

THE PRETEST

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Old Fashioned Sunday School
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Well, welcome to the Second Sunday of Christmas and, by the way, a new calendar year!

I trust that you have enjoyed the turning of pages on the calendar and are refreshed, renewed, and ready to begin again.

INTRODUCTION

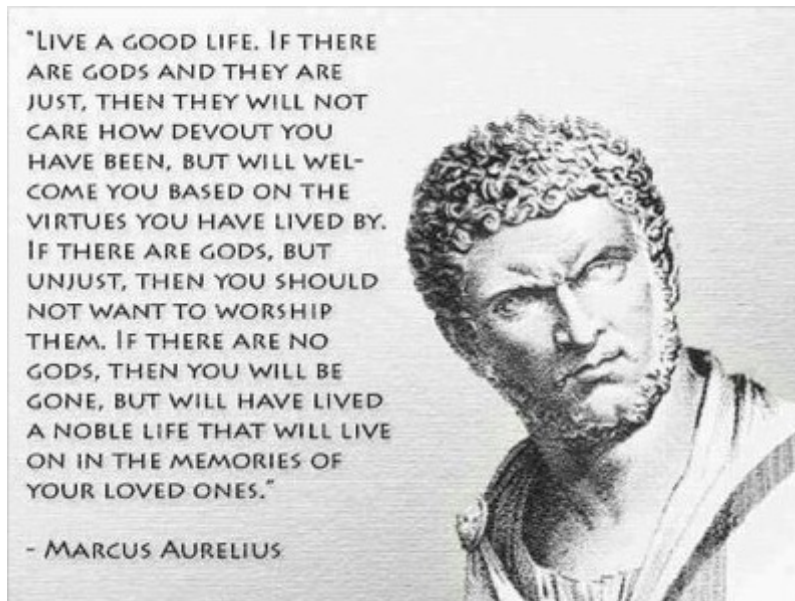
This term, we will continue our conversations about faith by examining the increasing secularization of our culture and wondering about how, exactly, that might impact what our children will believe.

I started thinking about this last summer, when I got an email from a friend of mine. The email attached a copy of something that one of his children had given to him. It was a quote from Marcus Aurelius, the great Stoic philosopher who became emperor of Rome in AD 161. Marcus Aurelius kept a journal, which carries the modern title “Meditations.”

He was in many ways the last of the “philosopher Kings.”

His Meditations follow the usual topics of logic, physics and ethics, and they offer a noble, temperate, sober vision of the world and our role in it. In order to act rightly (ethics), one must think clearly, not trusting false impressions (logic), but must understand one’s place in “the All” (physics). This will lead to accepting what is inevitable and behaving toward others with understanding and integrity.

Here is the quote:



The child's message was "This is what I believe about God."

And, it's not different from where a lot of people go when faith in God no longer makes sense to them. You can hear echoes of Marcus Aurelius in more modern admonitions. Just be nice. Do the right thing. Have the courage to face the world as it really is.

If you push at this position a little, though, you will see that it assumes a different worldview than the one offered by our scripture and tradition.

Marcus Aurelius was a pantheist. There is no concept of the distant, detached divinity of Epicureanism. He believed that the divine is in us, and around us, guiding and steering everything all the time.

As Christians, we believe that the world is the good creation of one God, who is both intimately involved with it and utterly different from it. This, we claim, generates a different approach to life, to death and to the sense of what it means to be human.

Most of us have always assumed the existence of God and the need to work out our relationship with God in order to experience the fullness of life. Most of our friends seemed to have had a similar experience.

It's different for our children, though. They are growing up in an increasingly secular world that no longer assumes the existence of God or the need to be in relationship with anything that we might call divine. And, to make things even more interesting, they are becoming friends with people who don't believe in anything outside of a natural (rather than supernatural) order – and yet live lives that can't be dismissed as immoral or unworthy.

People believe in a lot of different things today, and they put those beliefs into practice in a lot of different ways. Having faith in God has become just one alternative among many – and, depending on where you are, it's not always the most convenient one to choose.

