

offene kirche

elisabethen

Nadia Bolz Weber, Predigt/Talk anlässlich der theologischen Tagung «Frisch und Weise», Basel, 26.-28.4.2019

I am in a weird place with church these days. Not my former congregation, I am still very much in love with them, but like, Christianity in general. I recently spent a year and a half doing a deep dive into the messages the church has doled out about sex and the body and how those messages have harmed myself and my parishioners and between that and the fact that millions of white Christians in America turned their backs on real gospel values and voted for a woman-hating racist just for the golden promise that maybe I and all other women will eventually have our reproductive rights taken away, it's become harder for me to claim Christianity.

I know I am not alone. As I travel around the country, I hear countless stories from people about why they left the church. They left because when their mom finally left their abusive father the church told her she could no longer receive the Eucharist. They left because they had to choose between their sexuality and their faith. They left because they never heard anything in church about Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown or Sandra Bland. Not once have I heard someone say "I left the church because I just don't think that Jesus guy has much to offer" I suspect that most people don't leave the church because they don't believe in the Gospel anymore, I think they leave because they believe in the Gospel SO MUCH that they just cant stomach being part of an institution that says it's about Jesus but so clearly isn't.

So, I'm in a weird place with church these days. It's become harder for me to claim Christianity.

But sweetly, it has not become harder for me to claim Jesus.

So here's a timeline of me and Jesus and hymns to Jesus:

Beginning In utero

I am Christian because I was born orange and early and in need of three complete blood transfusions the first three days of my life. I wasn't supposed to be conceived, much less born alive.

Peggy, my mother, had RH factor: her blood developed anti-bodies against the blood of the babies growing inside of her. In the 1960s women with RH factor could usually count on having one healthy baby, but the anti-bodies grew with each subsequent birth. One baby was a blessing. Two was not likely or even suggested. Three wasn't really possible.

I was Dick and Peggy's 3rd baby, and she tells the story that when I was one day old, a particularly bossy nurse had told her that she shouldn't put me to the breast since she wouldn't want her milk to come in when Peggy probably won't have a baby to nurse. Then two days later when I had lived longer than expected and my mother was again breastfeeding me, the same nurse scolded her, "You're just going to make that baby sicker." To which Peggy, full of faith, prayer and pure will, lifted up her head and said, "that just doesn't sound right to me" while switching me from one breast to the other. So, I come by my faith and defiance honestly.

I was an unlikely baby girl born to a woman of faith who would sing *What a Friend We Have In Jesus* while I grew in her Kentucky belly. She told me once that she knows she couldn't survive without Jesus- so when she was carrying a baby no one thought would live, she sang to the one she couldn't live without.

Which is to say, songs to Jesus were my first language.

Age 5

I am Christian because, as a young girl, Jesus to me was the gentle good shepherd gathering baby lambs around him. He wore flowing blue robes and he spoke softly and walked through the woods singing while woodland creatures and toddlers gathered around him. A blue bird alighting on his hand – like a blend of St Francis, Snow White and Mr. Rogers. Never bothered by our noise or mess, this Jesus had arms that reached out to children. Children like me. I loved this Jesus. And *Jesus loved me, this I know.*

Age 13

I am Christian because during the hardest part of being the hardest age, I remember so many sermons about Jesus' suffering. The preacher in our church of Christ liked to go into horror movie level detail of exactly what crucifixion was like. But I didn't recoil from this as much as others did, because it was often the only time all week anyone was honest about what pain felt like. Jr. High is the time in my life when Jesus, the one who suffered the taunts and insults and spitting, and violence of the human crowd was especially near and dear to me.

See from his head his hands his feet...sorrow and love flow mingled down.

Age 19

I am Christian because when I was several months shy of 20 years old and living in a 2 bedroom apartment with 8 people, a motley blend of drug addicted activists and drug addled people who were not activists - I kept a journal and there in the self-serious pages of bad poetry and lofty ideals was a short list of my heroes: 1. Jesus, 2. Che Guevara.

