

“Either/Or? I Don’t Think So” by Jacqie Wallen

March 11, 2018



Image adapted from Hokusai (1760-1849)
“Under the Wave off Kanagawa”

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
in the Tradition of Church of the Saviour
Lent 2018
The Foolishness of Faith

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Two weeks ago, Ken asked me to preach today. For me, that wasn’t much time at all to prepare. I like to read the lectionary and let the ideas percolate for quite a while before I sit down to write a sermon. And when I looked at the lectionary, I was sure I couldn’t possibly write a sermon on the readings for today, especially the Gospel reading. I re-read it anyway and, to my surprise, an outline of a sermon immediately popped into my head and I knew I had to write it. The gospel reading, as you know, is from John, chapter 3, and includes words attributed to Jesus that I have a long and complicated history with and that at one time haunted me. You heard them earlier, but I’ll read them again and then tell you why they have been so difficult for me:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world

to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

My guess is that I am not the only person here who has a history with these words, though our histories might all be quite different. There was a time when these words brought me great comfort, but then there was a time when they caused me great anxiety.

When I was just turning 13, my mother accepted a job with the U.S. government in Munich, Germany (my parents were divorced). We moved there the summer before my first year of high school and I spent that school year at a boarding school in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The school was high in the Alps, just above a town where the American missionaries, Francis and Edith Schaeffer, had established a home-based evangelical ministry called L'Abri. A British teacher had come from England to teach at my school specifically because he was a fan of the Schaeffers and wanted to be a part of their ministry. Every Sunday he would take those of us who wanted to go with him to worship at the Schaeffers' and every Wednesday evening he would take us there for Bible study. Most, if not all, of those of us who went to the Schaeffers were Americans, for a very good reason. The food was incredible and totally American – popcorn, chocolate chip cookies, chocolate cake with marshmallow frosting, potato chips, brownies, sour cream and onion dip, pretzel sticks, Oreos, the list goes on and on. We loved everything they served. None of the food would have been possible if the Schaeffers' friends and followers had not brought or regularly mailed them packages of food from America.

The Schaeffers were fundamentalists, a term now mostly applied to conservative Muslims. It was widely used in the mid-20th

century, however, to refer to certain Christians. I recently learned that it originated with a series of pamphlets that were published by some evangelicals and theologians describing in detail certain fundamental beliefs that they regarded as non-negotiable. In other words, as far as they were concerned, if you didn't believe these things, you were not a Christian. What are these beliefs? They believed that we are "saved" or "born again" when we accept the fact that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, wiping the slate clean, so to speak.. At this point we experience a spiritual transformation and, when we die, we will be resurrected, as Jesus was, and go to heaven. Literally. These beliefs presuppose a triune God consisting of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (literally) and require acknowledgment that everything in the Gospels, or perhaps even the entire Bible, is literally true.

I had been raised an Episcopalian and had spent a chunk of my childhood going to my Catholic best friend's church with her and her family on Sundays. I had never heard of being saved, but once I heard Mr. Schaeffer talk about it, I knew I didn't want to go to hell. Mrs. Schaeffer gave me lots of books and pamphlets and Weekly-Reader-like youth ministry newsletters to read and I learned that if I was saved I could have a personal relationship with Jesus (something else I had never heard of) and would need tell other people about Jesus so I could bring other people to the Lord to be born again. One way to interest other young people in Jesus was to carry a Bible on top of my books at school. When other kids asked about it I was supposed to use it as an excuse to start a conversation about salvation in hopes they would become saved, too.

I once asked Mr. Schaeffer how God could make most of the people in the world (including the people who considered themselves Christians but hadn't been saved) go to hell just because they hadn't believed (or even heard of) some specific teachings of a small, time-and-geography-bound group of

people. He told me a story of a man in a remote part of Africa who had never heard of anything but his own tribe's religion. The man was paddling down a river in his little boat and found a page from the New Testament floating on the water. It just happened to be (believe it or not) a page from the Book of John containing today's reading. The man read it (Mr. Schaeffer didn't explain how he happened to be literate or whether it was in the man's tribal language but I didn't think to ask about this at the time). The man believed what he read and was saved on the spot, showing that people who really want to be saved will somehow be led to the truth. This was not at all convincing to me, but I liked the Schaeffers' a lot and their food was great. So was the fellowship they engendered: there was a lot of genuine love and kindness and good-natured humor. They were happy and had a lot of fun. So, by the end of the school year I was saved. I believed everything and had gotten so scared of hell, which I had never really thought about before, that it was a huge relief to know I was going to heaven for sure.

