



# Tasting Tradition

SAVORY BITES  
FOR THE  
POST-MODERN  
PALATE



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*Written for Evangelical United Church of Christ  
in honor of the questions we share.*

## CHAPTER 1: THE READER

## ESSAY:

*Normal is in the eyes of the beholder.*

- Whoopi Goldberg

"Sitz im Leben" is the theologians' phrase for the significance of understanding context. A common English phrase with similar meaning is "where you sit determines what you see."

'Sitz im leben' originally referred to the social setting of a particular story or biblical narrative. Herman Gunkel, a theologian who popularized this phrase in the early 20th century, was committed to both the historical context and the literary forms of the texts that he studied.

Valuing context influences the way we might choose to read Paul's letter to the Corinthians, a letter written in the 1st century which was saved and placed in the collection we call our "bible." To understand Paul's letter, we might choose to learn about Paul's life as a Roman citizen in the 1st century (author). The particular situation in Corinth can also be very illustrative (context). Also important would be an understanding of the writing forms that were used in Paul's day (literary form).

The 'sitz im leben' of the object being studied was Gunkel's concern, but many scholars also wanted to explore the implications of the reader's context. The situation for the person reading a text also influences the meaning that is derived.

An early example of this endeavor is *The Woman's Bible* written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1898. Weary of the biblical text being used to subordinate women, Stanton and her colleagues endeavored to offer a biblical commentary that reflected their perspective as women. In her introduction to Genesis she writes:

*Genesis 1:27 says: So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him: male and female image, created he them. HERE is the sacred historian's first account of the advent of woman; a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God. It is evident from the language that there was consultation in the Godhead, and that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented. ... If language has any meaning, we have in these texts a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. The Heavenly Mother and Father! "God created man in his own image, male and female." Thus Scripture, as well as science and philosophy, declares the eternity and equality of sex--the philosophical fact, without which there could have been no perpetuation of creation, no growth or development in the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdoms, no awakening nor progressing in the world of thought.*

Liberation Theology is a more recent example which emerged in the later half of the 20th century as South American theologians worked against oppressive power systems. In his book *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (1984), Robert

McAfee Brown showed how an unexpected blessing of this enterprise was the re-discovery of bible stories as they spoke new messages in new contexts. Our bible stories were originally written in the context of oppressed communities for the oppressed, but most of our current North American theology reads the stories from a place of relative privilege. What we bring to the text has an undeniable influence on what we hear.

Understanding the powerful influences that our own setting brings to our understanding of life and faith, many contemporary theologians suggest that we begin our confession of faith with an acknowledgement of our own cultural context. The context of this writer, for instance, is one of relative privilege as a middle age, white, married mother serving as pastor of a theologically progressive suburban congregation. Without the struggle for daily sustenance, the theological quest undoubtedly takes on a more esoteric tone.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What is your own particular context?
- Are you more likely to identify with the underdog in a story or the leading lady?
- How will this author's passion for questions inform the way she tells the story?

#### PONDERINGS:

Once upon a time two quarreling students approached the teacher, each demanding that their version of truth be affirmed.

The teacher, given to stories, began to tell of a group of blind men standing in various places around an elephant, each describing what they were facing. One man was standing behind the elephant, holding the tail and describing the stringy dangling piece with an odd odor. One, holding the ear, insisted the elephant was as a sheet of softest wool. The man standing at the side of the elephant talked of its vastness. The one touching the feet described the alternating hard and soft.

The teacher then asked the quarreling students, "Which of the blind men was correct?"

retelling of an ancient Buddhist legend

## CHAPTER 2: BIBLE

## ESSAY:

*The Bible is a book that has been read more  
and examined less than any book that ever existed.*

*- Thomas Paine*

The book to which we ascribe the title "bible" is actually a collection of books which Christians divide into two sections called "testaments." The first section is called the Old Testament. It is sometimes referred to as the Hebrew Scriptures because these texts predate Christianity and are the sacred texts for our Jewish brothers and sisters. The oldest of these writings are also shared with Islam.

The three religions together are sometimes called the "children of Abraham" or the "people of the book". The New Testament is the second section. In this collection, sometimes called the Christian Scriptures, there are four stories that tell the story of Jesus' life and ministry as well as the story of his passion and resurrection. These are called "gospels", which means 'good news'. We also have an assortment of letters and writings about Jesus and the early church. The letters are called "epistles".

One of the treasures of our stories is how they are echoes of one another and of the cultures from which they emerged. The story of Jesus 'feeding the 5000' (Matthew 14:15-21, Mark 6:30-33, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14) is the familiar story of a few pieces of bread and fish which, when shared together, are able to (miraculously) feed a multitude. These Jesus stories are also an echo of much older stories told about Elijah and Elisha, prophets that appear in the book of Kings. Likewise Jesus' trips to the wilderness to pray echo that of another ancient, Moses, and his treks up the mountain to pray.

Some echoes bear witness to traditions beyond our own. Many of the stories in the first chapters of Genesis were oral traditions long before they were written down. Some scholars believe that many of these stories were not written down until after the Hebrew people had spent years in exile in Babylon (5th century BCE). This timeline might help to explain the striking similarities between our creation stories (Genesis 1 and 2) and the (even older) creation stories of the Babylonians.

