

Jesus As Our GPS

Let's suppose you are driving across the country. You are out in the middle of nowhere. There is nothing around for miles. Suddenly up ahead you spot a gigantic concrete arrow. As a matter of fact, if you were to keep driving in such remote areas, you would encounter countless of these structures. They are dotted across the length and breadth of the United States. What are they?

They were built in the late 1920s and early 1930s to help guide pilots navigating the country's just-coming-into-existence air mail system. This, of course, was in an era long before satellites and GPS devices. The arrows were part of a federal project to speed up communication across great distances.

Transcontinental airmail service began in 1920, but even with this advancement over ground travel, service was slow. Pilots had no sophisticated instruments, so they couldn't fly at night or in poor weather. The government built a path of 70-foot-long concrete arrows every few miles from coast to coast, each painted yellow and topped with a 51-foot steel tower that had a rotating beacon. Using the path, an airmail pilot needed only half the time to deliver a letter from New York to San Francisco. Eventually aircraft were equipped with navigation systems, making the paths obsolete. The towers were scrapped to supply metal for the war effort, leaving the arrows to bleach and crumble.

Compare that to what we have today.

I have been fascinated by planes and flying ever since I was a small boy. I think most boys are. I just never grew out of it. You know the dinner conversation game that sometimes is played where one of the questions is, "If you could do any job other than the one you have, what would it be?" My answer is, "I'd be a pilot."

I got to do some work years ago for what was known as Continental Airlines. In the process of doing that, I got to visit with and know Captain Bill Nogues. We have stayed in fairly close contact across all these years. I've shown you his office. Before he went back to flying 777s, he was in charge of all pilot training for Continental. When I first got to know him he invited me, and Sherry, to come out to fly one of the simulators they have at their ground training facility here. The

equipment Continental flew at the time was MD-80s. They were just switching to 737s for their domestic flights. The graphics are so realistic on the simulators that during a night landing you can see the headlights on cars on IH-45 and on the ground, you can see the cracks, filled in by asphalt, on the runways.

The avionics on a commercial jet are so sophisticated today that an onboard computer can tell the pilot within a matter of seconds when the plane will land.

I learned a lot being with Captain Nogues during those days.

For example, I learned that once airborne a plane is off course almost 90% of the time. Maybe more. The plane's weight is constantly changing because of fuel consumption. Every time the flight attendants push the service cart up and down the aisles, that changes things. There is the matter of what they refer to as "winds aloft."

Interestingly, when this happens the pilot doesn't throw up her or his hands and walk out of the cockpit saying, "I'm no good at this." By the way, the word "cockpit" comes from the British navy and its meaning was a "tightly confined control space." Today the correct term is "flight deck."

One of the most surprising things I learned from Bill had to do with the phrase "point of no return." Even people who have never heard that phrase can probably figure out what it means. It means that you've gone so far in the flight that there is not enough fuel left in the tanks to turn around and go back. Bill told me that the phrase was invented not by the aviation industry but by Hollywood. Pilots have always used other technical nouns over the years. He said, "It is a very descriptive phrase and has become very popular and easy to associate with many phases of life. You might wish to continue the myth rather than try to correct it."

Currently pilots use the phrase "critical point." Bill even showed me several pages from the Boeing 777 flight manual about how "critical points" are computed. I might as well have been looking at something in Swahili. He said that on a flight from Newark to Hong Kong there are as many as five "critical points." If there is a problem that comes up with the aircraft or if there is a suddenly critically ill passenger or dangerous weather, the pilot always knows where the next place is to

land. He said, and I'm quoting, "If a problem occurs one foot or one second beyond the critical point, the pilot is expected to continue forward to the destination or the next airport used in the computation of the critical point."

I bring all of this up because on this journey between the "no-longer" and the "not-yet" the flight plan is unlike that of any other journey we take.

The airport from which we took off is gone. The flight plan we had been given, inherited or simply assumed to be true, is proving not only unworkable but dangerous. Like flying through a thunderstorm with only concrete arrows on the ground to guide us.

What is coming to light, however, is a guidance system that is safe enough for us to entrust our lives to - no matter how fierce the storms outside.