At the end of the school year I returned to Munich to live with my mother and finish high school at the American Dependents School there—Munich American High School. It was my turn to send cake mixes and popcorn back to the Schaeffers in Switzerland. My mother was a very well-educated, liberal, and well-informed woman, and so were her friends. She was a spiritual person, but in an Episcopalian way—nothing over the top — the Schaeffers would not have considered her a Christian. She was not born again, nor was anyone else I knew apart from the Schaeffers and their followers. The first order of business as a born-again Christian was to get my mother saved. She was very polite when I explained it to her, but she just wasn't interested. I couldn't convince her, nor did I have the courage to bring it up to anyone else, knowing from my experience with my mother how uninterested they would probably be. I never could get up the courage to carry my Bible to school. Too embarrassing. My friends were nice and

most considered themselves Christians, but they weren't saved. I was taking Introduction to Biology, which covered evolution, What I was learning made it pretty much impossible for me to get my mind around the creationism that Mrs. Schaeffer insisted on. And I couldn't give up smoking, a vice that I had acquired at my Swiss boarding school. This apparently was something that Christians of the born-again variety didn't do (though as far as the Episcopal Church was concerned...no problem). I also couldn't force myself to believe that my mother and all her friends, like most of the rest of the world were going to hell. Like my own friends, they were very nice people. Gradually, I became unsaved, un-born again. I spent many anxious days and sleepless night after that worrying that maybe the Schaeffers were right and I was going to hell.

When I got to college, I took a History of Christianity course and learned about the many conflicting translations of the Bible and the political bargaining that shaped Christian doctrine. I began to explore Buddhism. Zen was very popular at the time. I started to wonder if heaven and hell weren't so much places we might go to after we died as they were states of mind or conditions on earth. I began to think of the Bible as metaphorical rather than literal. I read a lot of writing by Christian mystics, which introduced me, among other things, to the idea that it's all very mysterious and we probably never will know the whole truth. We are confined by the limits of our own consciousness and the nature of our inner experiences. In graduate school and afterwards, I began exploring a lot of different religious perspectives, most of them without the dualistic, either/or bias that characterizes most approaches to Christianity. Now I think much more about Christian growth than I do about Christian doctrine and it would never occur to me to divide the world into mutually exclusive categories such as good/bad; right/wrong; Christian/not-Christian; or, saved/not-saved.

That's one thing that is so important to me about Seekers. It is a Christian church, but it doesn't dichotomize Christians into people who belong or don't belong, and, in fact, it doesn't even dichotomize people into Christians and non-Christians. Instead, it embraces, with equal warmth, mainstream Christians, born-again Christians, potential Christians, non-Christian friends and partners of Christians, and others, Christian or not, who just happen to like the Seekers fellowship, ambience and/or architecture. As you probably know, Seekers also rents affordable space to a wide variety of different groups that are concerned with personal and spiritual growth, political action, and social justice, regardless of their religious affiliation, if any.

At Seekers I experience the same warmth, joy, fellowship, fun, hope, and connection that I experienced at the Schaeffers without having to judge anyone's beliefs or have anyone judge mine. I still have a personal relationship with Jesus though I do not unquestioningly believe everything the Bible says about him. In fact, when I used to live in a house with a hot tub I would regularly go out to soak in the hot tub at night and talk to Jesus. He gives very good advice though sometimes it's hard to take. Oh, and by the way, in case you haven't eaten here, the food at Seekers is very good, too.

Speaking of spiritual growth, most of you probably know that our School of Christian Living has changed its name to the School for Christian Growth, which is another departure from the either/or paradigm. It's not that we believe that people either live in a Christian way or don't. It's that we want to keep seeking ways to grow in our Christian faith and practice.

Before I conclude, I want to address another dichotomy in John, chapter 3, that first made me think I couldn't preach today and then made me think I had to preach today.

He says:

And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

In these verses, John dichotomizes light and dark, equating light with goodness and darkness with evil. This dichotomous equation occurs throughout the Bible. I dispute it. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, talks about "solar Christianity," arguing that the Christianity that most of us practice deprives us of experiencing what the book of Isaiah calls "treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places." According to Isaiah, these riches let us know who God is and that God calls us by name. Isaiah's darkness contains much in the way of goodness. Barbara Brown Taylor champions a lunar Christianity, in which we value and explore the many gifts of darkness, the yin (female, shadowy, dark, hidden, lunar, negative) along with the yang (male, sunny, light, visible, solar, positive); and in which we explore and cultivate both the exposed (the persona) and the hidden (the shadow) parts of ourselves.

Neither darkness and light nor good and evil are dichotomous. Each pair exists on a continuum. There are many shades of gray between dark and light and many moral gradations and combinations along the continuum of good and evil. Nothing is all "yin" or all "yang."

In the next term of the School for Christian Growth, which begins April 3rd, I will be facilitating a 6-week course called "Exploring Darkness with Collage." I have saved up a big stash of pictures from magazines and each week, focusing on a different topic related to darkness, we will cut up the pictures to make collages with construction paper and glue.

Then we will share what we have learned about ourselves and about darkness with one another. The topics will include:

- Going dark and the “cloud of unknowing”
- Seeing in the dark
- Finding light in darkness
- Dark emotions and the shadow self
- Dark saints and deities
- The hero journey

I hope this class will be of interest and that many of you will choose to sign up for it (although not too many because we have a class size limit of 12).

In conclusion, I am going to leave you with a quote from a poem by Suzy Kassem, a contemporary Egyptian-American poet and mystic:

Everybody has a little bit of the sun and moon in them. Everybody has a little bit of man, woman, and animal in them. Darks and lights in them. Everyone is part of a connected cosmic system. Part earth and sea, wind and fire, with some salt and dust swimming in them. We have a universe within ourselves that mimics the universe outside. None of us are just black or white, or never wrong and always right. No one. No one exists without polarities. Everybody has good and bad forces working with them, against them, and within them.