I cared about justice and got arrested at protests and slept in a shantytown on the campus of CU Denver to fight the university's investments in apartheid south Africa, even though I wasn't technically a student there at the time. As a young adult who had walked away from Christianity, I took with me, tucked under my arm, the Jesus who entered the temple and disrupted the money changers and drove out all who sought to profit off the poor's desire to be holy. I kept the Jesus who wore a che guevarra t-shirt while overturning the spiritual payday loans table in the temple.

I secretly still loved him while in exile from his church, I loved him: God in a human body walking around like he didn't understand the rules.

I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.

Age 23 I am Christian because at my lowest point, my hollowed out shell days when I had no money, or place of my own, when I couldn't keep a job or keep sober, it was as if my wounds – whether those wounds were inflicted by the sin of others or by my own sin, were what kept me in motion – because I had to try and make up for them, or try and convince myself and everyone else that they weren't there or I had to try

and get them healed by the love and attention of other people even though none of that ever works but wow it sure does keep me in motion.

I mean, I think that if shame could be bottled as an energy source it could easily replace fossil fuels.

At this time in my life, I loved that Jesus was that guy who spent a very long time talking to the Samaritan woman at the well.

She'd had a few husbands, but we don't know why –Maybe she lured men into her trap, killed them after a year of marriage and just kept getting away with it. Who knows? All I know is that no matter if the wound was self-inflicted or inflicted by others or some combination of the two, she had a wound. Like we all do

I imagine her lost in her thoughts, the heat of the noon sun pressing down on her, sweat stinging her eyes and she makes out a figure sitting at the well and she takes a deep breath, braces herself, and makes sure to not make eye contact.

Which doesn't matter because for some reason Jesus starts talking to her. Not only does he chat with a woman (big no-no) not only does he chat with a woman who is an ethnic outsider (bigger no-no) not only does he chat with a woman who is an ethnic outsider who has had 5 husbands (there aren't enough nos for that one) but this is by far the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in all of the Gospels.

All of that is amazing but what struck me so deeply was how when he says to her that he offers her living water she gushes up to eternal life and She says *Give me this water so that I may not thirst* he then goes straight for her wound.

She says give me this living water and he asks about her husband.

He wasn't avoiding the subject he was avoiding the BS

Jesus says to me that if I want this eternal life then it starts with the truth – the naked truth of my original wound and my original beauty and every good and bad thing about me. I've heard it said that water finds its lowest point – living water finds my lowest point.

I am Christian because The Living water offered by Jesus Christ finds my lowest point. It finds my original wound. The thing that I spend so much energy trying to heal through all the insufficient ways – relationships, religion, success, more graduate degrees, more therapy, working out.

There is a balm in Giliad to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in gilead, to heal the sin sick soul.

Age 30

I am Christian because during the time in my life when I was an exhausted young mom, I spent so much time every day telling my children stories. And it was then that I realized how much I loved those weird stories Jesus told. His stories seemed like nonsense, but then they also seem like absolute truth at the same time.

Jesus, the one who said God's world is like Fathers who run out into the road to meet their no-good child like their no-goodness was no matter. I loved that one.

Because everything else in this bankrupt world feels like it's about worthiness. Am I thin enough and pretty enough to be worthy of desire? Is my heart pure enough for God? Am I smart enough to get good enough grades to get a job that's good enough to be seen as impressive? Are my children accomplished enough for me to feel like I

am a worthy parent. Children, for fuck sake. How functional and multi-talented our children are. Did enough people “like” something I posted on social media so that I feel worthy of taking up space on the planet? Have I shown the proper amount of correctly worded outrage to be worthy of the term “woke”? It’s fucking exhausting. All of it.

And every time I am exhausted by trying and failing or maybe not even trying at all, I remember that Jesus just kept saying that the things we think are so important rarely are: things like holding grudges and making judgements and hoarding wealth and being first.