I am working in these talks at creating a vision of a religious and spiritual life based on an emerging paradigm that comes from what I'm calling "quantum theology." What I mean by this phrase is something that is inclusive of everything and everyone just as I understand God to be inclusive - or whatever we mean when we use the word "God." God is not something off separate from us or the world.

I am speaking in the context of a Judeo-Christian tradition and one of my goals is to expose, refute and replace the dangers and errors of Christian Fundamentalism. I hope what is emerging for you is a new, more useful and wiser understanding of the writings we call the Bible. What we are leaving behind, or need to, is seeing the Bible as infallible, literal and factually true. Actually, for Fundamentalists, this is not simply a way of seeing, it is a belief. Further, it is a belief that more often than not extends to the creeds and what the Fundamentalists refer to as the central doctrines of the church - all of which were written from the perspective of a "flat earth" belief system. What I'm suggesting is that the Bible, as well as Christian creeds, worship, rituals and practices be seen for what they are - metaphors. And, that our spiritual work be to be open to allowing these things to function, as I said last week, as sacraments; as ways of seeing.

Whatever else it is, Christianity is not primarily about believing certain things to be true. Christianity is primarily about relationships. A relationship with our true

identity as a child of God and, then, with all the others of God's children. To be Christian is to allow this stance to work its transformation within and through us.

Here is something I desire to write with indelible ink upon your soul. Christianity is NOT about having the truth. Period. Underscored. Exclamation point. Christianity is NOT about having the truth.

Rather, it is about a way of making sense of our human experience and making our human experience meaningful. And, further, we do that through our relationship with and our understands of the teachings of Jesus.

The goal is not that you know. Though, God knows!, knowing is critically important. This is one of the reasons I spend some of each of these talks contributing to religious literacy. It is, I think, important to know about things like the Bible and its origins. It is important to know how the various world's religions developed. It is important to know. But what we know is that we don't know. We just think we do and that what we think we know is enough, is all that there is to know. The goal of this religious and spiritual work is that you and I experience that we are known.

We have spent several weeks looking at the Christian Fundamentalist claim that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and should be taken literally. This is absolutely the worst way to approach the Bible. This kind of literalism always leads to one kind of violence or another.

The Bible can be so easily misused and abused and is most often done in a way that leads to the misuse and abuse of people, of God's children.

Let me give you a tiny example:

There is a statement attributed to Jesus that reads like this:

“For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.” (Mark 14:7)

This verse is often used as an excuse to do nothing about poverty. But that is not what Jesus is saying here at all.

The setting in Mark for this saying is that Jesus and his disciples are having a meal and at the dinner table is a leper. Jesus is making an assumption about his disciples. He is in effect saying to them, “Look, because you are my disciples, I know and you know who you will hang out with, who you will share your meals with, who we focus our attention on. You’ve been watching me. You know what my priorities are. So you will always be with the poor. You will always have an opportunity to share with them.”

Jim Wallace, one of the authors of the statement of faith issued by a group of Christian leaders titled “Reclaiming Jesus,” says that “social location often determines biblical interpretation.” What that means is that people who are well-off can easily miss the consistent emphasis in the teachings of Jesus on justice, simplicity and equality.

Though we can talk a “good game” about inclusivity and equality, the fact is that most Christian worship services in this country are still fairly segregated along color and economic lines. This is probably because that is how we organize our lives socially outside of our worship services.

When I was in seminary sometimes students would wonder what church, if any, Jesus would be part of if he were here today. Likely none. It would be a matter of which synagogue he would attend - if any. His message to us would be now what it was then: if you want to understand the outer poverty, injustice and absurdity in the world look at your own inner poverty, injustice and absurdity.

It is when we can recognize our inner brokenness and have acceptance and compassion for that, that we can begin to see and address the brokenness that exists in the world around us.

I think that Jesus’ emphasis on “the least of these” was not initially for their benefit but for our own, for our own redemption, our own liberation, our own healing; not just to help others. Or, as Richard Rohr puts it, “to pad our spiritual resume.” Rohr

goes on to say, “I can’t hate the person on welfare, when I realize I’m on God’s welfare.”

