes to work and it is a work where he seems to break one rule after another - eating without washing his hands, eating with the wrong people, healing on the sabbath, etc.

When he graduates from seminary and comes home, he turns on the television and finds on the Christian Broadcasting Network a charismatic evangelist called “John the Baptist.” He is really attracted to this guy and goes off to join his church. He gets baptized and is a disciple of John’s for around three years. After a while, he decides that he will go off and do the forty-day retreat that was common for mystics of that time to do. (I’m not making this part up.)

He comes out of that experience with an understanding of himself and of God and of what his world needs that will shape his life and teachings until the day he dies. He is the beloved son of God. Most scholars are of the opinion that one reason this emphasis is so important to Jesus is that his own paternity was questioned by the community in which he grew up. So, he boldly claims, "I am the beloved son of God." So is everyone else - a beloved daughter or son of God. God is love and, more importantly, Caesar has it wrong. The way to peace is not through war or retributive justice but, rather through non-violence and distributive justice.

One of the great lines I got from John Dominic Crossan at this Conference was when he did his part of the closing ceremony. He crossed himself by saying, "Tradition, vision, time and place." We'll talk more about tradition in a moment. Then he said, "Clergy have usually said something like, 'Go in peace.' Or, 'The peace of the Lord be with you.' That doesn't seem to be working out too good. So I say to you, 'Go and practice distributive justice and universal peace will take care of itself.'"

The parallels between the world in which Jesus began his teachings and our world are jarring!

All of the major titles that were eventually applied to Jesus were used for Caesar at the time: Prince of Peace, Son of God, Savior of the World. The gap between those at the top and those at the bottom was huge. Those at the bottom were called "expendable." Those at the top were privileged in every way. The Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome, was achieved through brutal warfare and if you broke the rules justice was retribution. The rules didn't apply if you were at the top. It was another story for those at the bottom.

Jesus said "No!" to this. Peace would be found by lovingly applying distributive justice. Jesus would teach love and non-violence.

So, after hearing that John the Baptist has been arrested, Jesus begins his teaching ministry by telling people it is time to change their minds about things because a new era is here.

In his first sermon Jesus go to the synagogue. He was handed the scroll to read from and he read from the prophet Isaiah. This is the way Eugene Peterson translates it.

When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

God's Spirit is on me;
God has chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,

To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

From the get-go the authorities, both religious and political didn't like what he had to say or what he was doing. But everyone, even the authorities were amazed by both the content and the power with which he spoke.

Before long he gives a sermon that we know variously as the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain. Depends on which version and no scholar believes now that he gave all of this at one time. His disciples, in telling the story about Jesus, put it together this way.

As I said, there are two very different versions of this sermon. I won't read the entirety of either one of them to you. The one in Matthew is the better known of the two. The one in Luke is shorter. Here is part of the one in Luke:

Don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion.

There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more.

Has anyone by fussing before the mirror even gotten taller by so much as an inch? If fussing can't even do that, why fuss at all? Walk into the field and look at the wild-flowers. They don't fuss with their appearance - but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

If God gives such attention to the wildflowers, most of them never even seen, don't you think God will attend to you, take pride in you, do the best for you?

It was, and is!, a great sermon. And, it really, really upset the authorities. Why? It went against everything that both the empire and the Jewish religion at the time taught. It is the same reason that everybody in this room, if you listen to these words of Jesus with the dualistic mind, immediately rejects them as unrealistic, as a pipe-dream, as something that doesn't apply to "the real world."

Go back to the Crossan quote. "My point once again is not that those ancient people told literal stories that we are smart enough to take symbolically. But, that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."

The questions that Jesus asked were not to be heard or answered dualistically. They were meant to reposition people. To lift them up out of one world and put them in another. In the realm of reality into which Jesus invited people there are not really answers as much as there are answering persons. The ego, and organizations have egos, the ego demands immediate satisfaction so much that it will almost always settle for satisfying falsehood rather than remain on the search for often very unsatisfying truth.

In the questions that he asked and the stories that Jesus told Jesus sought to get people to be aware of their unconscious biases, to break them out of dualistic mind,

to challenge their understanding of God, of themselves and, most of all, their image of “the neighbor.”

We all have biases, preferences. Where do they come from?

One of the things the man I refer to as “my first spiritual teacher” kept at me about was the the principal of equality. In Buddhism it is referred to as “non-judgment.” Jesus also had a lot to say about that and we’ll get to it in time. (I say that I refer to this man as “my first spiritual teacher.” In fact, my first spiritual teacher was my mother and, then, my teddy-bear. Which I still have.)

What I was taught is that judgments, or reactions, come up. Boom! They are there. But, we don’t have to take them as real.

Right now the Methodist Church is dealing, and poorly, with the issue of judging homosexual people. It just seems so contrary to the mind and spirit of Jesus that the Methodist Church just spent millions of dollars at a Conference deciding who to exclude. It’s just the Christian thing to do.

So, let me ask you, where do your beliefs about people with a different sexual orientation than your own come from? As a matter of fact, were do your beliefs about anyone who is different from you come from? People of a different skin color? Different economic status, like the street people around here?

Where do your beliefs about people with a different sexual orientation from yours come from? Don’t say, “The Bible.” Or, “My the pastor of my youth.” Or, “My parents.” Deep down inside your own heart and soul, what do you really believe?

Does anyone really believe that some adolescent or young adult person wakes up some morning and says to themselves, “You know what, I think I’m going to be a queer. Or, a lesbian. They have such a wonderful life. They are never judged or discriminated against. If they are in a committed relationship and walk down the street holding hands or making demonstrations of affection, no one ever stares at them. They are always included in everything. They get preferential treatment. Besides, my parents will be so pleased. Yep, that’s the life for me.”