An interesting aspect of our context is how context determines the rules we chose to embrace for reading the bible. Native American tradition holds that although a sacred story might not have happened in the stated way, the story can still be true. Western European culture, on the other hand, displays a preferential option for history over fiction so that questioning the historicity of a particular story is often seen as devaluing it. Whether or not our scholarly tools are necessary or even welcome when we read the bible is dramatically affected by our cultural context.

Prior to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (1447) this wasn't much of an issue; books were rare and reading for the privileged. Instruction in the Christian tradition was through memorizable creeds, memorable stories, and of course the arts. This was the era of stories told in stained glass, exquisite music, and highly ritualized liturgy. With the

printing press, however, access to the biblical narrative opened. This resurgence of interest in the printed text laid the foundation, of course, for what we now call the Protestant Reformation. Reading proved to be freedom, in this case freedom from the confines of papal instruction and freedom for new ideas.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Literary scholars have helped us to recognize that the bible employs a wide array of literary devices. Metaphors are prevalent, but what would it mean to suggest that the bible also employs personification and even creative license?
- If the Bible is true, does that mean the events happened in history as they are described?
- If one Bible story talks about God's forgiveness and another about God's wrath (anger), which will you believe and why?

#### PONDERINGS:

At a recent family gathering, Aunt Mary was telling of a particularly precocious boy in her Sunday School class. While in her telling of the tale her love for the child was obvious, so was her frustration with his question. The story of the day was the gospel story where Jesus invites Peter to leave the boat and walk with him on the water. The young child, upon hearing the story, demanded to know, "How did he do that?". The child's question was timeless, as was Aunt Lorraine's answer. "It's a miracle. You just have to believe."

As I listened to Aunt Mary's retelling, I was struck by how the boy's question had sent a dart into the armor of her literally held biblical faith. A weak dart that did little damage to be sure, but an unmistakable attack. I wondered why. Why does the little boy have to believe that a historical man took a literal walk on a metaphysical body of water in order to be a Christian? Why does he have to believe that the story happened that way?

Why can't the little boy believe simply the truth in the story? The truth that sometimes our faith takes us places we would never want to go, places that seem precarious and unsteady and wrought with peril? Why can't he simply hold the truth that in these times we walk not alone? In our quest to teach the little boy to believe the facts of the story, I am quite certain that we will teach him to miss the truth.

## CHAPTER 3: JESUS - THE CHRIST

## ESSAY:

*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen:  
not only because I see it,  
but because by it I see everything else.*

- C. S. Lewis

A common phrase in Christian liturgy is “the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Most of our writings, however, focus on just one aspect: his life (teaching, healing, feeding), his death (passion and suffering), or his resurrection (mystical presence).

Our earliest writings about Jesus now appear to be the writings of the Apostle Paul in the later half of the first century. These writings were in the form of letters of admonishment and encouragement to communities of faith in places such as Corinth, Thessalonica, and Ephesus. These communities in Greece were geographically distanced from Jesus’ ministry in and around Jerusalem and the letters were written about 40 years after his death.

Although Paul was the earliest writer in the Christian tradition, his experience was not of the historic Jesus but rather of the Christ of faith. Paul had no first hand knowledge of the person Jesus and no access to what we currently call the gospels. Undoubtedly there were stories in circulation about Jesus’ life and teachings, but Paul makes no reference to these stories or to the historical person.

How Paul first encountered Christ is something of a mystery to which he makes vague reference. The writer of Acts describes it as something of a roadside epiphany but still without detail. Whatever the experience, Paul became the movement’s sharpest critic and most ardent evangelist. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Throughout history we find rich examples of the Christ experience, but no time offers more illustrative examples than the age of the mystics, the middle ages. The writings of mystics like Meister Eckert (1260-1328), Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), and Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) provide not only an insight into the mystical Christ experience of the distant past, but also provide spiritual challenge and sustenance for today. An example of their work is this poem “Infinite Love” by Julian of Norwich:

*Because of the great,  
infinite love which God has for all humankind,  
he makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ*



*and the lowliest of the souls that are to be saved . . . .  
We should highly rejoice that God dwells in our soul  
and still more highly should we rejoice that our soul dwells in God.  
Our soul is made to be God's dwelling place,  
and the dwelling place of our soul  
is God who was never made.*

The renewal of interest in the ancient language of Sophia is another attempt to describe an experience of the Christ. Sophia is the Greek word for wisdom and is used by Paul in his early writings to describe his experience of Christ. Curiously, or not so, it is in this realm of the mystical that the pronouns we use for the divine become less rigid. Sophia, like the Hebrew word *Ruah* (breath), is a feminine noun which leads some to choose the pronoun "she" when speaking of this ongoing experience with God's presence.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How might Christianity have been different if Paul had been one of Jesus' disciples?
- What significance might the Middle Ages have had on the rise of mysticism?
- In what ways have you experienced the presence of Christ in your life?

#### PONDERINGS:

Looking for the king  
Christ lives in the prisoner.  
Whenever we see the captive and the lost,  
we see Christ.

