

KEY NEXT DOOR

John 13:7

1 Corinthians 13:12

I'm leaning over the side of a hospital bed standing in a room between the kitchen and living room. The person's normal bed no longer worked and so a hospital bed was obtained. And it was situated in this particular area instead of the bedroom so trees and birds and nature could be seen. Yes, it was an odd place to put a bed, but when life is not normal you don't always do normal things and when life is ugly you seek all the beauty you can get.

On this hospital bed is a body that can barely fit lengthwise. This person, with his head propped up slightly, is long, stretched out from the top of the bed to the bottom of the bed. He is a tall man who has become thin, very thin. Actually, he is bony, skeletal, emaciated.

I particularly notice his hands. A lot of the man's personality, much of his being, was in his hands which now are shriveled, dried-up. Large hands with long fingers that produced a strong, pressured handshake, a vice-like grip to let you know not to mess with him. Now the hands are weak, frail, feeble, scrawny, unable to squeeze the life out of you because in them is very little life.

I also notice, am aware of his face, what there is left of it with eyes now sunken into his skull.

He looks like something right out of a Halloween horror film.

This beloved face which is now a shocking face was seen in Wedgewood's sanctuary for ten years and these now down-to-the-bone fingers we heard play the organ, loudly, triumphantly, majestically. And on the way out the church door those fingers gripped our hands tightly, forcefully to remind us----not to mess with him. Don't mess with Bill he told us----with his handshake.

But now Bill Skinner is being messed with, messed with, not by us, but by AIDS, that horrendous, dreadful, dignity-robbing disease. Bill is before me listless and almost lifeless in his bed and we try to make a bad, ugly situation a little better with a view of creation and moistened cloths on his forehead. His eyes are death-glazed and there is no communication, at least from Bill to us. We hope and pray he knows we are there and that he is comforted, even as we are terribly dis comforted by what we see.

AIDS has messed Bill up and in the process it has messed our theology up as well. For what we are seeing, for what we are witnessing, for what we are experiencing there are no answers, no good answers, no satisfactory answers, no acceptable answers, at least for me.

I am sitting at the dinner table or the supper table---(If you call it dinner, raise your hand. If you call it supper, raise your hand.)---ah, who cares----let's just say I'm at a table eating and it's around 6:30 p.m. and we are sharing the events, the news, the happenings of our day. My wife, my significant other, The First Lady of Wedgewood, has gone to a funeral on this day. A co-

worker of hers has lost his wife, his beloved in a tragic car accident and Vicky informs us it's now only him and his three-year old son-----left behind. Victoria also shares with us that at the church, which is right down the road from Wedgewood, the minister declares that it is a happy time because the deceased is now in heaven, that it is not a time to cry, that is it not a time to question God, because God in His infinite wisdom---and in this church God is definitely a "He"--God in His infinite wisdom from the beginning of time preordained her death in this tragic accident and it is not our place to question. Rather, instead-----we are to accept that God is in total control and there's a divine reason for everything that happens, including this death that has left a husband without a wife and a toddler son without a mother.-----God's will, they say.

I am lounging in my recliner in my study and I'm reading that cosmologists think:

- The universe began 13.7 billion years ago.
- The contents of the universe include:
 - 4% atoms (ordinary matter)
 - 23% of an unknown type of dark matter, and
 - 73% of a mysterious dark energy.
- Our solar system was formed about 5 billion years ago.
- The earth was formed about 4.5 billion years ago.
- 150,000 years ago was the first appearance of homosapiens.
- The nearest star to our sun, Alpha Centauri, is about 4.3 light years away.
- The nearest clearly defined galaxy to our galaxy is 2 million light-years away.
- What is a light-year? The distance light will journey in a year traveling at the approximate rate of 186,000 miles per second. One light year equals almost six trillion miles.

I am lounging in my recliner in my study and I'm reading that Paleontologists think:

- invertebrate life began on earth about 600 million years ago;
- fish evolved about 300 million years ago;
- amphibians evolved about 150 million years ago;
- dinosaurs evolved about 80 million years ago;
- hominids began appearing about 4 million years ago;
- neanderthals appeared about 300k years ago; and
- homo erectus appeared about 130k years ago.

