

Easter...Now What? April 15, 2007

I want to share with you all a great paradox I've been wrestling with, especially in the wake of the Easter Season. The Easter season started over forty days ago with Ash Wednesday. In our Easter travels we went through Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and finally last Sunday...Easter. Well, the Easter season for the Church is kind of like March Madness for the NCAA. You have this period of intense activity culminating in the Final Four, and then the big championship game. Well, now what? Frankly, for me, it's a big letdown. What do we have to look forward to...baseball season?!

For me, Easter represents the same kind of dynamic—okay, we've had Easter...Now what? What do we do with Easter event? What does Easter mean for us? The question I ask myself is this...Is Easter a day, or is Easter a way of life? I think often we get stuck on Easter as a day, and moreover, get stuck on what happened on Easter and can we actually "believe" the biblical Easter?

Very few of us have any problem believing Jesus was put on trial, executed, and put in a tomb—after that though, many of us get stuck on what we believe or don't believe about what happened next.

And, I think this is precisely the point where the "Now What" question becomes most intense. This *is* where the letdown and disillusionment, start to inform our spiritual lives.

I believe wrestling with these questions delivers us on the doorstep of what it means to be a Christian...really, what it means to be a person of faith, period. Is being a person of faith of any tradition measured by what we can affirm we *BELIEVE*? That is to say, are you a better Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu or whatever because you can recite words in a creed or set of belief statements? In his book, *Walk On, The Spiritual Journey of U2*, Presbyterian minister Steve Stockman says this: "Another strange quirk about the Church is

it has specific qualities that determine one's worthiness. Usually they have to do with swearing, smoking and drinking. For some reason, there are biblical teachings that do not—but perhaps should—hold so much importance. Among them: materialistic greed, bigoted prejudice, the oppression of women or the neglect of social justice. Somehow you can ignore some of the rallying calls of Christ and the prophets, and because you are teetotal and less flowery with your language and attend church twice a week, you are declared spiritually strong."

It's no secret to many of you that I am a huge fan of the aforementioned band, U2. One of my favorite responses to the gentle chiding I get from friends and colleagues about my affinity for U2 is to say, "There *is* other music out there, but why bother?" I make light of this, but I do not apologize or shy away from claiming the way in which this music radically transformed my life. And that one song in particular, *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*, has been incredibly important to me in my faith Journey.

I don't mind telling you that my faith journey has been a bumpy ride. I grew up going to little Presbyterian church and Sunday school through my high school years; however, when I left home to go to college, I left my church home too...literally and figuratively. The only time I set foot in church after that is when I absolutely had to...coming home for say...Easter. During that time in the wilderness I did a lot of soul searching, asked a lot of questions, tore a lot of things down, and through it all continued to listen to this music...this U2. In 1987 U2 released the album (yes album) called *The Joshua Tree*. On that record was the song *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*. Finally, someone had captured how *I* felt.

For me this song was a good dose of soul searching and practical theology, but with a good dose of reality too. I *do* believe in the kingdom come and that all the colors will bleed into one...Nonetheless, I still hadn't found what I was looking for.

While the practical, folksy theology in this song appealed to me, many so-called “good Christians” had taken that one verse of the song quite literally. Unbeknownst to many, U2 is a Christian band of sorts. By today’s narrow definition of Christian bands, they probably don’t stack up to well, but the truth of the matter is, three of the four members of the band are Christians. The band got its start in the midst of meeting together in a charismatic Christian group in Ireland. The lyrics to their songs are replete with scriptural underpinnings. Much of the music is driven by the lead singer, Bono’s, wrestling with what the Bible says and how it applies to our lives. Thus, in the early 80s U2 had become the darling of the Christian music world. With hits like Gloria, Rejoice, and “40,” they had brought a subtle Christian message into the mainstream. Then...and then came, *I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For*. This touched off a firestorm of criticism from the Christian world.

Again, according to Steve Stockman, “*The Soul Patrol and the Theological Police were out in force, and they concluded their case that anyone who had not found what they were looking for could not have found Christ.*”

Our Bible passage today is from Philippians. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to Christians in Philippi where earlier he had founded a church. Now remember who Paul was...Paul used to be a Pharisee, a religious scholar, a follower of the law. In a previous life, Paul had been persecuting Christians for their perversion of Jewish law. Paul though, had had a radical conversion experience and was now preaching Christ. But listen to what Paul says in his letter...

“Steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they’re interested in is appearances—knife-happy circumcisers, I call them—The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I’m tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so

important are gone from my life—I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.”

Don’t you just love it? “Barking dogs, those religious busybodies” I guess Paul didn’t have the terms Soul Patrol or Theological Police back then, so he settled for barking dogs and religious busybodies.

Well, the key connection here between this ancient message and our modern lyric is the connection between the “eye on the goal” and “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” In the song, the Soul Patrol missed the point—one would be hard-pressed to find a more clearly stated theological treatise—*You broke the bonds/You loosed the chains/Carried the cross/And My Shame/You know I believe it.* But with Bono and Paul, that’s not the point. The point isn’t whether one accepts a particular set of beliefs...the point is how one’s life is transformed as a result of one’s beliefs. “Thus...it’s not a way of believing, it is a way of being.”

In his book *The Post-Evangelical*, English preacher Dave Tomlinson states: “*Evangelism is good at introducing people to faith in Christ, but unhelpful when it comes to the matter of progressing into a more grown-up experience of faith.*” Or, as Steve Stockman said, “the Church spends a lot of energy on being “born again’ but little time on ‘growing up’ again.”

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, called this *growing up again* “*moving on toward perfection.*” That is to say, once we come to belief, we spend the rest of our lives searching and reaching...expressing our belief. As a Christian, Wesley believed that once one opened oneself to the transformational power of Christ, one’s life was radically transformed.

For Wesley, it wasn't that the belief part wasn't important at all, its just what did you do with that belief once it sparked a transformation within? In Wesley's case he believed the Holy Spirit worked in people's lives to compel them to "act like Christians."

Now to my way of thinking, we have pretty powerful company here...The Apostle Paul, Bono, and John Wesley. Even though they say it in slightly different ways, and in different historical times, their song is very much the same.

Being "Christian" for each of these men didn't mean working oneself up to a particular belief, punching the clock, and saying...I'm done. Being a Christian *started* at this point, not *ended*. The Apostle Paul became a missionary traveling around the Mediterranean basin preaching and founding churches. John Wesley became a field preacher. That is to say, he rode his horse from town to town preaching and teaching tirelessly usually seven times a week to common folks who the Church of England had shut out.

And, what of my man Bono? Bono does a little preaching too—I've been to his church numerous times...but, shhhh, don't tell anybody, they *call* it a concert. The deal is though, the music, the sermon, the belief...whatever, that's not the thing. The thing is who you become in response. Bono has been around the world fighting the scourge of Poverty and AIDS. I heard that message loud and clear at one of his church services and it radically transformed my life.

What about you? Have you found what you are looking for? Many of you have participated in our Spiritual Statement workshops. The last thing we do in those workshops is to write a statement of belief. It has been my experience in these workshops that the majority of these statements are very much like the song *I Still Haven't Found What I'm looking For*...that is to say...here is what I DO believe, but now what. How DOES this belief inform my being?