Does anyone actually think people make that kind of conscious choice?

I said in here on the Sunday after General Conference, which made me feel like an NFL football player had punched me in the gut, that I was done with arguing with people about what the Bible says about this issue. And, I am.

But, I want to be clear about three things:

First, and I don't want to bore you with it or wear you out from it, but I am going to continue to advocate for full inclusion of all people at all levels in any organization that claims to follow Jesus. I may be the queerest straight guy you've ever met. (I got that line from Jacqui Lewis.)

Thank God I have never had an issue about this in my life. And, what a wonderful world it has opened to me. Forty-eight years ago, and I have permission to share this, I sat across the table at a small Italian restaurant in Houston with a man who would become one of my best friends. He came out to me as a gay man. Oh, God!, to be trusted like that. That man is Rob Landes. His husband is sitting in this class. I performed their wedding almost nine years ago. I am so grateful that no limiting bias got in the way of that. What a wonderful world I would have denied to myself.

Second, people who say that they are just following the Bible are delusional. I know that they don't think they are. No one "just follows the Bible." We interpret the Bible and we do it in a particular culture, from a particular point of view, with various communities of faith traditions, none of which is absolute. No one of us can rise above where we are in the current human drama. I can't and I assume you can't either. Besides, as I indicated earlier, what we have learned about our world, creation, other cultures and ourselves in just the last few decades is causing every aspect of the biblical materials - their creation as well as their interpretation - to undergo dramatic changes.

There is a dramatic difference between faith and certainty.

If our primary purpose, after we have met the security issues, is growth - clean up, grow up, wake up - then we likely shouldn't be believing the same things today as we did five years ago.

Third, people say that what they are holding to about this issue is just “clinging to the tradition.” It is referred to as either “the Christian tradition” or “the tradition about marriage.”

You are very smart people so you know, I hope, that both of those claims are nonsense. At one time it was the “Christian tradition” to own slaves.

There is a masterpiece of scholarship about Jesus written by Bruce Chilton. (Look him up on Wikipedia.) He shows that Joseph, the father of Jesus, already had another wife and family when he got with Mary. Mary was likely thirteen when she got pregnant with Jesus. Is that a traditional Christian marriage? What’s good enough for The Blessed Mother sort of thing.

One of the really valuable things I got from John Dominic Crossan at this conference was living with what he called “the soft t” when it comes to tradition. If we didn’t do that, we’d all still be Jewish. If we didn’t do that, we’d all still be Roman Catholic. If the Methodist didn’t do that, they would still be part of the Church of England. Not that there is anything wrong about being Jewish, Roman Catholic or part of the Church of England. I’m talking about not being trapped by a blind loyalty.

This question of Jesus, “why are you afraid?” is designed to expose how we create God and our religious beliefs to fit our thinking.

And, you are right: this is hard work. This spiritual stuff is hard work. It probably even requires a “daily spiritual practice.” It takes work to clean up, grow up and wake up.

When we move from the known to the unknown, what happens? We get frightened. Jesus says, “Fear not.” If our faith is dependent on what we are certain about, when that certainty goes, so does our faith. That is why there has been, is and, likely will be, such an emphasis in organized religion on “correct beliefs,” and “getting it right.” And, making sure doctrines are defended at all costs.

A faith like that is so stressful, not comforting. So tedious to maintain.

The title I've given this talk today is "The Sin of Certainty." Certainty is a "sin" because it sells God short. I hope you know that I am speaking metaphorically. But, it is what Jesus is addressing in raising this question, "Why are you afraid?"

"The Sin of Certainty" is not the entire title. I'm also calling this "Becoming an 'Opti-Mystic.'"

Jesus is speaking metaphorically here. By raising this question he is attempting to get people to focus on not what they believe but in whom they trust. Faith is not a "what" word. It is a "who" word. It is not primarily beliefs about but, rather, trust in.

When we are afraid to let go of what we think is "correct thinking," at that point we are trusting our thoughts more than we are trusting God. And this question of Jesus - "Why are you afraid?" - is about trusting God.

Over and over again on the spiritual journey we come to that point where we have to choose between trusting our thoughts or trusting the Sacred.

One of the things we are learning from evolution is that Sacred Mystery, Divine Presence, does not like being boxed in. Actually, can't be. We can either choose to get with that program or not.

So, people want to be able to "take something away" from here today. "What did you get? What did you learn?"

I've got, I think, a very practical answer to that.

Tell people you are learning about a God - or, use some other word if you like - who who includes everything, everyone. Even some of it that we don't like and can't understand.

If you want to know what you can do to make this a more inclusive and welcoming space for all people, regardless - which is what God does - be more inclusive and welcoming in the various spheres of your personal life. Be the kind of person that

anyone can feel free and safe to “come out” to you. You know yourself, it feels awful to be “boxed in.”

Who knows, maybe some day you’ll find yourself seated across a table and someone wants to tell you something about themselves, something dark and hidden. Like, “You know, you probably suspected this all along but I’ve never learned how to use the turn signals on my car.”

Seriously, maybe they will be free enough in your presence to tell you who they really are. That with you they don’t have to hide any part of themselves. That’s a miracle when that happens.

When people ask you what you are doing and what is going on in your life, if this issue matters to you, tell them. Tell them how you are working and lobbying for your church to be inclusive at every level for all people.

This journey we are on between the “no-longer” and the “not-yet” is a sacred journey that can transform us. My definition of what it means to be Christian is having a relationship, an on-going and growing relationship, with the God of Jesus and having the faith and trust that this relationship will not leave us unchanged. Not that it will make us certain.

As someone has said, if you don’t have a place at the table, you are likely to be on the menu in one way or another. There is no way that constitutes a healthy diet. Certainty is a sin. Becoming an “opt-mystic” is an adventure. The best adventure you could have.

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