Serving in the palace  
Christ lives in the homeless.  
Whenever we touch the last and the least,  
we touch Christ.

Listening for the powerful  
Christ lives in the vulnerable.  
Whenever to hear the frail and the lonely,  
we hear Christ.

## CHAPTER 4: JESUS – THE MAN

## ESSAY:

*I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.  
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.*

- Mohandas Gandhi

Although the Apostle's Creed is the most familiar (and probably the oldest) of our creeds, it says absolutely nothing about Jesus' life and teachings.

*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.*

In fairness to the creed, we know remarkably little about Jesus' life.

Jesus was born into a world before mass media and birth certificates. There is no external record of his physical existence. The only remaining evidence of his life outside of the writings of believers is a brief (and disputed) reference in the writings of a first century Jewish historian, Josephus. The quest for the 'historical Jesus' is a foray into the culture of Jesus' day and a painstaking endeavor to understand what lies behind the story.

The Jesus Seminar is a group of biblical scholars on the quest for the historical Jesus. They have become a lightning rod for the debate about the historical Jesus. Their project is to examine historical evidence about Jesus, using the bible and any other bits of information they can gather. While this quest for the historical Jesus is not new, ancient writings rediscovered in the last century and made available in recent decades have greatly expanded this quest. The goal of the Jesus Seminar is to allow the research to move outside of closed scholastic circles and enable all Christians to understand the historic teaching and ministry of Jesus. Although they do discuss themes of death and resurrection, their primary focus is on discovering the life of Jesus.

Another scholar on this journey, Amy-Jill Levine (Vanderbilt University), invites us to a greater understanding of Jesus by recognizing the Jewish fabric upon which this story is written. Based upon the witness of the gospels that were gathered into our canon (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), we know that Jesus was unapologetically Jewish. Although he was a prophet, there is no biblical indication that he was distancing himself from Judaism nor intentionally creating a new religious expression. He was presented in the temple on the eighth day after his birth, wore 'fringes' (prayer shawl) during his ministry, and apparently observed dietary traditions. His teachings are rooted in the stories of the Torah and the Prophets. To fully understand the imagery of the gospels, Levine argues, one must embrace the more ancient tradition of the Torah.

Believing Jesus, as best we can understand him from the stories of his living, is a daunting challenge. His challenge to forgive seventy times seven, to turn the other

cheek, and to give both coat and cloak away are almost incomprehensible. To find life in losing it, honor in humility, and wealth in divestment is at best counter intuitive. Summarizing the demanding nature of Jesus' teachings, the Center for Progressive Christianity ([www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org)) invites believers to: *Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.*

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- In what ways could following Jesus be costly?
- Do you find the life and teachings of Jesus to be helpful in your understanding of God?

#### PONDERINGS:

I once was a Kindergarten Sunday School Teacher at First Wesleyan Church. At First Wesleyan we proudly had a passion for children and particularly for the most vulnerable children in our city. Each Sunday morning a fleet of buses, also staff by volunteers, headed out onto the city streets driving through the most challenged neighborhoods and picking up children all along the way. We greeted the busloads of children in our classes. Loved them, taught them about Jesus, gave them cookies and Kool-Aid. It was chaotic and crazy, but my memories of these 30 precious five year olds are filled with joy. After two hours (time enough for both the Education and Worship hours), the buses would fill once more and deliver the children back to the streets called home.

I thoroughly enjoyed my children and I also enjoyed the challenge of teaching, but my newly wized spirit noticed a disconnect. Many of the children arrived hungry, dirty, and in need of clothing. They left each Sunday the same.

So I made an appointment to see the Pastor. *Pastor, I began, I love my class and I love my children. But I'm worried about them.*

*Yes, we all are, he agreed. That's why we spend so much time and money to bring them here and share the good news of God's love with them.*

*Right, I said. But here's the thing. They arrive each Sunday hungry and dirty and in need of clothes. And leave the same way. I mean, we give them cookies – that's great – but they really need breakfast.*

*Yes, they have many needs, he agreed sadly. So many that it is impossible to do everything. With the limits we have, though, what we can do is tell them about Jesus, and how much he loves them.*

End of conversation. End too of my career as a Wesleyan.

## CHAPTER 5: JESUS - THE PASSION

## ESSAY:

*About sacrifice and the offering of sacrifices,  
sacrificial animals think quite differently from those who look on:  
but they have never been allowed to have their say.*

*- Friedrich Nietzsche*

No single movie has ignited more passion among religious folk in the past decade than "The Passion of the Christ." This movie was produced by its star, Mel Gibson, and was by all accounts a bloody retelling of the story of Jesus' suffering and death as it is told in all four of our gospels. This is a story of unremitting horror that has both haunted and empowered Christians from the beginning.

As we examine the earliest writings of their community, both those which were carefully saved and those discarded, an unmistakable pattern emerges. The writings of early Jesus followers range from fanciful tales of Jesus' childhood (The Infancy Gospel of Thomas) to collections of the sayings of Jesus (Gospel of Thomas). The one consistency to those included (and those excluded) is the presence (or absence) of the passion narrative. Already by the time of the third century, a preference for Jesus stories inclusive of the passion narrative was evident. Books that included the tale of suffering and death (Gospel of John) were included; books that did not (Gospel of Thomas) were ultimately discarded.

