

“THIS I BELIEVE. . .”
Gospel: Luke 4:14-21; Epistle: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
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Mike McNally

When I was growing up in Montana, one of our family traditions was the Sunday afternoon drive: We would pile into the car, my sisters and I in the back seat, my parents in the front, and we would waste a couple of gallons of gas—probably more than a couple of gallons of gas, considering how they made cars back then—driving through the plains of north-central Montana. On occasion, on partly cloudy days, I would catch sight of a shaft of sunlight, pouring through a hole in the clouds to illuminate a certain spot in the landscape. As a young boy, I used to believe that these beams of light shooting down from the heavens were God—not evidence of God, mind you, but God himself. Oh! Such a naïve boy!

Perhaps needless to say, at some point—probably beginning with the onset of my cynical teenage years—God stopped speaking to me through sunlight. In fact, my surly teenage self through high school and college couldn’t help but notice that God, such a blabbermouth in the Old Testament and on the plains of Montana—had fallen silent to my modern ears. (I see a lot of that attitude now in my 17-year-old daughter, proof perhaps that God has not just a sense of humor but also a finely tuned sense of irony.)

As I trace my religious development, I cannot point to a certain moment as an epiphany, although part of me wishes that I could. Nor have I ever been able to find the hand of God in every mildly fortuitous occurrence in my life, the way that some people do. In fact, I sometimes find myself envying those folks who proceed as if God sends them specific instructions every day; it must be nice to be so certain, and at that level at least, I think I understand some of the appeal of fundamentalism. As I stand before you today, I also must confess that even as my faith has slowly grown, I have never been able to entirely shake the occasional doubt.

But I recall reading, many years ago, a theologian who pointed out that if you could know for sure, you wouldn’t need faith. In some ways, I think, that’s the message of Job, that slice of the Bible that has, oddly enough, given me considerable comfort over the years: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding.” And, of course, Job can’t. There are answers that are beyond us. There is so much that is beyond us. I heard echoes of this a couple of weeks ago in the speech from Marcus Borg—Borg gave a shout-out in that speech to Warren, by the way, who was a key player in luring Borg to Corvallis. Borg talked and has written quite a lot about the sacred more, the sense that there is so much more just outside the limits of our daily lives, and if we pay attention, if we turn down the daily clatter, we can start to sense that “more.” I believe that.

Borg also has written about the Celtic notion of “thin” places—places where you can sense that you’re closer to that sacred “more.” A lot of folks find those places in nature. Looking back, I

think I've always found them in congregations; one of the highest values of gathering for worship, I've always thought, is just in gathering together, even for an hour each week, to ponder – together–the very biggest questions. That sense comes in many different ways. When we first joined the University Congregational Church in Missoula–and many, if not most of you, would feel right at home in that congregation–I noticed that some of the congregational leaders were people who had been my teachers in college. At that time, I thought, well, geez, if these people– who are so much smarter than I am–are believers, I can be too. During communion, Peter Shober, the minister in Missoula, likes to say these words as you lunge at the bread: “Food for the journey.” I'm a slow learner, but it finally occurred to me that, yes, this is a journey; and the journey is what's important–and just as important are the people who are on that journey with you. I've been blessed now to find two groups of fellow travelers, one in Missoula and one here. As for God, you know, I still don't know quite what to believe. I used to hope that the first few moments in the afterlife would be devoted to a question-and-answer period, where God–or His spokesman–would answer whatever questions were on our minds. Nowadays, I don't think it works like that, but I do think that God is at work in our lives in ways we don't always understand or even sense. In that regard, I'd like to share a poem by a fellow named Carl Dennis, a poem that, like Job, raises some challenging questions but ends with some measure of affirmation. Like many poems, it also turns out to be funnier than you would think when you read it aloud. The poem is called “The God Who Loves You.”

