



Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



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What's It All About?

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Mark 12:28-31 NRSV

Looking at the news this morning I came across this story on NPR: **After Year of Atheism, Former Pastor: 'I Don't Think God Exists'**. This is a follow-on to last year's story: **Former Pastor Decides To Spend A Year Without God**. The stories are about Ryan Bell, an ordained pastor in the Seventh Day Adventist tradition. These stories describe a common faith issue in the Church: "What's it all about?" What's surprising is that an ordained pastor and theological educator is this confused.

A year ago Bell discussed his crisis of faith with NPR and had this to say:

My entire adult life, I've been a leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And I think the expectation of church leaders is that they would have fewer questions and more answers, and that the members or the seekers or people who come to the church are the ones with the questions. And I can't remember a time when I wasn't wrestling with my faith. I mean, I think faith is one of those things that we - people wrestle with. (Emphasis added).

He then explains how he went from a crisis of faith to "trying on" atheism.

Like when things start to come unwound, sometimes they unwind all the way. And then, you know, perhaps you can wind it up a little bit again later; who knows? But I feel like I lost my church leadership position, and then I really didn't have any compulsion to go to church internally. Like, I just didn't feel like participating in church. Like, I tried a number of times, and it woke me up to the kinds of things people had been saying to me all these years - like, I love what you're doing at the church but church just isn't for me.

And it wasn't that I was against it, necessarily, or that I thought the people who were there were doing something wrong. It was just that it wasn't connecting for me. So I just decided not to fight it. You know, I just decided to say, well, let me just give church a rest. And as I did that, I just began to wonder about the very existence of God. (Emphasis added)

Having spent a year trying on atheism, he has come to the following conclusion that forms the basis for the follow-on story:

I think one of the things I've learned is that people very much value certainty and knowing and are uncomfortable saying that they don't know. I find that scientists, by occupational tradition, I suppose, are more comfortable saying they don't know. That's kind of the impetus to keep searching. Atheists, I think, are comfortable with saying they don't know. I find Christians are very uncomfortable saying they don't know. I think on all sides of this question, certainty is a little overrated.

But I don't think that's necessarily the most interesting thing about me. You know, I think there are much more important issues to be focused on - things that are really threatening our society while we're worried about what's going to happen about after we die, when in reality, no one of us knows what's going to happen to us after we die. But what we do know is that if we don't do something about the immediate challenges that we're facing today, we're going to die a lot sooner (laughter) than we might otherwise. So that's - my focus is I want to have a closer relationship to reality. I think before I wanted a closer relationship to God, and today, I just want a closer relationship with reality. (Emphasis added).

In this last week of the old year it might be helpful to examine Mr. Bell's theological crisis and remind ourselves of what he should have known before he was ordained.

First of all, I am amazed that Bell expected to have “fewer questions and more answers” as his years in the ministry progressed. Coming to faith in God is acknowledging that we stand before a mystery that we can never wholly comprehend. Often the more we learn, the more questions we have. “Struggling with faith” is not a Christian failing. It is the reality of our lives. Every Christian struggles with faith in God to a greater or lesser extent; every Christian experiences doubt. As I've noted in preaching many times, doubt is an engine of sorts that drives rather than impedes our faith. It is doubt that keeps us searching for God.

Ryan speaks of “participating” in Church and “giving Church a rest.” Again, his statements make it clear that he has never embraced the biblical understanding of “Church.” The “Church” is all of us. The “Church” is The Body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:27. Ryan seems to see the Church as the congregation to which he belongs or his tradition. Someone can decide to no longer participate in a congregation or can change traditions. But God makes us part of the Body of Christ. We can choose to ignore God's claim on our lives but that doesn't remove us from the Body of Christ.

Following his year of trying on Atheism Mr. Bell states that he has decided that atheists and scientists are comfortable with uncertainty but that Christians are not. Again, I am astonished that Mr. Bell managed to become both an ordained pastor and a theological educator and yet be so confused in his theological understanding. The writings of every major theologian in the last 2000 years reflect doubt and uncertainty about the nature of God and the meaning of life. Like the scientist and, presumably the atheist, Christians live with uncertainty.

The most curious of all Mr. Bell's statements comes at the end of his interview. After implying that Christianity is focused upon our life after death he states: *So that's - my focus is I want to have a closer relationship to reality. I think before I wanted a closer relationship to God, and today, I just want a closer relationship with reality. (Emphasis added).* But, an examination of the scripture that opens this article makes it clear that a closer relationship with God **comes from** having a closer relationship with 'reality.'

We grow closer to God as we grow closer to one another. What we do for the least of God's people we do for God. Matthew 25:31-46. How can we love the God we haven't seen if we do not love the people we can see? 1 John 4:20. The bible speaks in a handful of passages about what happens when we die or what will happen at the end of history. The rest of the bible demands that we live in peace with each other and involve ourselves in looking after one another.