The passion narrative was undoubtedly empowering for believers in the second century who faced their own passion stories. The suffering and death of Jesus took on a particular significance in this century of persecution and was imbued with its own theological definition. One of the most significant influences in the development of this aspect of tradition was a man known as Ignatius. In her book "Beyond Belief," Elaine Pagels writes about Ignatius' personal tale of horror, his ensuing understanding of Jesus' story, and his influence on Christianity. Understandably, the community which had understood Jesus' passion as one of reluctant martyr shifted to embracing the inevitable sacrifice of both Jesus and the passionate follower.

As the persecution waned in the wake of Constantinople's conversion and Christianity went mainstream, the familiar story now had a shift in meaning. Sacrifice was not so much about solidarity in suffering, but now understood as "substitutionary atonement," meaning that Jesus' sacrifice was payment for the broken relationship between God and the people of God.

The passion narrative plays a major role in our church life as it is read and remembered each year on "Good Friday" (the eve of Easter). For those believing in "the necessity and sufficiency of the death of Jesus," Good Friday is an essential though somber day. Although this is the most common of Christian understandings, it is only one of many ways to understand and experience "Good Friday."

One alternative view is held by those who commemorate "God's Friday" with an understanding that the Passion Story is an archetypal one showing the destructive

power of human evil. In this interpretation, the focus of Good Friday becomes an acknowledgement of those still suffering and a confession of our responsibility.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Are there ways in which you understand the death of Jesus to be necessary?
- How might Christianity have been different had not the second century been so violent?

#### PONDERINGS:

jephthah's daughter is a story new to me.  
all these years i have escaped the hearing  
of this particular nightmare.

so i'm reading along  
becoming oblivious to the litany of women possessed and disposed.  
i read about assertive achsah who dared to claim her promise;  
the strange violence of deborah and jael and the implicit challenge to holy  
motherhood;  
by now the hour is late, my eyes are heavy  
and skimming is more accurate than reading.

but i'm struck by a hint of sympathy for jephthah  
the child of scorn who grows up to scorn.  
and in that moment of hesitant sympathy i re-engage in the story  
only to have my heart ripped as another innocent is burned.  
literally. burned.  
jephthah has made a deal gone bad,  
his daughter the unwitting victim.  
she weeps with her sisters and then presents herself  
to the sacrificial fires.

why is there no ninth hour deliverance?

the litany of possessed and dispossessed continues...  
from manohah to micah's mother to the levite's wife to hannah  
all merged into a single sinking feeling.  
the blood of my sisters runs from page to page.

can sacrifice of the other ever  
ever  
ever be noble?

the tragedy and challenge of a story like jephthah's daughter  
is that no amount of exegetical two-step can change the horror.

an abiding challenge offered by my sister colleagues

is the challenge to read jephthah's story.  
to hear the pain  
then and now.  
to be in solidarity  
so that i - you - we  
can call the mourning women  
so that the horror is not in isolation.

the story of jephthah's daughter is no longer new to me.  
for the sake of my daughter, my sisters,  
I listen

## CHAPTER 6: GOD

## ESSAY:

*The theory of intelligent design holds that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.*

- [www.discovery.org/csc/](http://www.discovery.org/csc/)

While it would be difficult to deny the presence of mystery and easy to ascribe the unanswered questions to a supreme being, the character of the being is not quickly defined. As a sign of humility, acknowledging all that is unknowable, our Jewish sisters and brothers cover their heads as they pray and refuse to write the word God. Their witness is compelling.

Two of the leaders in the early days of the Christian movement demonstrate the difficulty of trying to define the divine. Marcion and Tertullian were leaders in the second century about a hundred years after Jesus' death but before there were such things as Bibles and Creeds. Marcion set forth his ideas in a book called Antithesis (Contradictions) in which he claimed that Christ was the messenger from the Supreme God of goodness. Marcion was deeply troubled by the evil of the world. He believed that the goodness of the Supreme God could not be responsible for the tragedies so common in our world. Tertullian wrote many books against Marcion's ideas, claiming that there is only one God, a good God who created a good world.

The Apostles Creed, which emerged in the later part of the second century, predates the gathering of gospels and letters into the canon (what we call the Bible) and may be a response to the argument between Marcion and Tertullian. The creed begins: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." Tertullian's view prevailed and Marcion was relegated to the halls of heretics.

Although their arguments were quite philosophical and are difficult to parse with our modern world, their bottom line was much the same as ours. As children of the 20th century living into the 21st, we have witnessed awesome shifts in the earth upon which we walk. We have seen the destructive force of a tsunami and the relentless battering of hurricanes. The challenge of how to understand the goodness of God in the face of unexplainable evil and suffering is called theodicy. It is a timeless riddle and one that becomes even more troubling in the wake of recent storms.

Another challenge in our understanding of God is balancing transcendence (the big God out there idea) with imminence (the presence of God within us and all of creation). While much of our Christian heritage has been dominated by language of God's transcendence, many people of faith have sought a more intimate and personal way to describe God's presence among us and in all of creation. St. Francis was renowned in the 15th century for his experiencing of God within nature. Mother Teresa, in the 20th century, described her experience of God in the most vulnerable of people in India.