I am sitting in a chair in a classroom on a beautiful, gorgeous day wishing I were somewhere else, wishing I were anywhere but where I am, taking notes while listening, though almost asleep due to boredom, but listening with the help of God to a professor. I am in Wake Forest, North Carolina where the University used to be a long time ago, but now the site is the home of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. It is the second year in my Master of Divinity program which means----which means it's time for Systematic Theology, Systematic Theology I and Systematic Theology II, meaning I have this class and this professor the entire year. This is unfortunate. This is not good. This is bad. For one thing, my professor is a former missionary who shouldn't have left the mission field because although he is one of the nicest human beings you would ever want to meet he is an unexciting, mind-numbing, boring professor. Or put

another way, he may have been called to teach at the seminary, but best I can tell the call was not from God. Did I mention that I had to have this professor and this class for an entire year? But even worse, even worse is that I have to sit through a course called Systematic Theology when already I've discovered there's a lot of theology that is not systematic, that there are a lot of bible verses that somehow just don't fit into the traditional theological categories, and somehow those passages just get ignored by my professor and 99% of the rest of Christendom. Actually, many of these passages not only don't fit, they contradict the passages used to prop up the traditional theologies. But let's see how far we can stick our head down into a hole in the sand.

Twenty years later I am sitting in a hotel banquet room being trained by Methodists to teach their Disciple Bible Study course which is a year long jaunt through the Bible using all the traditional theological categories and the usual Bible passages. I knew it was going to be bad before I went, but to tell you why I went would take too long. Well, for three days I am trained, but the entire time my mind silently shouts out, "But what about the other texts!" For three days my mind silently shouts out, "What about all the life experiences that can't be squeezed into these theological holes!"

Please permit an observation. There is this idea circulating among the Christians in the steeples that the best Christians, the advanced Christians, the most mature Christians, the Christians with the strongest faith are the ones who accept the traditional theology, who do not question the traditional theology or the clergy who espouse it. There is this notion among the Christians that a strong faith is one with no doubts, no uncertainties, no questions. I find that amazing. I find that interesting. I find that troubling. Not only because it's dead wrong, but also because it's not Biblical.

Camp out sometime with Job and hear his case against God.

Spend a week with Jeremiah sometime soon. Do some quality time with Jerry and hear his anguish at being seduced, actually it could be translated "raped", by God. At a minimum, he felt misled by God.

And the Psalms, read them. Not just the praise psalms, but the laments. Laments are nothing but the doubts and questions and uncertainties of the heart and mind and soul crying out.

I guess I should also add, read the book of Lamentations while you are at it for good measure.

In addition, as you thumb through the Bible, you might want to take a look, take a gander at the end of Matthew's gospel. Typically, we focus on what we call The Great Commission, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." I know you've read that, but don't skip over what is right before it. Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, is gathered with his now eleven disciples on a mountain. And Matthew tells us they worshipped him AND-----AND SOME DOUBTED.

Wow. He's standing right before them. And some of the eleven disciples---we're not talking about some Johnny-come-lately disciples, but folk who hung out with him from the beginning of

his public ministry, ones who had seen the feeding of the 5,000, saw him walk on water, saw him heal ten lepers----we are told that some of his eleven, inner circle, Peter, James and John-type disciples DOUBTED.

You see, it wasn't just doubting Thomas. Some of them of doubted and "some" is plural which means more than one of them.

I have an admission. Christians scare me. Christians who know more about God's will than God knows scare me. Christians who think having a strong faith means no questions, no doubts, no uncertainties scare me. People dishonest or in denial about God and the Bible and life scare me.

I know. I know. The truth. The Church has to preach the truth, safeguard the truth, protect the truth.

Yes, that's in the Bible too. But whose truth? God's truth, you say. No, God's truth as seen by you, God's truth which is ironically and coincidentally identical to your truth. What you don't understand is that, like me, you see in a mirror dimly.

The apostle Paul wrote this truth to the Corinthians: "Now we see in a mirror dimly----not I see in a mirror dimly but WE----now WE see in a mirror dimly, but then---but one day, we'll see face to face. Now I know in part; then---one day in the future, I shall understand fully. Not now, but some day. Partially in the present, understand fully in the future.

