

Scripture lessons: Ecclesiastes 4:1, 9-12 & Ephesians 3:4-19

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today is Laity Sunday. Here is how it happened that I'm standing here. Becky Leefers wandered up to me and asked casually if I might be interested in helping out on Laity Sunday. I wasn't too sure how that worked, so I asked her. She explained it was sort of like Youth Sunday, but the opposite. This was confirmed later when Becky, Barb Freeman and I sat around a table picking out hymns. Barb suggested "I Come to the Garden Alone". All three of us were immediately thinking "Tennessee Ernie Ford". Now it's a shame to have to explain a joke, but for younger folks, let's just say that he had a TV program in the 1960's that closed with a hymn, and leave the math to you. Anyway, seeing that I was warming to the idea a bit, Becky said, "It'll be great, and I'm sure you'll like the sermon". "Oh", I said, "who'd you get to do it"? She did that little smile she does when she bobs her head and her eyes get bigger, waiting for me to figure it out. Well, you've already heard the title of the second hymn, "Here I am Lord". I'm not really sure I'm up to giving a sermon, so let's call this "Reflections on a Laity Sunday".

Why do we have Laity Sunday? There are two main reasons. The first is respite for the pastor. Kurt told me last week he'd be missing my sermon—'nuff said. But Laity Sunday is also to honor role of laity in the church. So I will use this occasion to reflect on some of my experiences, and testimony of how the church has been interwoven with them, and how other members of the laity have helped me to reinterpret what I didn't understand properly at the time, and helped me live my life as best I can. Maybe some of this might be useful to those Youth present: don't imitate me in learning everything the hard way!

One thing this church has done for me is to offer opportunities for spiritual growth. It's Laity who have made this possible. Becky and Joyce Bischoff asked me to organize last year's science and religion series. I took this as a challenge to examine my faith in light of my profession in science. I chose to open myself to others, and was rewarded by people's encouragement. I'll share some of this in a bit. The experience also led me to greater knowledge of and respect for David Arnosti, Joey Huston and Larry Leefers. Kathy Swearingen gave me suggestions and encouragement on writing to clarify and discover, and suggested some very useful books for me to read on Jesus, the Bible, and Christian practice, by Marcus Borg, a member of the Jesus Seminar.

Becky followed this up with a retreat experience this fall, where we shared spiritual autobiography. This allowed me to encounter others in their faith journey in a way that deepened my experience. I learned to know and respect people who I hadn't known much about before. I found particularly memorable testimony by Barry Sedgwick, Donna Ellis, Carol Reed, and Joe Hess. These and other members of our church are thoughtful and inspiring people who shared powerful testimony about their lives, faith, and spiritual growth—people from whom I could learn. It also made me want to hear from more of the laypersons in our church.

This is my story of reinterpretations, of growing awareness, of what I hope is spiritual growth.

Becky's first suggestion for a title was "Christians in Community". I think this is a really good description, though once "A little help from my friends" popped into my head, I couldn't resist it. Look up the lyrics on the web some time; I still like them after all these years. Here are some of the things I clarified for myself in response to the opportunities Becky and this church provided for me.

I was raised Catholic. Our parish priest was an intimidating man—hardly an advertisement to the faith. I enjoyed the singing at church, even in Latin, but I do not recall a sense of community as being central to our church.

I spent much of my early life deeply angry at my father: I somehow thought this was the most important thing that people needed to know about me, how badly I had been treated. True, my parents had no idea of parenting, and I being oldest, they practiced on me. My Dad lamented to our face that we had been born, vividly stated how wonderful life would be without us. My brother Mike's guide to parenting was to ask, what would Dad do? Then do the opposite. Actually, that's not so easy to accomplish, and I still hear the impatience and the need to be in control in my own voice.

As a result of my self-pity, I was basically unfit for human company until in my mid-thirties, when I began making progress in understanding, and forgiving. Many years later I realized: what Dad did wasn't very good, but it really was the best he could do at the time. And I realized that both my parents were only children, and both had grown up in tough circumstances—in their own ways, tougher than mine. I used to complain that I didn't get to pick my parents. How long it took to dawn on me that they didn't exactly get to pick me, either. And later still, I realized that my reaction to my father's behavior was my own responsibility. My other brother, Alan, had the sense years ago to realize this wasn't really about him, and walk away when Dad lost his temper.