The adherents to the Intelligent Design theory emphasize the transcendence of God. They begin with a compelling thesis. Ascribing the mystery to a benevolent being is comforting. And though this preamble is agreeable and apparently innocuous, it is a faith claim. So too the theory that follows the thesis is a particular weaving of faith claims that some Christians choose to embrace.

Still the witness of our Jewish brothers and sisters beckons.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What are the concepts about God that seem to resonate for you?
- Which ones would you prefer to omit?

#### PONDERINGS:

God is alive in the squirmy children in our midst.  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in the beloved face lined with wisdom's folds.  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in the persons with whom we often quarrel.  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in the family whose values  
run counter to our own.  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in the unshaven man at the intersection  
waving his "will work for food" sign.  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in the disfigured woman  
who finally finds a job in telemarketing.  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in the corporate executive  
who cannot fathom the value of "enough".  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in the frustrated youth  
who believes that militancy fosters peace.  
*We will love them.*

God is alive in all that breathes.  
May our love nurture the Spirit poised for flight.  
*God is alive. Amen.*



## CHAPTER 7: SALVATION

## ESSAY:

*“What on earth are you doing?”  
said I to the monkey  
carrying a fish triumphantly to the tree.  
“Saving the fish from drowning,”  
replied the righteous monkey.*

*- adapted from Anthony de Mello*

Christians love to talk about “salvation,” but we don't often stop to define it. Salvation for some Christians is rooted in a belief in a dualistic after life. For others salvation has to do with God's redemptive presence in this life. Biblically the word salvation is also used in diverse ways.

The Hebrew Word translated as “salvation” means deliverance, victory, or prosperity. One story about “salvation” is the story of Jonah. The story is about his salvation as well as the salvation of the people of Nineveh. Read Jonah 2:1-3,10:

*Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying, “I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. 3 You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.”  
10 Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*

Salvation for Jonah is simply deliverance from the fish, physical safety.

The Greek Word translated as “salvation” means safety. When Jesus is described as savior in the New Testament, different understandings of salvation emerge. Read the following two uses of the word salvation:

*He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. [Luke 1:69-71]*

Salvation in this example also refers to safety from physical harm.

But the word is used differently in this text:

*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ... and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him... [Hebrews]*

In this text we begin to see a concept of “eternal salvation” which is used to reference a negative after life experience from which we must be saved.

The Apostle's Creed doesn't mention the word "salvation", but the third stanza references some of these ideas:

*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What does "salvation" mean for a Sudanese child in a refugee camp?
- Is the meaning different for you?
- Have you ever been asked if you are "saved?"
- What is the significance of this theological definition in our current cultural context?

#### PONDERINGS:

On September 11, 2001 the world that we understood collapsed.  
It's not that we were unaware that evil existed in our world,  
but the flame of hatred burned with an intensity that we had never seen.

We have touched the fire before, and bear the scars.  
But the magnitude of this assault on our collective consciousness  
continues to reverberate even now.  
I am clinging to the promise of the ash heap,  
that out of the debris a phoenix can rise.

I'm looking for the phoenix among the people.  
While we have spent most of the intervening years and months  
focused on the weapons of terror,  
we essentially ignored the persons of terror.  
Our national "security" efforts included monitoring nuclear weapons production,  
surveillance of chemical weapons plants,  
and even searching all carry on luggage for weapons.  
But it is persons, not weapons, that initiated this grief.

As I listen to the pundits, I wonder if we are not still missing the obvious.  
Evil isn't born, it is bred  
and it takes many years to rear a terrorist.  
In 1986, a psychiatrist and a neurologist teamed together  
to study the next 15 death row inmates scheduled for execution.  
Their researched revealed that *all fifteen*,  
prior to their own murderous rage,  
had themselves sustained head trauma,

*most of them victims of child abuse.*<sup>1</sup>  
Terror is a learned behavior.

As I stare into the rubble, the ashes,  
I am aware that the phoenix struggles even now.  
He is the little boy with bruises he cannot explain.  
She is the young child whose mother's depression leaves her abandoned.  
He is the teenager reared on hate and looking for a cause,  
and the young adult with nothing left to lose.  
The future of the phoenix is still unknown.

May God give us the wisdom to cherish one another  
**before** the hate takes root,  
and the courage to love even after.

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Mansnerus, "Damaged Brains and the Death Penalty", New York Times, July 21, 2001. Mansnerus' article is based on the work of Dr. Lewis (professor of psychiatry at New York University) and Dr. Pincus (chief of neurology at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Washington).

## CHAPTER 8: CHURCH

## ESSAY:

*Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.*

- Gilbert K. Chesterton

From the time of the Reformation (16th century) the trunk of Christianity has become increasingly thin and the branches more dense. At the outset of the 19th century in America, for instance, three Christian groups (Congregational, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian) held the dominant religious influence in America. In the wake of the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening, dominance shifted to groups such as the Baptists, the Methodists, and more evangelical Presbyterians. The pluralism within Christianity has continued to expand.

