

## GRIEVANCES

I was talking to a neighbor of mine who is also a Christian preacher. We have a mini-tradition (only have done it two or three times) of having lunch at an Ethiopian restaurant in Saint Paul. "Ethiopian restaurant" has always been a bit of a non-sequitur to me, as I associate Ethiopia with the famines of the 1970s and 1980s.

But I have to admit, the food at this place is great. It's the one cuisine where I never feel I'm "going without" if I order from the vegetarian side of the menu. I love the wonderful vegetarian pastes served with the fasika bread that looks like an Ace bandage when you roll it up.

Joe knew I was interested in God but put off by the particulars of, for instance, his church. He wanted to bridge the gap, but I doubt he really wanted to hear what I had to say. I wasn't any kind of churchgoer. In fact I walked through life a little like Bob Dylan, wrapped in the protection of my own cool, watched over by my mighty brain.

"There's a question I have always wanted to ask unbelievers," Joe said. "I wonder if you would be offended if I asked it of you."

I shrugged. "Ask away."

"OK. Why do you suppose it is that some people are so reluctant to just give up and be saved and be done with it?"

From his perspective as an enthusiastic charismatic, and a very down to earth guy who knows a lot about God and scripture, people like me were crazy not to jump in and splash around in the good feelings of being born again. Why would anyone resist such an opportunity? Don't they like Jesus? What is it about him they don't like? What's the problem exactly?

I was dumbfounded by the question, as they were things I have wrestled with and come to at least tentative conclusions about. Indeed, it seemed to me that Joe and I were

sitting on opposite sides of the same fence. On his side, he was puzzled as to why people didn't dive in head first to what he had to offer. It was so obviously the thing to do!

On my side, I was wondering how a person could possibly "dive in," knowing, as a for-instance, all the things that I knew. About history, about language, about human nature, about tragedy. I had absorbed what I felt were some very heavy lessons about religion in my life. Lessons that made the happy talk about faith seems pretty superficial.

Some of the difference between Joe and me was about time. We were both middle-aged men. Joe had had a conversion experience in his early twenties, decades before. This experience was dramatic and total. To hear him tell the tale, he went overnight from a Dylanesque humanities grad student sucking reefer from the seat of his motorcycle to being a cherry-cheeked Pentecostal on fire with the Holy Spirit. No tortured transition period, as I would have had -- just -- *rrrrrip!*

I hadn't a clue how he did that.

Nothing like that ever happened with me. Where Joe went straight to Go and collected his \$200, I spent decades in the theological equivalent of Jail, Free Parking, and certain low-rent stretches of Ventnor Avenue. And to be honest, despising quick-change artists like Joe who made the passage from existential misery to holy acceptance look so easy.

So here the two of us were, more than thirty years later, and he is wondering why everyone doesn't just go *rrrrrip* like he did -- that sure would make his task of converting everyone in the world to Christianity a whole lot easier, instead of having to take everyone to lunch one at a time, and even then having to pay the tab for amused but resistant persons like myself.

As it happens, I thought I knew the exact reasons why people didn't "just dive in," why they didn't just let it rip. So I answered him, still daubing at my pepper paste.

“People don’t want to be made fools of, Joe,” I told him, swallowing. “And they aren't anxious to be part of something that conflicts furiously with existing values that they have no reason to doubt.”

I assured him that this standoffishness has nothing to do with his Lord personally. It’s not about the person or the narrative of Jesus. It is hard to find anyone in the world -- Christian, Muslim, Jew -- who isn't drawn to the figure of Jesus. But billions *are* uncomfortable with the house built in Jesus' name.

And here was a mighty and painful predicament. What if Jesus was what he said he was -- a doorway to God -- but the door had been effectively slammed shut by the very church built on his memory? On the one hand, shame on the church for messing things up so bad, On the other hand, shame on people like me for using a secondary factor -- Jesus' church is a drag -- to disqualify the primary truth due to secondary or tertiary shortcomings.

There Joe sat on one side of the table, and me on the other. Each brimming with good will, each loving God in his own way (mine a whole lot vaguer than his)-- but neither of us quite understanding the other.

My dark fantasies of this good man went something like this: Joe was a sweet guy, a good guy, a credit to his faith. He was what people mean when they say "good Christian." He knew the bible backwards and forwards, and he loved, loved, loved Jesus.

But ... what if Joe was being duped? What if the cosmic wool was being pulled down over his eyes? What if the goodies of his religion were so tasty and so sweet that he had decided long ago to overlook the perplexities and contradictions that drove more rigorous persons, like myself, to doubt and distraction?

What if, of the two of us, *I* were the one who was showing great character and resolve, not him?

You have to know me to know how funny this question is. Just – trust me – I am no beacon of courageous forbearance. “Skittish” might be a better one-adjective description of me.

So I sat there looking at Joe, wondering what to do about this yawning chasm between us – between people who buy in to religion and those who hold back.

On his side he had all the goodies: belonging, acceptance, community, even joy. What did I have on my side? Mainly an admirable stance, Bob Dylan with this coat keeping off the cold. It was a stance of spiritual self-sufficiency. Admirable, if I was “righter” than Joe was, more sophisticated, subtler, able to shave a point thinner and more distinctively than he was. Especially admirable if I believed my stance was actually working and leading me in a spiritual direction.

Except, it wasn't.