

Dismantling the 'Institutional Monopoly on Access to God'

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In the summer of 1997, 14 years ago, I was interviewed by the Pastor Nominating Committee of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas. I had previously discerned that the large corporate-type church where I had served for 3 ½ years as the Associate Pastor to Youth and their Families, First Presbyterian Church of Fort Worth, just wasn't my style.

Bethany, a small congregation, was the only church in Grace Presbytery that had officially associated itself with the More Light Presbyterian movement, just as College Hill is the only congregation in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery that has done so. Needless to say, that church in Dallas considered themselves to be a progressive congregation, both theologically as well as socially. I considered myself to be as well.

During the interview process I was asked the following question. **"Would you have a problem with someone who serves on the Session who doesn't believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus?"** I still clearly remember my response to the person who asked that question. "The asking of that question makes me think there is indeed someone on the Session, perhaps that person being yourself, who doesn't believe that Jesus was literally and physically resurrected." After he complimented me on my astuteness and correct assessment, I continued, **"I personally have no reason not to believe it. But no, I wouldn't have a problem with someone who doesn't believe in a literal resurrection."**

This exchange made me realize that while someone can be considered quite progressive in one setting, he or she could also be considered quite traditional in another. That certainly applied to me in the context of these two very different congregations. I'm sure many of you have experienced a similar phenomenon among your diverse friends, coworkers, or family members.

Upon further discussion with that Pastor Nominating committee I learned that a former interim pastor at that church preached an Easter sermon some years earlier making the bold statement that **unless a person believed the resurrection narrative literally – believed in a physical bodily resurrection – they had no right to call themselves a Christian.** This belief, for this pastor, was a requirement.

Well the last time I checked, believing anything literally in the Bible wasn't a prerequisite in and of itself to call oneself a Christian. Rather, it's more about considering oneself a follower of the teachings and ways of Jesus.

Just a couple of weeks ago you may remember that I shared with you that I had received a letter from a woman who read a quote of mine in the *Tulsa World* that I had made while attending a press event sponsored by the Oklahoma Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. After many statements of judgment and condemnation, she concluded that **if I were to continue on my pro-choice journey (which she labeled as pro-abortion) then I should resign not only as a pastor of a church but also as a Christian.** Yet another example of what someone considers a requirement of Christianity.

To be fair to both the woman who wrote that letter, and the interim pastor who preached that Easter sermon, I truly believe that they were speaking as people of faith, with strong convictions that their understanding of these issues were a reflection of God's will. **For those of us who call ourselves inclusive, we must not, in turn, judge and condemn those with different theological, social, and political perspectives, even if we have been judged and condemned by them.**

To borrow a phrase from the Apostle Paul, though we find ourselves on different ends of the spectrum, we are both simply trying to "speak the truth in love" to one another. But as Pontius Pilate is recorded in the Gospel of John to have asked Jesus, **"What is truth?"** Most of us raised in the Western world over the past 200 years have been taught to equate "truth" with literal historical verifiable facts. But what if there is a different kind of truth – a truth that is filled with mystery and ambiguity, and less absolute from a literal perspective?

This is what lies at the very heart of progressive Christianity – having the right and the willingness to question long-held traditional understandings of church doctrines and biblical interpretations, while respecting intellectual integrity through the use of the latest in biblical, scientific, and social knowledge and understanding.

If we continue to allow the church to be unyielding and dogmatic, which it has been through most of its history, what is the inevitable outcome? In effect, what the above examples reflect is **the imposition of an 'institutional monopoly on access to God.'** That new favorite phrase of mine is one used by *Jesus Seminar* scholar Marcus Borg to explain how **organized religion throughout the ages imposes certain requirements in order for people (in their opinion) to have full access to the love, grace, and redemption of God.**

So important is this concept to me that I see this now as a primary guiding force in my own ministry – to do what I can to help dismantle this notion that the church has a right to an institutional monopoly on access to God. **The church must put an end to its endless litmus tests that it has used, and continues to use, to determine whether someone is a 'legitimate' person of faith.**

As I mentioned earlier, there was a time not too long ago when I didn't have a reason to question the literal interpretation of this Easter story of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Once the seed was planted, however, that there are other legitimate ways to look at and interpret these resurrection narratives, I allowed myself to explore, question, and eventually change my mind from my previous literal understanding.

Notice that I use the phrase, "change my mind," because that's what it was: the conscious personal choice to reflect upon my own journey of faith and reevaluate my previously held convictions. **That is the message that I bring to you this Easter morning – not to tell you what to believe or try to force the changing of your mind in relation to your own theological understandings and biblical interpretations – but rather to simply warn that the church's list of fundamental belief requirements that imposes an**

institutional monopoly on access to God is what I believe Jesus' own life and ministry tried to dismantle.

Jesus challenged the Jewish Temple system that required prescribed sacrifices that they believe were necessary in order for God to forgive. This, among Jesus' other challenges to the powers that be, led to his execution. Yet within the first century after his death the newly-formed Christian movement started prescribing it's own requirements on access to God, requirements that were engraved in granite upon Emperor Constantine's conclave that resulted in the Nicene Creed in early part of the fourth century. Throughout the following centuries the Roman Catholic Church continued to build on this list of requirements – dropping some while adding others.

The Protestant Reformation that began in the early 1500s sought, in part, to put an end to that monopoly. They did this by emphasizing God's grace – God's unmerited grace that didn't require the mediation of the clergy to allow people access to the presence of God. Yet soon after Luther and Calvin, *that* became the new requirement – that in order to have full access to the love, grace, and redemption of God, a person had to believe in their newly-prescribed understanding of God's grace. And so the cycle continues.

To this day, I would suspect that a majority of Christians think that the only correct way to interpret the Easter event is in a literal, physical, bodily resurrection. That, of course, if taken to its logical and literal conclusion means that Jesus is still out there somewhere physically, not just spiritually. Since I have addressed this issue specifically on the previous two Easters, I won't take the time this morning explaining an equally powerful and meaningful way to interpret these stories that doesn't rely on a literal interpretation. If you like, you can find those sermons on our church website.

There is still an enormous amount of fear that anything but the traditional literal interpretation may result in the ultimate punishment – eternal banishment in Hell. More and more Christians, however, are questioning that ancient concept as well, now including those who identify themselves as being on the evangelical end of the theological spectrum.

Last week's cover of *Time* magazine asked, “**What If There's No Hell?**” The article reflects upon a new best-selling book by Rob Bell, an evangelical mega-church pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His controversial book, entitled, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, is stirring fierce debate about sin, salvation and judgment. This isn't a new debate, of course, for those steeped in the theological liberalism that came out of the early 20th century. But it is for evangelicals.

The article asks if this understanding of Christianity – one that is less judgmental, more fluid, and more open to questioning the most ancient of assumptions – is on an inexorable rise. Bell states, “I have long wondered if there is a massive shift in what it means to be a Christian. Something new is in the air.” Indeed, there is!

Just think of the ramifications on the institutional monopoly on access to God if Christianity removes the threat of eternal damnation. What if God really is a God of love and unmerited grace – a grace that is extended to *all* people throughout *all* time – and not just to those who prescribe to list of requirements and specific beliefs in order to be recipients of that grace? The irony, of course, is that isn't really grace at all.

None of this means, however, that there aren't certain paths and understandings that lead to living life fully, to loving abundantly, and being who God has created us to be. But it does serve to help dismantle the institutional monopoly on access to God.

If you agree (and you are not required to do so) then I'll leave you with this question: What can you do personally, and what can we do as a congregation to help in this process of dismantling the institutional monopoly on access to God? Perhaps that's the meaning of Easter.

Amen.