It must be troubling for the god who loves you
To ponder how much happier you'd be today
Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.
It must be painful for him to watch you on Friday evenings
Driving home from the office, content with your week–
Three fine houses sold to deserving families–
Knowing as he does exactly what would have happened
Had you gone to your second choice for college,
Knowing the roommate you'd have been allotted
Whose ardent opinions on painting and music
Would have kindled in you a lifelong passion.
A life thirty points above the life you're living
On any scale of satisfaction. And every point
A thorn in the side of the god who loves you.
You don't want that, a large-souled man like you
Who tried to withhold from your wife the day's disappointments
So she can save her empathy for the children.
And would you want this god to compare your wife
With the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus?
It hurts you to think of him ranking the conversation
You'd have enjoyed over there higher in insight
Than the conversation you're used to.
And think how this loving god would feel
Knowing that the man next in line for your wife
Would have pleased her more than you ever will

Even on your best days, when you really try.
Can you sleep at night believing a god like that
Is pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives
You're spared by ignorance? The difference between what is
And what could have been will remain alive for him
Even after you cease existing, after you catch a chill
Running out in the snow for the morning paper,
Losing eleven years that the god who loves you
Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene
Unless you come to the rescue by imagining him
No wiser than you are, no god at all, only a friend
No closer than the actual friend you made at college,
The one you haven't written in months. Sit down tonight
And write him about the life you can talk about
With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed,
Which for all you know is the life you've chosen.

Yesterday, as I was pondering what I would say here today, I went up to Fitton Green and walked up the Allen Throop Trail. As I rounded that corner and saw the landscape below, I couldn't help but notice not one but several shafts of sunlight streaming down from the heavens and bathing the hills and trees and fields in a golden light. I thought this: Maybe that naïve boy from Great Falls, Montana knew something that the adult who stands before you today is still trying to figure out.

Annie Mueller-Warrant

My name is Annie, and although I've known most of you my whole life—having been raised in this church—I'm nervous today in front of you all. I'm not as good at public speaking as Liz or Ryan. Today I will talk about one aspect of God's love and how I show that love in the world.

Albert Schweitzer said, "It is only through love we can attain to communion with God. All living knowledge of him rests upon this foundation: That we know him in our lives as "will-to-love." It is this "will-to-love" that I want to talk about this morning.

Last summer my godmother, Lottie, came and stayed with us. I think some of you got to meet her. She is a very interesting lady, and I never got to talk with her that much before. But I got to talk with her a lot last summer, and she shared a lot about her faith. One of the things she shared with me is that in her life, she just let's love pour out of her heart. She doesn't think about what she is going to say or how she is going to act; she just let's this love pour out of her heart. And when she said that, I felt there was a deep connection between us because that is how I try to live my life as well: showing God's love to the world.

I have experienced a lot of wonderful things in my life which I would say shows God's love to me. A couple of years ago I, my little brother, Alex, and Amanda (La Bonte) all went over to Germany for about a month and lived and worked on one of the American bases over there. One weekend, we decided to get away to Ireland. We hadn't planned that well; so we were coming

home on the plane Sunday night and didn't exactly know, for sure, how we were going to get home from the airport in Frankfurt out to the base where we were working. We just thought somehow we would figure a way out. As it turned out, when we boarded the plane, I was a little mad because we were separated. Amanda was a couple of rows back, and I was squeezed in between a couple of older adults. They introduced themselves to me and we got to talking. It turned out they were Americans also and they were also going to Germany where they, too, worked on a base. They were teachers over there, and even though they didn't work on the same base, when I told them our predicament about not having a ride home, they offered to drive us all the way to Frankfurt to the little village where we were living. It was totally the wrong direction from where they lived; but out of the kindness of their hearts and, I think, God's love, they drove us all the way and dropped us off at the barracks, and we made it to work the next morning. It was a wonderful experience. That is one way God has shown God's love to me. So, I feel that it is my job to show God's love to everybody else.

One way I have done that is when I worked at a nursing home for about four years after highschool. I got a job at Heart of the Valley. It is not glamorous work at all, but it was fun; and it's one of the ways you can go to work everyday and just give love to these people. It is really an amazing experience to touch the lives of the people in really mundane ways; but it is still touching their lives and showing God's love to the world.

So these are just a couple of the ways God has touched my life; and, like Lottie said, just let love pour out of your heart into this world and not worry about the rest. So God's love manifest its many ways in my life, and I just try to pass that love onto the world.

Warren Hovland

Thanks to the Worship Committee for this difficult assignment and to my colleagues for their fine presentations. I believe everyone in the congregation should try this—maybe include a five minute presentation as part of our regular (worship) service. It would make us more literate theologically.