One notable exception to this trend of division in Christianity was the spirit of ecumenism that followed the two world wars in the early 20th century. Many groups of Christians were struggling to demonstrate unity, modeling for the world the importance of cooperation. This led to a series of church unions in many denominations and ultimately formed the United Church of Christ (UCC) in 1957. This union joined together two denominations (the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches) representing four distinct faith traditions.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church was formed in 1934 by the merger two geographically dispersed but ethnically similar groups:

The Reformed Church in America was founded by German immigrants in the 1700's and followed the teachings of John Calvin. They settled mostly in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Ohio.

The Evangelical Synod of North America was founded by a later group of German immigrants that settled in Missouri and the Midwest in the 1800's. The "Evangelicals" were influenced by both Lutheran and Calvinist ideals and cherished unity above doctrine. They were known for remarkable works of charity such as Emmaus Homes, Evangelical Children's Home, and the Deaconess ministry.

The Congregational Christian Churches were also a union of two distinct religious groups that shared a passion for local church autonomy:

The Congregationalists trace their heritage to the Mayflower. They were the separatist Pilgrims (Plymouth Colony) and the Puritans (Massachusetts Bay Colony). The independence of each local congregation was central to their belief; education and justice were treasured values. Founders of such institutions as Yale and Harvard, the Congregationalists were also known for their abolitionist work and their ordination of women.

The Christian Churches emerged from an American phenomenon called the "Renewal Movement" in the late 1800s. Basically they spurned religious institutional structure and cherished the spontaneity of the spiritual experience. Some of these churches formed

the Disciples of Christ denomination, some the Church of Christ denomination, and still others ultimately joined with the Congregationalists.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Our church history is very connected to our ethnic heritage. How is that helpful and/or limiting?
- Explore the difference between the Congregationalists' work for justice and the Evangelicals' passion for charity.

#### PONDERINGS:

We are six weeks old,  
We've celebrated our ninety-sixth birthday.

We are Japanese, German, English, Chinese, and African,  
North and South Americans.

We've celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary  
And we're exploring a new relationship.

We have cancer.  
We are clinically depressed.  
We've had surgery and a car accident.  
We're attending funerals and planning baptisms.

We claim Jesus as Lord  
As we wonder aloud about the historical Jesus  
And agree to disagree as we study the sacred stories.

We know the words to Amazing Grace by heart  
And we're learning new music from Africa.

We are the church.  
Diverse and growing,  
Twisting, flowing, being shaped by a spirit untamed.

We are alive.  
Thanks be to God.

## CHAPTER 9: WORLD

## ESSAY:

*Did St. Francis really preach to the birds? Whatever for?  
If he really liked birds he would have done better to preach to the cats.*

*- Rebecca West*

External events had a profound influence on the shape and character of this historic if infant denomination. Two of the most influential American theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were themselves children of the Evangelical wing of the tradition and both spoke eloquently on the intersection of faith and culture.

H. Richard Niebuhr and Reinhold Niebuhr were brothers, sons of a (German) Evangelical pastor and students of Eden Theological Seminary. Schooled in the shadow of the first World War and reaching maturity in the midst of the Great Depression, the rise of Nazism in their homeland had remarkable influences on their respective theologies and (at least legendarily) on their relationship. Prior to Hitler's rise, the brother's were both pacifists in support of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. H. Richard's definitive work, "Christ and Culture", was a careful description of his belief that the presence of Christ's church could have a redemptive influence on the practical realities of our world. But as Reinhold witnessed another generation of warring madness, he shed the pacifism of his youth and became an advocate for military engagement with the evils in the world. What continued to be consistent in both brothers' ethic was a plaintive call to engage our faith in relationship with the world in which we live.

The United Church of Christ is an embodiment both of that invitation, and the tension that it inevitably engenders.

In 1957 Federal troops enforce racial integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, and the United Church of Christ was formed.

Soon after, Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" (1960), Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" (1963) and Joseph Heller's "Catch 22" (1961) were published. These pivotal books offered insights on racism, sexism and institutionalism (respectively).

By the end of the decade, Malcolm X, President Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. were all assassinated. Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, the war in Vietnam escalated, and the Memorial Arch was built in St. Louis.

The third section of our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith was written in 1959. This third stanza of the statement talks about the Holy Spirit and our relation to the world today.

*You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,  
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,  
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.  
You call us into your church  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be your servants in the service of others,*

*to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.  
You promise to all who trust you  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.  
Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.*

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How have our local church and our denomination responded to these challenges?
- What are the challenges that our culture offers to us today?
- How can our church (local and denomination) respond?

#### PONDERINGS:

As election day draws near  
the television, radio, and newspapers  
seem obsessed with the details,  
too often the negative details.  
And I find myself wishing that the church  
could be the place of respite.  
Perhaps we could hang a sign at the door:  
"No politics allowed."

Yet many of the campaign ads  
unabashedly claim God's support  
and the issues in our elections affect  
not only our individual lives  
but the lives of the most vulnerable of our society,  
the lives of those with whom Jesus calls us to be in communion.

While I am tempted to belittle  
my own power in the voting booth,  
I am moved by a cloud of witnesses...  
the lines of black voters in South Africa  
casting their first vote for Mandela.  
the passion of suffragettes like Elizabeth Cady Stanton.  
the tragic cost of the Voter Registration drives in Mississippi and other states.