I am praying for Mr. Bell as he no doubt continues to struggle through his crisis of faith. However, given what he has said it is probably just as well that he has stopped preaching and teaching. As we begin a New Year let us rededicate ourselves to living in this world as the Body of Christ. Our faith does not call us away from reality, but into the very midst of life. *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:10.*

SOS from Bishop Unda Yemba Gabriel ***Bishop William McAlilly***

Occasionally when I lead the Apostles Creed I remind people that speaking the words, "I believe in God and Jesus Christ" can lead to imprisonment or death in parts of the world. As we affirm our faith with those words we are also affirming the faith of our brothers and sisters in these troubled lands. This is a message from Bishop's McAlilly's Blog. DJM



*Today I received the below communication (originally dated Dec. 28 from Africa) from Bishop Unda Yemba Gabriel, resident bishop of the East Congo Episcopal Area. To remind you, Bishop Unda preached at our 2014 Memphis and Tennessee Annual Conferences in June 2014. He thanked our Nashville Episcopal Area for raising money in 2013 to construct an Episcopal office and residence in the Congo, which I helped dedicate during my August 2014 trip to Africa. **If you wish to offer any financial assistance for the current crisis he describes below, please send to your conference treasurer for "Bishop Unda SOS."** ~ Bishop Bill McAlilly*

To brothers and sisters in Christ:

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As I write these few lines, my heart is too heavy because of the situation going on in Beni territory, northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is part of my Episcopal Area. The efforts of our army (are) insufficient to protect people.

People there are killed every day in the neighboring villages and we run the risk of losing all our believers. Two weeks ago, a group of Uganda rebels killed people in the villages (of) Kamango, Oicha and Mbawu. A Methodist family (a father, his wife and their two children) were killed with machetes. Many people are fleeing to Beni. Our local congregations there are crowded with displaced people who flee from villages for their lives. We need your prayers. But, as you know, food and basic needs must be met. Our evangelization should reach people in need. I am sending this SOS message to all those who may want to help.

May God be with us all during Christmas, but let's keep in mind that our brothers and sisters are dying somewhere because of selfish interests.

Bishop Unda Yemba Gabriel
Resident Bishop, East Congo Episcopal Area

Unhanging of the Greens

One of our yearly chores is removing the advent and Christmas decorations from the church. We will meet together at 9:00 AM this coming Saturday morning, January 3rd, to take down the decorations. If you have an hour or so to spare this week your help would be appreciated.

Year-End Giving Reminder From Rodger Klein, Chair of Finance

As the year comes to an end next week it is time to consider any year-end giving that you may want to do. Trinity UMC appreciates the generosity of all of our members and visitors and we are thankful for the contributions that we have received throughout 2014. Please remember, however, that for your year-end gifts to be counted as charitable giving for this year, we must receive your contribution not later than December 31st. Because our last Sunday service of the year falls on December 28th, that is your best opportunity to contribute to our Church and its mission during this year. Again, as Chairman of the Finance Committee, I want to thank everyone for their generous giving this year. We need everyone's participation and giving in order for us to be financially sound.

The Poverty and Justice Bible

The Poverty & Justice Bible is a bible that highlights each passage of scripture that deals with the issues of poverty and justice. There are more than 2000 references in scripture to poverty and justice, as opposed to four or five on such controversial subjects as homosexual acts or marriage. Yet many Christians seem to think that helping the poor is a pointless and even harmful act. As an on-going part of this newsletter, I will be providing citations to passages from the Old and New Testaments each week that deal with what scripture tells us about poverty and justice. If you are interested in learning more about *The Poverty & Justice Bible* you can check on Amazon.com or go to www.Justicebible.org.

*Like a branch that sprouts from a stump, someone from David's family will someday be king.
The Spirit of the Lord will be with him to give him understanding, wisdom, and insight.
He will be powerful, and he will know and honor the Lord. His greatest joy will be*

to obey the Lord. This king won't judge by appearances or listen to rumors. The poor and the needy will be treated with fairness and with justice. His word will be law everywhere in the land, and criminals will be put to death. Honesty and fairness will be his royal robes. Isaiah 11:1-5 CEV

The quoted text from Isaiah is seen in Christian tradition as a foreshadowing of Christ, the branch that sprouts from David's family tree. The world ruled by this figure will see justice and fair treatment for the poor and needy and will be clothed in honesty and fairness.

¹⁷ *If we have all we need and see one of our own people in need, we must have pity on that person, or else we cannot say we love God.* ¹⁸ *Children, you show love for others by truly helping them, and not merely by talking about it. 1 John 3:17-18*

As noted in the article about Mr. Bell and his crisis of faith, scripture calls us to do more than merely talk about helping the poor.

Prayer Ministry

The following persons have agreed to be part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Sarah Jordan	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Mac McAfee	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson
Leslie Eastwood	Rachel Newman	Sam Richardson	

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;
- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

Up-Coming Sermons

January 4th: Looking for God. What a strange undertaking. My texts are Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12.

January 11th: Remember Your Baptism and Be Thankful. My texts are Acts 19:1-7 and Mark 1:4-11.

Worship Leader's Schedule

January 4

Rachel Newman, **Liturgist**

Dawn & Richard Stevens, **Greeters**

Maurice & Joyce Edwards, **Ushers**

January 11

Mike Fetting, **Liturgist**

Tom & Julia Moore, **Greeters**

Herb Haynes & Linda Robinson, **Ushers**

Announcements

Companions in Christ New Series on **John Wesley, "Revival,"** begins Sunday, January 4. If you are looking to deepen your faith in 2015, join us for a six-week video journey following the life of John Wesley and exploring his defining characteristics of a Wesleyan Christian. Wesley's story is our story. It defines our faith and it challenges us to rediscover our spiritual passion.

The DVD features pastor Adam Hamilton guiding us through a Bible study tracing Wesley throughout England. It intends to deepen people's faith by calling them to a devout and holy life while defining what the Christian life looks like through his eyes.

January Birthdays

Cherry Klein, Dawn Stevens, Dennis Meaker, Ensley Mason, Rene Fetting, Judy Richardson, Linda

McGill, Jessica Moore

Happy Birthday to each of you!