

A Heretic's Statement of Faith

Bill Miller

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Albuquerque

October 20, 2013

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Laity Sunday)

Lectionary: Jeremiah 31:27-34 Psalm 19 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 Luke 18:1-8

I grew up in the Lincoln Street Methodist church in the small Appalachian coal mining town of Shamokin, Pennsylvania. Half a block downhill on Lincoln Street was a Baptist church, and each one of those two churches suspected that the other was headed for hell. When we heard them singing “Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown,” we would open up our hymnals and sing “No Not One!” We weren’t even entirely sure about the salvation of the other *Methodist* churches in town.

But during my adolescence we had a remarkable pastor named Norman Lewis Marden. He had a mid-life call to the ministry, after a career as a naval officer and a boxer. “When my temper rises,” he told us, “I shove my hands into my pockets. If you see that, it might be a good time to step back.” He was much beloved by our congregation, and every year as the Methodist annual conference approached we held our breath, never knowing when our pastor might be removed by the Bishop. Then one year the inevitable happened; he returned with the news that he would be moved away to the pulpit at Mount Pleasant.

Five decades later I still remember his farewell sermon. There was not a dry eye in the congregation, or in the pulpit either. His title was “But This I Know,” from the story in John 9 of Jesus’ healing of a man born blind. You remember that the skeptical authorities question the man, and then his parents, and then the man once again about how his eyes were opened. They want a theological statement about who Jesus is, to which he finally replies, “I do not know. But this I know: I was blind and now I see.” It was Rev. Marden’s jumping off point to reiterate the simple themes at the heart of his ministry. And the first of these was: “But this I know: God is love.” He went on to be a District Superintendent in the Central Pennsylvania conference, and for me as a teenager he laid the foundation for my own adult faith.

To be sure, it was a shock for me when in college I began to learn that people wrote the books of the bible at different times and for differing purposes, and to question the literal truth of the stories I had memorized. I went to college with the intention of going on to seminary and becoming a pastor. By my senior year I knew that my literal childhood faith was not going to work for me, but I didn’t yet have an adult faith. I did not yet understand the difference between “inspired by God” and “literally true.” I knew how much I didn’t know, and so called myself an agnostic. Thus it didn’t seem to make much sense to go to seminary – although as I’ve learned since that didn’t stop others and it would have saved me from the Vietnam draft. I went to our college chaplain to confess my agnosticism, not at all sure what he would say. What he did tell me is, “That’s a good place to grow from.” He was right.

What I am surest of now is that God *is* love – that the very nature of God is a love, compassion, acceptance and forgiveness so profound that it eludes description and human comprehension. And I believe that Jesus not only taught and exemplified that love of God, but also somehow literally embodied it, and was (and is) God in our midst – not just symbolically, not merely in word and deed, but in truth. I can say with all my heart that Jesus is my Lord and Redeemer. Because God is love, I do not fear death. I do not know what lies on the other side, but I utterly trust in God’s abiding love for us. In life and in death we belong to God, to the Love that Jesus taught and showed and embodied.

It is that very surety which causes trouble for me as I reflect on some traditional tenets of Christian faith through the centuries – things that simply do not square with a God whose essential defining nature is love. One of these is that Jesus was made a human sacrifice as a substitution to our getting what we deserve – that in order to feel OK about us God had to put Jesus to death, much as Abraham felt called to murder his only son Isaac. There are many other ways to understand Jesus' life and death, of course, but this substitutional view remains in our hymns and our history: that the omnipotent God somehow had to kill Jesus with excruciating pain so that it wouldn't be necessary to torture all the rest of us for eternity.

And there's my second problem: Hell. Jesus taught that God's love for us infinitely surpasses that of human parents for their own children. I have personally experienced a father's love for a child, and it is fierce. If God, whom Jesus called Abba, is like that only more so, it is utterly incomprehensible to me that God would create a place where some, let alone most of God's children would be condemned to excruciating torture that has no end. That's not a God you want to cuddle up to. That's not the quintessence of love.

Now add to this the view that traditional Christianity has shared with some other religions: that we have discovered the one and only possible path to God, and that - regardless of gender, race, nationality or social class - anyone who does not recognize Jesus as Lord and Savior is sadly misguided and is condemned by God to burn in Hell forever. Not only that, but within Christianity we have created many divisions, with each convinced that their own particular flavor is the one and only true way, and others who call themselves Christian are deluded. That sounds to me so very much like human nature, and not at all like the God and Jesus I know.

The Roman poet Sallust said of myth, "These things never were, but always are." My faith in God does not depend on whether there was actually a Garden of Eden or a flood that destroyed the entire world except for an ark full of animals. My commitment to and love for Jesus does not rest on whether he was literally born in Bethlehem and walked on water.

But this I do know:

That God who created the universe is very much alive and cares for us as individuals. God is as close to us as our breath, and not only hears us when we pray but knows our very thoughts before we even speak them. We are that much in God and God in us, so we should pray confidently and not lose heart.

I know that the essential nature of God is a love and acceptance so deep it defies our imagination, and that *agape* loving is what we are meant to be and to do for each other, our families, our neighbors, strangers, and even our enemies. It is the seed in us that contains a blueprint for maturity, as the acorn contains the oak tree.

I know this Way that Jesus taught and showed us is a sure and reliable path toward God. It is the way that I learned from my parents and from countless professors, Sunday school teachers, pastors and friends.

I know from scripture and from personal experience that when everything else is gone, God is still there. The things that the world tells us to seek and to trust – money, status, beauty, power, fame – are all ephemeral and unreliable, but God is a solid anchor and nothing, absolutely nothing can ever separate us from God's love, now or ever.

And I know that God is not done with us yet. The new covenant of which Jeremiah wrote and the kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke are already here, and are also coming. God is not limited to time or space. God as revealed to us in Jesus is with us and is also coming. This is the mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Jeremiah

²⁷The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. ²⁹In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." ³⁰But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. ³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalm 19

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

³There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

⁹the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

4In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Luke 18:1-8

18Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"