

“One Person’s Theology”

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2 Chronicles 1:7-12

That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, “Ask what I should give you.” Solomon said to God, “You have shown great and steadfast love to my father David, and have made me succeed him as king. O LORD God, let your promise to my father David now be fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?” God answered Solomon, “Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king, wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like.”

Daniel 12:3

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

John 8:12

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

I don’t know how old I was, but I remember I listened closely to the story of Solomon’s prayer after he became king. I’d heard about Daniel, Ruth, Joseph and his brothers, but it was Solomon that drew me in. I remember thinking, I want to be wise.

As a teen, I saw a movie where the female lead dies. Her partner visits the cemetery and sees the message she’d left him on her tombstone. That’s when I first realized we can influence someone, even in death. I thought, “When I die, I want people to say that I was wise.” I worked at it, trying to say worthy things, or to keep quiet when nothing wise came to mind. There’s a proverb in the Hebrew bible, “Better to be silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt.” More than wanting to appear wise, I think I wanted to be a positive influence to people around me... Be careful what you hope for!

Today I’m talking about a small part of my personal theology. There’s wisdom in listening to other people’s stories. It helps us recognize our own. The goal is to get as many of you as dare to think more deeply about your own beliefs – about God, humanity, the church...

I grew up Methodist – going to Sunday school each week, hearing the old, old stories. I sang and rang and played; joined MYF; helped with VBS. I knew all the out of the way places at church to sit in peace and quiet. I remember one November Sunday reading from the pulpit something I’d written about Zacchaeus.

After college, I moved to New Mexico. The Methodist Church there seemed foreign to me. During the next fifteen years I seldom had a church home. God and I still talked, but I didn’t

seem to fit in any of the churches I visited. I didn't realize it at the time, but my theology made it harder for me to connect with a church. Too many pastors were still preaching sermons from the 50s or the 1800s. I actually got up and left one church when the pastor was loudly preaching about hellfire and damnation. That was not the God I knew.

Our move to Wisconsin 21 years ago coincided with the arrival of a long awaited second child. I made church a priority. Surely one of the UM churches around would meet me halfway.

It seems I've always known about God. But until seminary, I didn't have words to articulate what I believe. Now I do.

God is around us and within us. God imbues every bit of the cosmos with some of Godself. God is you. And within the mentally ill person holding a sign near the freeway on-ramp. God's within the orangutans, struggling from habitat destruction. The pear tree in my backyard and the rocks farmers pull from their fields every spring all contain – if you will – some of Godself. Yet, while God is within everything, God is not used up. God is more than all that exists, beyond understanding, mystery.

I suppose I ought to have started by saying that – just as *biology* is the study of plants, animals and such – *theology* is the study of God. It's what we believe about God. And because of that belief, what we believe about everything else.

Since the Source of all life fills each person, I need to work at valuing and affirming the neo-Nazis, and the people who mow their yards at 7 a.m. I can't let myself get disgusted with people who think much differently from me. This's hard, but since I believe God is within us all, I have to look for the God in everyone.

My passion for justice shows up here as well. With you, I lament the dozens dead because of Harvey, but I also remind us of the thousand or so dead in Sierra Leon after a landslide two weeks ago. And, if God is in everyone and everything, I need to use my example and voice to encourage others to care for God's good creation. So I question party lines that say filling our teeth with mercury and spraying neurotoxins in our yards are safe.

John Wesley founder of the Methodist movement preached that there is no holiness but social holiness and no religion but social religion. This's part of our Methodist heritage. In order to be in good relationship with God, we have to be in good relationship with the others that share our planet home.

I haven't always believed as I do now. Sometimes, I wonder about the god I left behind, that angry, sometimes unreasonable god. It took me a long time to understand that even when people try to be open-minded, we're still products of our own context. Now, I understand that the Israelites were living in a patriarchal world. All their neighbors worshipped a pantheon of Gods while they were learning to have one God. Biblical writers were doing their best to make sense of what God is, and how they were supposed to live in light of that understanding. Still, sometimes at night, I feel disloyal to the god of my youth. I wouldn't go back but there is this tension.

This is a small part of my theology. Maybe some of it resonates with you. Or maybe you may find that it goes against your own beliefs. I trust that you can embrace the notion that God is big enough to deal with people like me as well as like you.

The question becomes, what do you believe? I get that not everyone is comfortable doing inner

work. That's an introverts' thing, I know. Still, it's important to know what we believe, because that affects everything we do, as individuals and as a faith community. To cast a vision as a church, we need to know what we believe and what we don't. A church that expects Christ to come next week is going to behave much differently than a church that sees resurrection more as a metaphor than a physical reality. What are your core beliefs without which there is no faith?

The United Methodist Church is like a large umbrella where people with different understandings of God can find a home. We practice accepting each other, trusting that this is God's intention. We miss the mark widely on some issues – LGBTQ+ inclusion being most noticeable at present. As a worldwide church, we work to accept other cultures' ways of honoring the holy that sometimes leave us uncomfortable. We share in one communion and when we come 'round the table not all use wheat bread or even GF loaves.

It's good to regularly ask ourselves what matters most. If I served rice cakes next month as we celebrate World Communion Sunday, would some of you leave and never come back? No, I won't do that, but this is still a good question. I mentioned to some of you last week that if I'm not upsetting some people sometimes, then I'm not doing my job as a pastor.

I like people to like me, yet this role demands that I ask tough questions and push us out of our comfort zones. When I do this to you, I hope you'll remember that I do it in love. We church people can get so comfortable insides of our buildings that we forget that Jesus never told us to build them. He told us to be disciples. To make ourselves into stronger, more faithful follower of God's way and to invite others to join us in the journey. I don't remember ever reading that verse from Daniel: "Those skilled in wisdom will shine like the sky. Those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever and always."

God's light resides in each of us. Jesus came, shining that light and helping us to connect with it, to be that light and find it in the world around us.

When I was in seminary, we had to write a spiritual autobiography more than once. That first term, as autumn grew toward Advent, I wondered how to begin. Then, it came to me. "I am a child of God." This sentence stays with me. Maybe you'd like to write it down and see what comes next.