THE PRETEST

So, at the beginning of a class, teachers often conduct a pretest, an evaluation of where the class might be in its understanding of the topic, as a way of determining where to start and what to say.

Knowing how much you like these kinds of things, I thought I would give this practice a twist. We'll give a pretest, but to someone else – in this case, to poet, editor, and essayist Christian Wiman who teaches poetry and literature at Yale Divinity School. I have constructed his answers based on the meditations in his 2013 book, [My Bright Abyss](#).

I'm hoping that Wiman's answers might help you think more deeply about how you might answer each of these questions for yourself, and lay a foundation for the rest of the conversation.

In listening to Wiman's answers, notice how they are grounded in wonder and mystery, how they sound more like a tentative working out of what he believes and not formal statements of dogmatic certainty, and how they always seem to make more, and not less, out of life – or, as

he says, make connections and continuities, not renunciations and severances.” (108)

1. Who or What is God?

I tell myself that I have no problem believing in God, if “belief” can be defined as some utter interior assent to a life that is both beyond and within this one, and if “assent” can be understood as at once active and unconscious, and if “God” is in some mysterious way both this action and its object, and if after all these qualifications this sentence still makes any effing sense. (72)

Hard core theology, on the other hand, tends to leave me cold, even when – perhaps especially when – in convinces me. I honestly don’t know whether I am describing something essential about the way we know God or merely my own weakness of mind. (73)

To have faith is to acknowledge the absolute materiality of existence while acknowledging at the same time the compulsion toward transfiguring order that seems no outside of things but within them, and within you – not an idea imposed upon the world, but a vital, answering instinct.

Headed home from work, irritated by my busyness and the sense of wasted days, shouldering through the strangers who merge and flow together on Michigan Avenue, merge and flow in the mirrored facades, I flash past the rapt eyes and undecayed face of my grandmother, lit and lost at once. In a board meeting, bored to oblivion, I hear a pen scrape like a fingernail on a cell wall, watch the glassed sweat as if even water wanted out, then suddenly, at the center of the long table, light makes of a bell-shaped pitcher a bell that rings in no place on this earth. Moments, only, and I am aware even within them, and thus am outside of them, yet something in the very act of such attention has troubled the tyranny of the ordinary, as if the world at which I gazed, gazed at me, as if the lost face and the living crowd, the soundless bell and the mind in which it rings, all hankered toward – expressed some undeniable hope for- one end. (77)

2. What is a Soul?

Wiman claims that the word “soul” has been stripped of its religious meaning, and replaced with the word “self.” He sees this as a good thing. He thinks anxiety comes from the self as ultimate concern, from the fact that the self cannot bear this ultimate concern: it buckles and wavers under the strain, and eventually inevitably, it breaks.

“Glimmerings are what the soul’s composed of,” writes Seamus Heaney, an interesting – and I think accurate – thought, if the word “glimmerings” is read as both literal and metaphorical: the soul is not simply the agent that does the seeing (the entity to which metaphorical glimmerings are given), it is in some way the things that are seen (the world that glimmers); or perhaps more accurately, the soul is a verb that makes an exchange between the self and reality – or the self and other selves – possible. It is the soul that turns perception into communication, and communication – even if it’s just between one man and the storm of atoms around him – into communication. (93)

This reminds me of something one of John Steinbeck’s characters said in Grapes of Wrath. ***“Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an’ he foun’ he didn’ have no soul that was his’n. Says he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul.”*** (48)

3. What is Faith?

Faith is not some hard, unchanging thing you cling to through the vicissitudes of life. Those who try to make it into this are destined to become brittle, shatterable creatures. Faith never grows harder, never so deviates from its nature and becomes actually destructive, than in the person who refuses to admit that faith is change. I don’t mean simply that faith changes (though there is that). I mean that just as any sense of divinity that we have comes from the natural order of things – is in some ultimate sense within the natural order of things – so too faith is folded into change, is the mutable and messy process of our lives rather than any fixed, mental product. Those who cling to the latter are inevitable left with nothing to hold on to, or left holding on to some nothing into which they have poured the best parts of themselves.