I grew up on a farm. A difficult life I respected, but didn't want for the rest of my life. Later I realized that it gave me some advantages: the self reliance required by farming, the attention to detail needed to get a job done, a recognition of God's presence in the annual miracle of soil bringing forth food. I also was stunningly lucky to inherit intelligence, and my upbringing allowed me to make good use of it, from "waste not want not" to "I'll show the old man".

However, despite ample exposure to philosophy and theology, while at St. Louis University, I stopped attending mass. This happened despite the warmth of community I felt at the university church, and despite the inspiring Jesuit folk mass services: I just felt I was not there for same reasons as others. I became an agnostic then, but always felt the question, "is there a God" was important.

A word about "Here I am Lord", a hymn from that Jesuit folk mass tradition. Dan Schutte was born in Neenah, Wisconsin, less than 30 miles from where my wife Ruth grew up. He wrote the hymn in 3 days as a young priest, when a friend "volunteered" him to produce a hymn for an ordination. For me, it is about answering Christ's call to all of us (laity included) to be the best Christians we can. There were many seminary students at St. Louis University (including, amazingly, a "seminary in exile" formed during divisions within the Missouri Synod Lutherans—Kurt's church). But because of their intellect and dedication, we really looked up to the Jesuits, the order which founded St. Louis U.

A couple of quotes on science and religion:

William James, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*: "At bottom, the whole concern of religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe."

Ursula Goodenough in her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*: As a religious naturalist I say "What Is, Is" with a bowing of the head, which then allows me to say "Blessed Be to What Is" with thanksgiving. "Assent is a dignified word."

My study of science, and learning to think for myself, did shake my faith. My skepticism still makes faith hard for me.

But: to me it is mysterious that the universe exists. I feel enormous gratitude that I exist *in* this wondrous universe. I am amazed that so much of it is comprehensible: we can observe and understand the regularities of its behavior and laws, even sometimes verifying predictions to a dozen decimal places. How is it that mathematics, an apparently free human invention, works so well in describing and organizing our perceptions? I have a deep reverence for this comprehensibility, and choose to view it as an invitation and a gift.

"The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life." Muhammad Ali

Just as my views of my upbringing changed, I eventually decided that it was a misunderstanding, to seek instead of *faith*, a *certainty* like that which physics offers. Certainty applies only to a narrow slice of life, and not always the most important part. Love is not based on certainty. Thank you, Ruth.

Ursula Goodenough: "Those of us who find a religious home feel deep affinity with those who have moved through with us and before us, congregating, including, supporting. We offer and receive sympathy and affection. The musicians sing their hushed responses or chant their solemn rhythms and we breathe together, sense our connectedness, heal."

Religion engages the mind and the emotions. The need for reverence and meaning is part of what humans **are**: how we are created, how we evolved. We are given this opportunity for reverence from many sources: from nature, from the inspiration of others' example (I think of Nelson Mandela, of Bishop Desmond Tutu). Or music, which exalts the spirits of the creatures that we are: a gift. The openness to religion is, I believe, a fundamental part of being human.

I was born Catholic and part of that remains with me. My mother felt it was her obligation to take me to receive communion on 9 consecutive first Fridays. She did this because she felt there was a promise that doing so would guarantee that my soul would go to heaven. Was this a naïve superstition on her part? I think not. The distinction between ritual and superstition is how the practice affects you, affects your soul. Ritual binds us by shared experience to others in the same tradition, "through the ages in unbroken line", a connection back towards the Apostles and early followers of Jesus.

My best friend (and best man at my wedding) is a gay man I met in college, who is still a Catholic. I asked him why, after all the years he lived in Asia, he hadn't become a Buddhist. His answer was simple but profound: "I was born into the western and Christian tradition, and since it's a lifelong journey, I will be a better Christian than I would ever be a Buddhist." He said this, even living within a religion which largely tends to reject him as a person. Here's to you, Kevin.