I grew up in a warmly supported Missouri Synod Lutheran home. My father was Sunday School Superintendent into his 90th year. You've heard the story of St. Peter escorting a group of new arrivals around heaven. When they came to the section devoted to Missouri Synod Lutherans, he said, "Shh, they think they are the only ones here." I guess I've been a religious pilgrim. Baptized and confirmed a Lutheran, attended a Methodist School, was ordained a Congregational minister, attended the Presbyterian Church (Federated with Congregational) here when I first arrived, and married a Quaker. My friends call me an "ecumaniac." I encountered liberal thought in college and Yale Divinity school, was a Navy chaplain in the Pacific, did my PhD. Thesis at Yale on Martin Luther, and taught Philosophy and Religious Studies at OSU for 38 years.

So, "Here I Stand," at 88, trying to articulate my core believes!! I guess the simple way is to say, "I am trying to become a Protestant Liberal Christian.."

As a Protestant: I affirm some things as my beliefs. I affirm my belief as a theist, I affirm that life is sacred. I find experiences of the sacred and the holy in the birth of a baby, in the complexity of

the DNA, in the sunset at Seal Rock, the Fifth Symphony, moments of worship and passages of Scriptures, lives of the Saints, and supremely in the embodiment of divine love in the life of Jesus, who enables us to call God "Father." And, if I am to be saved, it is only by the wonderful gift of God's grace.

The Protestant Principle also affirms that every theological statement, including creedal and Biblical statements, are fallible (including this one). They are human statements and capable of error. Only God is infallible. The Core of Protestantism means that each individual must formulate his/her own belief/faith statement; no pope, no church, no clergy or guru can do it for you. No one can take your bath for you. You, therefore, alone, are responsible.

As a Liberal, I affirm the impact of the historical role of the Enlightenment, the importance of modern science, the fact of evolution, the historicity of the Bible and, most importantly, the Social Gospel.

Let me say a few words about each of these beliefs.

Liberals accept the fact of change and, in some cases, welcome it. As compared with the Conservatives, they do not hold fast to the past. The history of religions and the history of Christianity is, in part, the story of changes in response to historical and cultural changes. In fact, Adam is reported to have said to Eve, "Darling, we are living in an Age of Transition."

The Enlightenment, that historical movement of thought beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and with it the rise of modern science, has greatly influenced modern liberal thought, our economy, and our technology—including TV and cell phones. Today, cultural wars are being fought over the question of how religion should respond to these modern cultural and scientific ideas.

As a Liberal, I accept the fact of the Enlightenment, the rise of modern scientific thought and the findings of Evolution. This really distinguishes the Liberal from the Fundamentalist. I believe that science is the attempt with certain empirical methods to understand the physical universe. Religion, on the other hand, with methods appropriate to its discipline, attempts to understand and relate to the spiritual universe. Evolution may well be God's plan for the development of his/her universe. I am reminded of the story of the zoo attendant who found his favorite gorilla reading with a copy of Darwin in one hand and the Bible in the other. He said he was trying to understand whether he was his keeper's brother or his brother's keeper.

Like most Liberals, I accept the historicity of the Bible and recognize the importance of understanding liberal Biblical Scholarship which investigates the questions of who, where, when, and why the Bible was written. But I also recognize, that as a Covenant people, Christians have regarded the Bible as authoritative for their belief system. The Bible, for Liberals, functions much like the way the U.S. Constitution functions for our democracy. Recognizing it as a historical document, it is in need of interpretation to make it relevant to modern issues. I, like most liberals, have my favorite sections: like the Sermon on the Mount, and certain Old Testament prophets like Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.

Finally, as a Liberal, I believe in the Social Gospel as the core of the Christian faith. The Social Gospel is the application of the Biblical faith to the problems of the Social Order. It is the teaching of justice and love applied to the problems of race, labor, sexual orientation, poverty, discrimination, violence, international affairs and war. It is the basis of our church's being "a Just Peace Church" and "an inclusive community," as printed in our worship bulletin. It is really what we, as a church, are all about and our central mission to society.

The Social Gospel holds that we are saved not just one by one but two by two—that the Church must be involved in society and often, as its critic of materialism and consumerism as well as in its ministry to the poor and economically disadvantaged, a healer of its alienation from God and the neighbor. It also must address our rampant militarism consuming such a large portion of our GNP, as well as our failure to support the United Nations and seek international cooperation and peace. Finally, the Social Gospel must address global warming and care of our fragile planet. The Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the Gay/Lesbian Movement, all continue to need our attention. We are not finished; it is a big job. Our task is reconciliation and compassion.

As a Liberal, I pray with Reinhold Niebuhr: "Give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what can be changed, and wisdom to know the one from the other."

Finally, Liberals need worship—of the kind that is nourishing, challenging, and mutually supportive.