

RELUCTANT CHRISTIAN

Who knows

Doesn't talk.

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--opening lines of Verse 56 from the Tao Te Ching

Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

--Romans 5:20.

I generally don't talk about being a Christian. I, and almost everyone else I've ever heard, get it wrong when we talk about it. You can tell what Christianity is not by listening to people tell you what it is.

I am reluctant to stand before you as a Christian and I am even more reluctant to tell you why I am a Christian because there is a very high probability that I will get it wrong. And my saying this is not false modesty. I say this because there is one thing on which I completely agree with my fundamentalist Christian cousins: All that really matters is your own personal relationship with that which you consider ultimate. So, in the longstanding Christian tradition of offering a witness to the power of sin and grace, I can only talk about my own, personal experience.

And now I've run into the first problem of talking about Christianity; the jargon. What is sin? What is grace? What do I mean when I say the word God?

Let's take that last word first. What exactly is God? Who knows? Certainly not me! My attempts to define God inevitably reflect my misguided desire to control God. And yet I need some shorthand to talk about a universe that is literally unfathomable to me.

I appreciate the Jewish story of God's response when Moses asked his name. The answer was, "I am that I am." I appreciate the wisdom of our radically monotheistic Muslim ancestors who exclaimed that there is no God but God. I appreciate the wisdom of the mathematician Alfred North Whitehead whose Process Theology suggests that God is the process of becoming. The great 20th Century Christian theologian, Paul Tillich, talked about God as the Ground of Being.

All of these are excellent crutches to help me relate to the unfathomable universe. But my actual experience of the universe is something else again and it is

something that is poorly approximated with words. Nevertheless, it is the universe as well as my interactive experience of it that I refer to when I use the word God. Your own universal mileage may vary depending on conditions.

One of the reasons I am a Christian is because I experience sin and grace. These two loaded words are poorly understood by those who were not raised in a church. I would argue that they are even more poorly understood by most of us who were raised in a church.

Many of us have the notion that sin is an act, a sort of breaking of the rules. People refer to sins – plural – and even maintain an informal hierarchy of sins. A little white lie is a small sin but having a sexual relationship with someone other than your life partner is a big sin. According to some, the voluntary termination of a pregnancy is a really big sin – a cardinal sin. (I might add that the voluntary termination of a doctor's life would also be considered a really big sin.)

However, Paul Tillich thought that this “rules based” approach was way off base. He argued that sin is a state of being rather than an action. He suggested that one way to think about sin was to understand that we are separated from others, separated from ourselves and separated from the Ground of Being. Who hasn't experienced a time of disgust and self-loathing? (Separation from ourselves.) Who hasn't turned our back on another human being...sometimes even those we are closest to? (Separation from others.) Who hasn't wished for a different world – a different universe than the one we've been given? (Separation from the Ground of Being.)

These experiences of separation are not individual acts. They define the very condition of our lives. Separation is the state of being for each individual human. Since separation is a universal human experience, it is easy to see how a concept like original sin was developed. Original or not, sin abounds.

The Apostle Paul hit the nail on the head in his letter to the early Christian community in Rome. He said, “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound.”

Paul understood that sin is a state of being, not a list of bad behaviors. He wanted the developing community in Rome to avoid simply replacing one set of religious rules with another. He writes, “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound,” to point out that when we fool ourselves into thinking that we can follow some set of rules – some religious recipe – as a way to avoid sin, we are simply magnifying our separation from others, ourselves or the Ground of Being. No matter how “good” I am, no matter how “righteous” I am, no matter how hard I strive for social justice, I still cannot escape my separation.

The Tao Te Ching says, "Everybody on earth knowing that beauty is beautiful, makes ugliness. Everybody on earth knowing that goodness is good, makes wickedness." Indeed, the rules of right behavior act to magnify our separation.

But Paul goes on to say, "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Paul was trying to explain something to the early Christians in Rome that was an overwhelming experience to him. Paul had spent his early life variously trying and failing to follow the law – the Jewish religious recipe of his times. But when Paul finally "got it", when he finally understood what Jesus had consistently said, it was such a powerful experience that he describes it as knocking him to the ground.