Even today there are millions of Americans who cannot vote.  
Children. All of them.  
Migrant workers and day laborers  
whose addresses change with each season.

Immigrants who are not yet citizens, who may never be citizens.  
These who cannot vote are the most vulnerable in our culture,  
hardest working, least insured.  
These are the ones with whom Jesus' ministered,  
for whom we are called to vote on November 7<sup>th</sup>.

Each one of us who are eligible to vote in this country  
have a right and, I daresay, an obligation  
to swallow our disdain and our sense of futility  
and approach the voting booth.  
Not because our choices are great,  
Not because our interests need defending,  
Not because we are deluded that our one vote can change the world.

We vote because our absence sends a message of apathy  
to those who cannot vote,  
a message of further isolation and belittlement.  
We vote because it is one small candle to light in a darkened corner.  
We vote not apart from our faith,  
we vote because of our faith.



## CHAPTER 10: COMMUNION

## ESSAY:

*If someone knows from experience that daily Communion increases fervor without lessening reverence, then let him go every day. But if someone finds that reverence is lessened and devotion not much increased, then let him sometimes abstain, so as to draw near afterwards with better dispositions.*

- Saint Thomas Aquinas

There are distinctly different understandings not only of the words to use as we share the bread and wine, but also of its very symbolism and significance.

Typically Christians are in agreement that the bread shared (whether common loaf or wafers) represents the body of Christ and the cup shared (whether wine or grape juice) represents the blood of Christ. But it wasn't always this way.

Interestingly though, one of the earliest stories we have of the ritual practice of communion is from a book called the Didache. The Didache is an ancient Christian manual from late in the first or early second century. Chapter 9 of the Didache describes Eucharist (communion) as something that needs to be shared each time the community gathers for worship. The meaning of the bread and juice is described like this: The juice reminds us of the fruit of the tree of David and the bread reminds us that bread represents the wheat gathered, broken, and made into one loaf. In the Didache there is no mention of Jesus' body or blood in the sharing of Eucharist/communion.

Even for those who interpret the bread as representative of the body of Christ and the cup as representative of the blood, the differences are profound. We can trace some of this difference within our own United Church of Christ back to two of the most influential Reformers, Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564).

Luther and Calvin shared many beliefs. Both of these reformers were concerned about the way that the Church was functioning. Both of them agreed that obedience to an institution was not the path to God's favor. Both of them wanted to emphasize the importance of faith in God. Both of them emphasized the Bible as foundational for Christian faith.

Luther and Calvin also had many differences. Luther believed that only faith in Jesus Christ would save humans from eternal damnation, Calvin asserted that such matters were in God's hands alone. Luther's chief concern was the fate of the individual, whereas Calvin had much passion around communal formation and social concerns. Luther modified the liturgy of the Church, but largely embraced the form. Calvin emphasized a more simplified ritual life, modest worship spaces, and the singing of psalms (rather than hymns).

One of the ways in which the differences are embodied is in their understanding of Communion. For Luther the body and blood of Christ are present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine of communion. For Calvin, Christ is present in the community as it gathers to share in the bread and wine.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How might Christianity have been different if the Didache's understanding of communion prevailed?
- How might the persecutions of the second and third centuries have influenced the definitions of communion/eucharist?
- What are your understandings of the bread and the cup that is shared in worship?

## PONDERINGS:

As I hold the bread each Sunday, I name each person coming forward (to the extent that my post-40 memory will allow). This exchange is holy, the presence of the living God is palpable as our eyes meet over the breaking bread.

Sometimes the mood shifts even to joviality as a child frowns and offers an innocent "no, thank you!" or if the bread of the day seems unbreakable. But even in these moments, I cherish this sacred space. "George, the body of Christ shared with you."

The treasure of the moment certainly lends insight into the timeless debates around who is welcome at the table. In our tradition the debate centers around the appropriate age, the words to be used, and the type of bread shared. In some traditions there is an element of recipient 'worthiness'. But the rules seem to miss the holiness of the experience.

As I speak the name of each congregant coming forward and experience that moment of connection, I am awed by the intangible truth that there is a spirit at play which is not in my control. To be sure, in fifteen years of serving the bread I have encountered situations where I wanted to duck into another line. I can vividly recall times that I wished to avoid serving a person with whom I had conflict or concern. But it is in precisely this moment of mutual vulnerability that the spirit is most vibrant.

The irony of this moment is that it is exactly the cumulative effect of these moments that will shape us into the persons of faith that the spirit would have us be.

## CHAPTER 11: BAPTISM

## ESSAY:

*Vaccination is the medical sacrament corresponding to baptism.*

*- Samuel Butler*

While most Christians share baptism in remembrance of Jesus' baptism, our practices and our beliefs vary widely. At its simplest form, baptism is the placing of water on the head of the recipient with prayer. Beyond this, however, the differences begin.

For John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River, baptism was about a shift in consciousness, a deliberate and public decision to change directions in life. For the early church baptizing whole families, the rite was one of initiation into a particular community of faith. Common in our grandparents' generation was a belief that baptism kept babies safe from a wicked after-life so the baptismal font was the very first outing many children made.