For me, the important thing with religion is how you live. How do you treat others? And do you *willingly* give from part of your resources to support your church, to help others through charity—or support the tasks of government through taxes? Or is it grudgingly? This is about everyday living—in fact the Love Revolution Kurt is preaching on. It is simple (but difficult) things.

Email. If ever there was a case of "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem", this is it. Same for Twitter or Facebook. It is a continual challenge for me to not hit Send when someone's made me angry, whether by rudeness, whining or snideness to a CC list, or figuring that all resources in a collaboration are best directed towards them. I have learned the hard way to have a "Not Sent" folder. This is a practical opportunity to practice your Christian charity, empathy, and turning of the other cheek. It not only improves the atmosphere among those you work with, but saves you from producing a written record of your worst moments. I have a colleague who plagues me with "I need" emails continually. Last weekend there was another, but I noticed a weary comment about needing some peace this weekend. So I waited, and Tuesday I asked whether she was feeling better. I was floored by the response—she had been in for a painful biopsy, waited in dread all weekend, and finally, in capital letters, "I AM FEELING MUCH, MUCH BETTER. I AM NOT SICK". I would never have known, and narrowly missed making her weekend even more miserable by an intemperate reply.

There's another fundamental thing I view differently now than when I was 20. Then, the fact that there were so many religions in the world led me to the conclusion that they were mutually contradictory, and therefore none could be true. Now I do not hold this to be evidence of human ignorance and self-delusion. Instead, I view this as demonstrating a universality across cultures of our fundamental human response to the question of how

we are to live in, and understand, our world. So is the fact that the Golden Rule is common property of many traditions: because we are here, and we know how it feels to interact with each other.

Back to Muhammad Ali: what should we be doing to avoid wasting those 30 years? I think the answer is listening to others about their lives, learning how others different from ourselves lives (for example in Mission trips), learning about problems of others (as we do in Joys and Concerns, or Rwanda coffeehouses) and using that to develop some perspective on what's a big problem, and what's not. I *eventually* learned—**everybody** has something to deal with. And learned who I want to spend time with: people who are thoughtful, people who are positive, who bring a smile, who exude enjoyment of life, who demonstrate gentleness of spirit, who encourage you to be better. This can happen just by how people greet you, how they offer service in the food bank, how they offer a word of encouragement when you need one. Like my students struggling with equations, I need *examples*. And I have found them in abundance at HCC. Now I know that you are on your best behavior on Sunday. Me too; we should be! But your best is exactly what I need! And while Nelson and Desmond are an inspiration, and Jesus is my teacher, I fear I'm just not always up to that heroism—so more everyday inspiration is also something I desperately need.

There is one more thing. Once we have finally learned that others have problems too, that you are not so unique in this way, we are called to do more than simply stop feeling so put upon. And not only to encourage each other by example in doing what is right, but to go a bit out of our way, to make life a bit **better** for each other. This is the love revolution: making our world a better place by the example we set for others, by what we do for others; but not by telling others how we wish they would behave. This is what Paul was talking about in Ephesians: the building of a church, the building of a community with each individual encouraging the other, allowing each other to see the Christ-light within us.

I give thanks for the friendship I have found here, the spiritual nurture, the people whose presence here lifts my spirits, people whose example I admire. There are so many of you; here are some that spring to mind for me:

Bill Burrus, Rich Baumgartner, Dave and Sandy Vietti, David Arnosti, Dave Weight, Barbara Freeman, Dick Ledebuhr, George Swanson, Wendy Johnson, Susan Turney, Joyce Bischoff, Ron Turkus, Pat Dalton, Kirk Reilly, Betty Hicks, Chuck Willems, Bob Puroskey, Joyce Bartels, David Zin, David Finkbeiner, Fred Schrepfer, Mary Nelson, Bob Lockhart, Don Flagg, Dave Fry...the list goes on, but I'm running out of time...

So I try to live as best I can; this church and the example and encouragement and opportunities it offers is a big part of how I attempt it. I value being a part of this community of faith: I seek your strength and support. I value being part of that long line of believers. I am here because Ruth is an example to me. And because I wanted all of the laity of this church to be an example to my daughter Rachel: and you have indeed given your help, support, and care.

For this and more I thank God for the gift of the laity of this church. Amen.

Jim Linnemann