Though we are not into the territory or the “not-yet” yet, we know that the truth of non-duality is that the inner and the outer reflect one another. As compassion, love and kindness flow out of us to anyone else, wounds are healed - theirs and ours.

What I’m saying in this talk is that as we go forward, away from the “no-longer” toward the “not-yet,” that we use Jesus as our GPS. But, let’s get it right. Let’s learn to read the Bible and our tradition correctly.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the brilliant theology who is the author of the famous serenity prayer used prominently in AA and whom I will refer to again at the end of this talk, wrote extensively about how Jesus and his teachings can serve as our guide in how to stand with our culture, how to stand against our culture and how to stand in service of our culture. It isn’t by twisting the story of Jesus to fit contemporary, popular American values, especially the religion of consumerism.

Our culture, as reflected in and by our leaders, is obviously lacking in integrity. We need a North Star, a guiding teacher who can not only orient us but critique us. To quote Rohr again, “If Another is not our reference point, we are burdened with being our own, which makes for a very small and self-referential system of thought and vision.”

We could easily take something else for a central reference point. There are others and they are good: the homosexual inclusive issue, ecology and spirituality, peace and justice issues and so forth. The teachings of Jesus would have us look at these, and other, issues with another set of eyes, with what he referred to as “The Rule of God.”

One of the primary ways Jesus can lead us and lead us in serving our culture is in non-dual mind and practice. Namely, by putting the Sacred and the Human together.

Notice that Jesus does not stand against the culture. That is so appealing to the oppositional mindset that shouts so loudly today. Nor, does he stand in conformity to the culture. That is so appealing to the uncritical mind.

Rather, he stands with the excluded, the outsider, the one considered by the rule-makers of his day as sinner, the poor. He is outside any status-quo thinking, any establishment thinking.

What is truly astonishing about Jesus, and this is something that virtually every expression of religion that claims to be established in his name either misses, ignores or distorts, is that Jesus doesn't localize evil outside or over there. That is what allows us to criticize it, judge it, punish it, try to change it. For Jesus sin is the very act of accusing itself. Whenever we try to expel, accuse, control or any of those righteous behaviors, we leave ourselves out of the equation. That, for Jesus, is sin.

The only way Jesus tries to change people is by loving them. His social programs are "standing with" people. We'll get to more of this when we talk about Jesus' death and resurrection - two core distortions of Christian Fundamentalism.

Loving people is, I promise, far more difficult than achieving some form of political or religious "correctness." One of the things that makes this so difficult is that accusing others has become the name of the game in our current culture.

One of my current goals in these talks is to offer a way for those who might be interested to related to Jesus in this era of quantum physics that will go far beyond the teachings of Christian Fundamentalism on incarnation and substitutionary atonement. I want, instead, to offer an inclusive philosophical, mystical, yet rational, paradigm by which we can relate to Jesus. By the way, I'm not unique in doing this. I try to be very transparent about the scholarship these talks are based on.

I am more than just sharing contemporary scholarship about Jesus. This is a sales-pitch. I want the world to be different than the world we live in. I want our society to be different. And, I'm counting on you and me to contributing to and influencing this difference.

There is no way the Christianity of yesteryear can or will continue as it has. The type of faith that discourages questions and that is not open will simply not prevail. The question is, and it is what these talks are aimed at, what will take its place?

My hunch is that there is a piece of Jesus fabric in each of you just as there is in me. I've spent decades studying Jesus and his teachings and my fondness for him and his message grows. I also value inclusivity, science, scholarship, exploration and any other practice or intellectual element that better informs our reality and enable us to live a better quality of life.

Using Jesus as our GPS embraces a lot of things. Fortunately we've got years to talk about this. Here are some hints about the arrows we need to follow. All my opinion, you understand.

If you read the Jesus story, there is one thing he was clear about and that is love. When he was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" His response was, "Love God. Love your neighbor." We immediately wanted to know, "Well, who is our neighbor." He body slammed us on that one.

It means being willing to step into and actually live into a post-literal and post-earth-centered, Milky way only understanding of the cosmos.

It means being unafraid to embrace concepts and practices from other living traditions if they add to our ability in creating more peace, love and joy.

It means embracing the suffering of the world. Not from a selfish point of view but with an awareness that without doing so, we will not grow spiritually.