Depending on beliefs about the role and significance of baptism, the time in which this ritual is shared also varies. Some Christian communities share baptism with infants, others ask that baptismal candidates be old enough to express their own faith commitments.

The content of the prayers are most often dedicatory in nature, usually invoking Trinitarian (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) language. The most common phrase is "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit". Some communities chose to use a more inclusive phrase such as "I baptize you with faith in the living God, Source, Servant and Guide."

While usually celebrated in church settings, baptism can also be celebrated in lakes and rivers reminiscent of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. The water is sometimes placed on the head of the recipient although in some traditions the recipient is fully immersed in the water.

An important point of difference is a belief in either "original sin" or "original blessing". Following the notions of Augustine (4th century), original sin is the understanding that all humans are inherently sinful and thereby separated from divine embrace from birth. For those who embrace a theology of original sin, baptism is often seen as that which (either symbolically or literally) washes away the (original) sin and restores relationship with God.

Original blessing is newer language to express an even older idea that humans enter the world at one with the Creator. People adopting this theology are more likely to understand the ritual of baptism as the celebration of the relationship between the recipient, the gathered community, and the presence of God.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Have you been baptized? If so, when and why? If not, why not?
- Should all Christians be baptized? Why or why not?
- What is your understanding of baptism?

## PONDERINGS:

he played in the holy water.

eighteen months old  
wiggling in his church shoes  
eyes dancing  
nervous parents reaching for him.

it was his baby brother's baptism day.  
his older sister dressed and smiling.  
the perfect happy family

except he couldn't stop moving.  
yes  
I lifted the bowl of water from the basin  
knelt down on the ground

and let him touch  
ok, play  
with the water.  
and the outcry was almost instantaneous.  
the holy water was decimated.

or was it blessed?  
I shall always wonder.

it was a small  
unplanned  
action.  
I guess revolutions  
always  
start that way.

## CHAPTER 12: MISSION

## ESSAY:

*The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.  
Where there is no mission there is no church.*

- Emil Brunner

While most Christians would resonate with Brunner's quote, the differences emerge as we seek to define "mission." How are we to enact our faith?

Many Christians refer to the closing of Matthew's gospel to what they call "the great commission":

*...Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... (Matthew 28:18-20)*

This single verse from Matthew suggests a proselytizing (conversion) function to mission with the goal of expanding the number of Christians. This has been a dominant understanding of mission in America since the "great awakenings" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But this has never been the only understanding of mission.

The question of mission, the "so what" of our faith, of course predates the development of the Christian tradition. The prophet Micah who offers this wisdom:

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

Micah suggests a pietistic (prayer centered) life of justice as the life of faith. Similarly Jesus is remembered as having said:

*'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:34-40)*

The early Christian church, according to the book of Acts, understood their call to be one of community life:

*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44)*

The writer of Acts shares a utopian vision of communal interdependence. Whether or not such every existed is questionable, but the challenge is profound and inspiring.

The Center for Progressive Christianity ([www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org)) offers this vision of mission:

*Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.*

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Do you believe that all people would benefit from becoming Christian? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that faith should inform even our financial decisions?
- How will you live your faith in this world?

#### PONDERINGS:

The Legend: One day a believer was walking by the river and discovered a baby floating downstream in peril. The believer quickly jumped in and saved the baby. The next day the believer came to the river and discovered two babies, quickly responding to save them both. As the summer went on, more and more babies were discovered and more and more believers were called to the river's edge to help. One day a believer new to the river asked "Why?" This believer wondered why the babies were in the water, what was happening upstream? "Let's go up the river and see if we can keep the babies out of the water."

Here the versions of the legend diverge. Some versions suggest that the believers were unwilling to look upstream, others that the upstream trek was so successful that there was no need to stand downstream.

What if we were both? Martin Luther King, Jr. worked upstream, Mother Therese worked down. Both were incredibly faithful embodiments of God's love and justice. The downstream believer, even with all of his friends, cannot save all the babies. The upstream believer, persuasive though she may be, cannot completely prevent the problem. If we work together, however, we can save the babies.

Questions written for the community of Evangelical United Church of Christ to shared at Baptism, Confirmation, and the reception of New Members:

Respecting divine mystery beyond our human knowing,  
revealed but not contained in the stories of our faith,  
will you strive to walk humbly with God?

Celebrating the fullness of Jesus' witness  
flowing from the baptismal waters at the river Jordan  
and the stories of bread broken and shared,  
do you confess the God made known  
in the one we call Christ?

Believing Jesus about God and trusting his example,  
will you accept the cost and joy of following him;  
welcoming the unwelcome-able,  
speaking the unspeakable,  
touching the untouchable,  
and suffering the insufferable?

Honoring the Spirit revealed in the paradoxical,  
will you live the questions of our faith,  
open to the continuing revelation  
of our still speaking God?

Discerning strength in vulnerability,  
do you acknowledge your interdependence  
and mutual accountability with all of creation?

Claiming God's grace abundant in our common life,  
will you covenant together to cherish inquiry,  
embrace diversity, and honor vulnerability?