What is this overwhelming experience? For me, it has been the experience that I am just exactly the right Larry Bennett that needs to be.

To be sure, that doesn't mean that I always meet with my own self approval. But even with my ongoing behavior that disappoints others and disappoints myself, I am somehow acceptable in this universe. I am accepted – some people might say I am loved – by something that is greater than me.

For me, like Paul, this was a jaw-dropping experience. All of the religious rules and recipes are, quite simply, unattainable. But the flesh-and-blood, very human Jesus understood something that remains quite radical; the kingdom of God is at hand...right here...right now.

This universe is whole and perfect. *This* world and these conditions in which we find ourselves are perfect. And this perfect world, full of separation and horrific consequences, includes me – an individual whose life is full of separation. Nevertheless, and almost miraculously, I am just the person who needs to exist at this moment. I am unworthy and yet capable of reunion and reconciliation and the astoundingly positive consequences that go along with love in action. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

Jesus poked fun at those who thought that adherence to the recipes, to the laws, could earn their salvation. He understood that the experience of grace cannot be earned. The experience of grace cannot even be explained. It either happens or it doesn't.

A couple of thousand years later, Paul Tillich said that the only thing that is required of the person who has the grace experience is to accept the fact that they are accepted. Good works are not necessary as a response to the grace experience. Although good works may grow out of that experience, there really is no formula, no recipe, no rules.

Just as sin is a state of being instead of a series of acts, grace is also a state of being. We are irrevocably acceptable in our universe. That's right, I said we...all of us...the misfits, the outcasts, the people I despise for their political beliefs and the people I adore for their acts of justice and love.

I may, or may not, reach out to others across the gulf of separation. Nothing is required of me as a result of my grace experience. But I know this: Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds.

QUESTIONS:

Now I wanted to stop my presentation here. But several of my Unitarian Universalist friends, as well as my son, were unwilling to let me get by without answering some very specific questions. "Why", they ask, "do you insist on identifying yourself as a Christian even though you understand that the experience of sin and grace are universally human?"

One reason is that I was raised in a Christian home, in the Judeo-Christian cultural setting of Southeast Kansas in the middle of the last century. Whether I like it or not, the influence of my Christian upbringing will be with me as long as I live. But it would be a copout for me to claim that Christianity is simply a condition of my particular circumstances.

For me, the historical person called Jesus offered a radically new worldview that I find irresistible. His ancestors and his contemporaries held the view that a world of justice and peace was imminent. They believed that the kingdom of God would arrive soon. In their minds, God would intervene to bring about a world without routine violence and a world where all people, not just a few, would have enough resources to survive...and thrive.

But Jesus lived out of a different understanding. He lived in a world where God's kingdom *is already present*. He lived in a world where he and you and I are accepted...*and acceptable collaborators* in bringing peace through justice. It is his insistence that we already live in the kingdom of God that makes me choose to be his follower.

However, it is organized Christianity's insistence on accumulating power that generates my reluctance to use the label of Christian. Organized Christianity tends to support societal norms that funnel resources to a few to the detriment of those in need while simultaneously condemning the poor for improperly following society's impossible recipe for success. No real success is possible as long as some of us don't have enough. How much is enough? For now, let me simply say that it is not enough if you are frequently hungry or if you are

frequently ill without the resources for wellness or if you are frequently subjected to violence or ridicule.

One element of the impossible recipe is the insistence that Jesus was divine. If he was divine, then what possibility do any of us mere mortals have to treat our brothers and sisters as full citizens of God's kingdom? It is a perversion of the greatest magnitude to encourage acceptance of suffering here and now by fostering the notion of a future heaven. At the very least, I am reluctant to align myself with such perversion.

But I find great joy in the incarnation of Jesus - the very flesh and blood person who revealed that this world is perfect and perfectly responsive to our rejection of want and violence. It was a human being that lived a couple of thousand years ago who successfully demonstrated that I can fully embrace myself and others and the very Ground of Being.

"But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Amen.

Larry Bennett
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