4. Is Faith Reasonable?

Contemporary physicists talk about something called “quantum weirdness,” which refers to the fact that an observed particle behaves very differently from one that is unobserved. An observed particle passed through a screen will always go through one hole. A particle that is unobserved but mechanically monitored will pass through multiple holes at the same time. What this suggests is that what we call reality is conditioned by the limitations of our senses, and there is some other reality much larger and more complex than we are able to perceive. The effect of good poetry is not some mystical world, but of multiple dimensions within a single perception. They are not discovering the extraordinary within the ordinary. They are, for the briefest of instants, perceiving something of reality as it truly is. (52)

Faith cannot save you from the claims of reason, except insofar as it preserves and protects that wonderful, terrible time when reason, if only for a moment, lost its claim on you.

5. What is Religion?

When I hear people say they have no religious impulse whatsoever ... I always want to respond: Really? You have never felt overwhelmed by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond yourself, some wordless mystery straining through word to reach you? Never?

As David Brooks notes, “Most believers seem to have had these magical moments of wonder and clearest consciousness, which suggested a dimension of existence beyond the everyday. Maybe it happened during childbirth, with music, in nature, in love or pain, or during a moment of overwhelming gratitude and exaltation.”

These glimmering experiences are not in themselves faith, but they are the seed of faith. As Wiman writes, “Religion is not made of these moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of your

life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can't even acknowledge their existence afterward. Religion is what you do with these moments of over-mastery in your life." (70)

Brooks again. "The faithful are trying to live in ways their creator loves. They are trying to turn moments of spontaneous consciousness into an ethos of strict conscience. They are using effervescent sensations of holiness to inspire concrete habits, moral practices and practical ways of living well."

6. What is the Christ?

Wiman tells a story about a conversation he had with a friend named Adele, who at nearly sixty years old finds that her faith has fallen away. At an outside table, she tells him that it was love that first led her to God. Thirty-five years earlier, love for the man who would be her husband for most of her life seemed to crack open the world and her heart at the same time, seemed to fuse those latent, living energies into a single flame, the name of which she knew was God. There were careers and children. There were homes laid claim to and relinquished. There was something perhaps too usual for a love that had torn her so wholly open, but time takes the edge off of any experience, life means mostly waiting for life, or remembering it – right?

Then she tells him of her divorce, and her loss of faith. How can a love that prompted her toward God become the very thing that kills her faith?

Once it seemed love lit the world from within and made it take on a sacred radiance, but somehow that fire burned through everything and now she walks lost in a land of ash. If God by means of love became belief in my heart, became the faith by which I lived and loved in return, then what should I believe now that my love is dead?

"Christ is contingency," he tells her as they cross the railroad tracks and walk sown the dusty main street of the little town that reminds him of the town in which he was raised. The buildings of ramshackle

resiliency. The languages, Spanish and English, fusing into one and then separating into two. The cowboys with creek-bed faces, with sky in their eyes and twelve-packs in their arms. He has been working on his book, trying to figure out what he believes. He has just been diagnosed with cancer. He notices that visible distance is so much a part of things that things acquire a kind of space, as if even the single scrub cedar outside the window where he is working held – in its precise little limbs, its assertive, seasonless green – the fact of its absence.

Contingency means subject to chance, not absolute. All of life is uncertain. He realizes that it may be heretical to think of God in those terms, but he finds it comforting. If he is going to be able to make any sense out of human suffering, then the humanity of God cannot be a half measure. And indeed, he says, what is most moving and durable about Jesus is the moments of pure – at times even helpless: My God, my God – humanity. God is given over to matter, beyond the transforming touch of something outside or beyond. He feels relief in meeting God in contingency, in what he calls the havoc of chance, to feel enduring love like a stroke of pure luck.

How would we know God without this contingency?