Following Jesus does not require believing in any creedal statement. Jesus never defined God and the way he read the Bible of his day was to edit out the parts that didn't fit with his ethic of love and inclusion.

To follow Jesus is not to believe in miracles but to see all of life as a miracle.

It is also to follow a mystical path. When asked by the religious leaders of the day, “What are you talking about?” His response was, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed for, in fact, the kingdom of God is within and among you.”

When he said, “The Father and I are one” he didn’t mean that literally or mean it applied just to him. What he taught, the way he lived clearly acknowledged the level of divinity in all of us. “When you pray,” he said, “say, ‘Our Father.’” Not, “My father.”

Yearning for a new way will not produce it.

Only by having the courage and wisdom to end the old can room be created for the new.

We cannot hold on to the old while saying that we long for something new.

Because the old will defy, deny and decry the new.

The only way to bring about the new is to make room for it.

To say that you will never reach something is not the same as saying you are not approaching it.

There is a story which perhaps you have heard. It is very old.

A man is out for a hike alone in the woods. He is captivated by the beauty of his surroundings. Especially the beautiful trees, the blue sky above, the birds he can see and hear. Consequently, he does not see, as he steps out of the underbrush, the edge of the cliff that he steps off of. As he is falling to his certain death, he reaches out and grabs a tree root that is protruding from the cliff. He glances down at how impossibly far the rocky ground is below him. He begins to scream out for help. “Help! Is anyone up there? Help me!”

His desperation grows.

Then he hears a voice in return. The voice says, “Sure, I’ll help you. Let go. I’ll catch you.”

He looks around to see where this saving voice is coming from. He can see no one.

“Where are you? Who are you? I can’t see you!”

“This is God. Let go. I’ll catch you.”

The man once again looks down at the ground.

“Is there anyone else up there?”

There was a time when the arrows on the ground would work. Sometimes they still do. But, more than that is required now.

We don’t need a map. We need miracles.

We have a GPS. We on our own can’t get there. We have to be open to what Bill Wilson, co-founder of AA, refers to as a “vital spiritual experience.” We can’t create that. We can only be open to it. This is why, among other reasons, we have a spiritual practice.

I mentioned to you earlier the work of Reinhold Niebuhr the theologian who wrote the famous serenity prayer:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Thy will, not mine, be done.”

He also wrote these words:

“Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our

standpoint; therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

As I said, this is a sales pitch. I want you to commit to a practice that leads you to doing acts of peace, love and joy. Our spiritual practices stand the chance of removing the disorienting fog of bad habits and beliefs, left-overs of an old guidance system.

Since we were last together, we went to see the documentary about Fred Rogers life. I recommend it to you.

Fred Rogers of “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” was a radical evangelist for the well-being of children. He was doing and teaching acts of inclusion and kindness that, given the context and the culture, were radical for the time. When Jim Crow laws were still in place and the integration of public swimming pools had not taken place, indeed when tolerated acts of violence were being done against both places and people where such mixed swimming was legal, Mr. Rogers welcomed the black policeman who was a regular character on the show into his “home.”

Mr. Rogers was soaking his feet in a basin of water because it felt good. He invited the officer to join him. “But I don’t have a towel,” the officer said. “That’s okay. You can borrow mine.” At the end of that Mr. Rogers dried the officer’s feet.

Reminiscent of another foot-washing scene where Jesus knelt at his disciples’ feet, washed them, dried them and then said, “I have a new commandment. That you love one another.” That’s our GPS.

If you think that what you do doesn’t matter, you are mistaken. One of the things we are learning from the new physics, Rupert Sheldrake calls it “morphic resonance,” is that every little thing, what we do as well as what we say and think, matters.

We have been so conditioned by the myth of separateness and separation that we don’t see this. I place the burden of responsibility for this misapprehension directly at the feet of Christian Fundamentalism with its emphasis on making a “personal

decision for Jesus” and its preoccupation with “what will happen to your soul when you die.”

We are all one. Our task is to see that.

Even if no one knows or sees what you do to give flesh to peace, love and joy, the effect of it is no less than if someone made a feature documentary just about you.

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