Well, Paul could have remembered that truth better himself. The apostle had a way of seeing his truth as THE truth and those who disagreed with him as incarnations of the devil. But like me and you, Paul saw in a mirror dimly.

Here's what I think. I think when it comes to theology Christians could take some extra doses of humility.

Here's what I think. A lot of it is mystery.

I don't always agree with Bishop John Shelby Spong---for the record I don't always agree with myself--- I don't always agree with Bishop John Shelby Spong, but he's right on target when he writes: "I think the time has come for the Church to invite its people into the frightening journey into the mystery of God." (*Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 21.)

Here's what I think. Christians and the Church should not be intimidated by questions and doubts and uncertainties. It's all faith anyway. Yes, all the questions and doubts and uncertainties have made me into a different type of Christian, but nothing----NOTHING has changed my deeply held commitment to God. You know, who is afraid of the big bad wolf? Well, not me. And I'm also not afraid of questions and doubts and uncertainties because NOTHING has changed my deeply held commitment to God.

I remember my first semester at seminary. It was shocking. It was disturbing. It was unsettling. I was learning things, being introduced to, information the Church had failed to teach me. Seminary students generally fell into one or two groups: those who were willing to face the questions, live with the questions, and those who chose to stay wrapped in the religious blanket of their childhood faith. As for me, with each passing day, with each new piece of information, the old blanket did not work. I had to discard the blanket of my childhood faith. But I wasn't left without a blanket. I wasn't left without a blanket.

That first semester at seminary when I should have been reading what my professors had assigned I was reading a book I had purchased while browsing through the books at the seminary bookstore. The title of one book captivated me, *The Christian Agnostic*. It was written by Leslie Weatherhead, a famous preacher in England during World War II. While reading the preface my mind was fascinated by these words: "I am writing for the 'Christian agnostic,' by which I mean a person who is immensely attracted by Christ and who seeks to show his spirit, to meet the challenges, hardships and sorrows of life in the light of that spirit, but who, though he or she is sure of many Christian truths, feels that he cannot honestly and conscientiously 'sign on the dotted line' that he believes certain theological ideas about which some branches of the church dogmatize; churches from which one feels excluded because he cannot 'believe'. His intellectual integrity makes him say about many things. 'It may be so. I do not know.'"

In the book Weatherhead also communicated that he put all his questions and doubts into a drawer labeled "awaiting further light."

Well, it was an important book at an important juncture on my journey.

A few months later I purchased a copy of one of Weatherhead's sermon books in which he had a sermon titled "Key Next Door". Weatherhead writes: "I remember once wanting very much to see inside a house. It was an empty house [and] the next house [was] a good deal farther on. I went up the drive of the house I wanted to look over. The doors were shut and barred and the windows tightly fastened. I took the liberty of looking in through the ground-floor windows. And I could see a little. By walking outside around the house I could get an idea of the house's general plan. But, of course, from the outside one could really only have the vaguest idea of what the house might contain and what details had been in the plan of the architect. One could only 'know in part'.

Then I noticed that there was a card in the window of a downstairs room facing the front gate, and on the card were the words: 'Key Next Door'. So I had to go farther on, obtain the key and come back and enter the house. Then a good many things that had been obscured from me were made plain."

Key next door, learned Weatherhead, and so did I.

It seems like with every passing year I have more questions, more doubts, more uncertainties. Am I any less Christian because of it? No! I'm just saying I haven't gotten a key to the house yet. I've circled around the house. I've looked in the windows. But I've never been inside.

One day I hope we will all get the key to the house. And I hope on that day a good many things that have been obscure will be made plain. Until then----until then I will continue to be immensely drawn to this Jesus of Galilee and I will seek to pattern my life after his. And for those things that puzzle me, for those things that I question and doubt and about which I am not sure, well, I will not deny them. And from time to time I will “swim around” in them, discuss them, debate them, and reflect on them. And when my brain needs a rest----and I’m finding my brain needs more rest these days---- and when my brain needs a rest I’ll tuck them in a drawer labeled “awaiting further light.”

That’s enough for me. I hope it’s enough for you because----because if we are honest that’s all we have.