Omnipotent eternal, omniscient are attributes Wiman claims that he can't imagine much less perceive. So, Christ, as contingency, is the only way toward knowledge of God and contingency for Christians is the essence of incarnation. And incarnation, as well as the possibilities for salvation within it, precedes Christ's presence in history, and exceeds all that is known by the term "Christianity."

***Into the instant's bliss never came one soul
Whose soul was not possessed by Christ,
Even in the eons Christ was not***

***And still: some who cry the name of Christ
Live more remote from love
Than some who cry to a void they cannot name.***

--- After Dante

Wiman admits that telling Adele, in the midst of her suffering, that Christ is contingency was ridiculous. Yet, he says, there is a sense in which love's truth is proved by its end, by what it becomes in us, and what we, by virtue of love, become. But love, like faith, occurs in the innermost recesses of a person's spirit, and we can see only inward in this regard, and not very clearly when it comes to that. And then too there can be great inner growth and strength I what seems, from the outside, like pure agony or destruction. In the tenderest spots of human experience, nothing is more offensive than intellectualized understanding. (18)

But, that is different from saying that the church has a monopoly on salvation. "The minute any human or human institution arrogates to itself a singular knowledge of God, there comes into that knowledge a kind of strychnine pride and it is as if the most animated and vital creature were instantaneously transformed into a corpse. ... Truth inheres not in doctrine itself, but in the spirit with which it is engaged, for the spirit of God is always seeking and creating new forms." (111)

7. How Do You Feel About Converting Others?

When a man's relation to the divine radically changes and his life and mind open in ways he could not have imagined, he is inclined to think of the transformation in terms of progression – from a lower consciousness to a higher one, or from benighted despair to enlightened joy. This is the first mistake. The second is his immediate desire to life others, particularly those he loves, into this new state of awareness. But faith is not a new life in this sense; it is the old life newly seen. And the test of that sight is that it leads to connections and continuities, not to renunciations and severances. Nothing is more poisonous, both to one's own faith and to one's relationships, than an overeager urge to proselytize, a too-avid grasp of the "truth." No doubt there is the rare Caedmon whose mute tongue is touched into song by the spirit of God, but I think for most of us – for me, certainly – God comes as an annihilating silence, a silence we must endure as well as enjoy. To be sure, the injunction to evangelize is upon every believer, but there is a strict hierarchy of effective methods. "Go forth and spread the gospel by

every means possible,” said Saint Francis to his followers. “If necessary, use words.” (108)

8. What Happens to You When You Die?

Wiman talks about living in South Texas with his grandmother and her sister, Aunt Sissy; actually, he lived in a twenty-five foot trailer behind his grandmother’s “big house” which wasn’t so big.

He talks about their lives -- migrating to Texas from South Carolina during the dust bowl, sharecropping, miscarriages, waitressing at a cowboy café just off the interstate. And he talks about a faith in God that was so instinctive to them that even their daily chores, accompanied by hymns hummed under their breath, seemed like devotion.

He recalls his Aunt Sissy dying as he and his grandmother leaned over the hospital bed.

They had been with her in the hospital since she suffered a heart attack. She was not conscious, he says, but just before the end, when my grandmother and I were bent over her inert and unresponsive body to tell her that we were there, that we loved her, that God was there and loved her (I didn’t say this), she rose up, took each one of us in her trembling arms (“Praise the Lord,” said the nurse in awe), and then, without a word or even any clear indication that she was conscious, let us go. Later that day, she died.

His grandmother died just a little over a month later.

Wiman says that she was destroyed by the strain of taking care of Sissy during the last years of her life. He says that her heart began aching ominously just as Sissy’s finally stopped. And so, he found himself leaning over yet another hospital bed, trying to understand another dying woman’s desperate gestures. He asked her if she was cold, and she shook her head no. He asked if she was thirsty, and she shook her head no. Finally he asked if she was scared, and her eyes widened even farther and she began to shake terribly as she nodded yes and tried to form words around her breathing tube: yes, yes, yes.

Wiman quotes the last words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet and priest who died of typhoid at the age of forty-five. "I am so happy. I am so Happy. I loved my life."

He notes that most of us want to believe that death could be filled with promise, that the pain of leaving and separation would be, if not a foretaste of joy, then at least not meaningless. Forget religion. Even atheists want to die well, or want those they love to die well, which has to mean more than simply a quiet resignation to complete annihilation. That is merely a polite nihilism. Not, to die well, even for the religious, is to accept not only our own terror and sadness but the terrible holes we leave in the lives of others; at the same time, to die well, even for the atheist, is to believe that there is some way of dying into life rather than simply away from it, some form of survival that love makes possible.

He doesn't mean by survival merely persisting in the memory of others. He means something deeper and more durable. If *quantum entanglement* is true, if related particles react in similar or opposite ways even when separated by tremendous distances, then it is obvious that the whole world is alive and communicating in ways we do not fully understand. And we are part of that life, part of that communication – even as, maybe even especially as, our atoms begin to long dispersal we call death.

Wiman speculates that Hopkins is happy because he is dying into the life that he loved, and not falling irrevocably away from it.

What then does faith mean?

Wiman says that he often feels that it means no more than, and no less than, faith in life – in the ongoingness of it, the indestructibility, some atom by atom intelligence that is and isn't us some day-by-day and death-by-death persistence insisting on a more-than-human hope, some tender and terrible energy that is, for those with the eyes to see it, love.

My grandmother, who was in the world too utterly to be "conscious" of it, whose spirit poured and pours over the cracked land of her family like a saving rain, exemplified this energy, and I feel that to be faithful to

her, faithful to this person that I loved as much as I have ever loved anyone, I must believe in the scope and momentum of her life, not the awful and anomalous instant of her death. In truth, it is not difficult at all. Nor is the other belief – or instinct, really – that occurs simultaneously: that her every tear was wiped away, that God looked her out of pain, that in the blink of any eye the world opened its tenderest interiors, and let her in. (33 -- 37)

9. Should we worry about our children if they don't believe in God?

Part of the mystery of grace is the way it operates not only as present joy and future hope, but also retroactively. In a way: the past is suffused with a presence that, at the time, you could only feel as the most implacable absence. This is why being saved (I dislike the language too, not because it's inaccurate but because it's corrupted by contemporary usage, a hands-in-the-air-holy-seizure sort of rapture, a definitive sense of rift) involves embracing rather than renouncing one's past. It is true that Christ makes a man anew, that there is some ultimate change in him. But part of that change is the ability to see your life as a whole, to feel the form and unity of it, to become a creature made for and assimilated into existence, rather than a desperate, fragmented man striving against existence or caught forever just outside of it. (148)

10. Should we worry about the Church if our children don't believe what we do?

Christianity is both temporal and relative. To every age, Christ dies anew and is resurrected within the imagination of man. This is why he could be a paragon of rationality for eighteenth-century England, a heroic figure of the imagination for the Romantics, an exemplar of existential courage for writers like Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann. One truth, then, is that Christ is always being remade in the image of man, which means that his reality is always being deformed to fit human needs, or what humans perceive to be their needs. A deeper truth, though, one that scripture suggests when it speaks of the eternal Word being made specific flesh, is that there is no permutation of humanity in which Christ is not present. If every Bible is lost, if every church

crumbles to dust, if the last believer in the last prayer opens her eyes and lets it all finally go, Christ will appear on this earth as calmly and casually as he appeared to the disciples walking to Emmaus after his death, who did not recognize this man to whom they had pledged their very lives; this man whom they had seen beaten, crucified, abandoned by God; this man who, after walking the dusty road with them, after sharing an ordinary meal and discussing the scriptures, had to banish once more in order to make them see. (11)

Christian Wiman discussed much of this material with Krista Tippett (On Being, May 23, 2013) shortly after the book was published. Here is the link.

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/a-call-to-doubt-and-faith-christian-wiman-on-remembering-god/4535>