Then Jesus got all weird one night at dinner and said this bread is his body and this wine is his blood and all of it is for forgiveness – all of it means our no-goodness is no matter.

Just as I am thou wilt receive will welcome, pardon, cleanse relieve.

Age 37

I am Christian because I loved Jesus for how bad he was at choosing his friends, because it made me think that maybe I could have been one. If I was granted one wish when I was in seminary it would have been to teleport back to those years in Palestine to be in his presence.... although honestly, I’d worry that this would freak him out since I would likely be the whitest, tallest woman he’d ever seen. That all seems so romantic, to be in the presence of Jesus back in the day.... but in reality, I can’t kid myself, I’d likely have been as distracted and moronic as the ones who surrounded him at the time.

But I love that.

Jesus will accept anyone – that guy loves a sinner and will offer forgiveness and mercy to like, basically anyone. Just look around. He’s got no taste.

So, I believe Jesus is more ok with my shortcomings than I am.

I’d love nothing more than to cut the raw footage of my life down to that highlight reel of just the wonderful moments when I managed to be my best most gigantic self. But in the editing room of my life, as I try and cut out the footage of when I thought only of myself, or I yelled at my kids or when I maybe lied about that one thing- as those bits of film fall to the cutting room floor – so I can whitewash the broken reality I live in, I can hear my Lord say “hold on. I can use that stuff”. It’s like I have a soul food God who makes spiritual ox tail soup and chitlins out of the stuff I’d rather throw out.

Age 40

As a church planter in the city amongst a heavily cynical population of very hurt people, I am Christian because Jesus is unafraid to touch the untouchable – to reach into the tombs we make our homes. I am Christian because Jesus knew that tombs are real but that they are not the most real thing. And as a Christian I confess that God comes close to those who are cast out. God comes close to mad men in graveyards. God comes close to Hagar cast out of Abraham’s house and gives her a well to nourish her child Ishmael from whom a great nation was promised. God comes close to the terrorized. And despite what we think is best, God brings God’s terrible mercy to even the demons. Remember when Jesus commanded the demons to leave the Garesene Demoniac, that the demons begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss but into a herd of pigs instead and Jesus *agreed*. What the hell? He

was merciful TO THE DEMONS. To the demons! That's super disturbing to me. And yet, if I'm honest I have to say that this is *exactly* the kind of saviour I need.

I mean, I may *want* a vigilante saviour. But what I *need* is a saviour who brings a swift, terrible mercy. What I want is a dividing saviour – who will draw the same lines I would draw...but what I need is a saviour who makes us one, a saviour, who lifted up, draws all people to himself. Not just the worthy. Not just the lovely, the likely and the lucky. All people. I need a saviour who commands me to love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me – pray for those whose hate blinds them to their own goodness *and* the worth and dignity of others. And I need a saviour this merciful because it is I who needs this much mercy.

Streams of mercy, never ceasing / Call for songs of loudest praise.

50 years old now – and I'm right back to the Jesus and Children thing.

I am Christian because when Jesus' dumbass disciples were arguing on the road about who was the greatest, he took a child and placed that child on his lap and said whoever welcomes a child such as that welcomes him.

It's difficult to remember that the sentimentality we as Westerners attach to childhood is a fairly recent thing. It really wasn't until the 18th century that children were viewed as innocent and angelic. These days our images of children come from Norman Rockwell paintings emblazoned in our minds or worse, those Anne Gettes photos...you know where she dresses up children as potted flowers and snow peas...well, we might conjure these kinds of sentimentalized images when we think of childhood, but it wasn't like that in the 1st century. In Jesus' time, there wasn't a growing market for adorableness like there is today.

Those children didn't exactly take bubble baths every night before being tucked into their hello kitty bed sheets and read Goodnight Moon. There was no sentimentality about childhood because childhood was actually a time of terror. Children in those days only really had value as replacement adults but until then they were more like mongrel dogs than they were beloved members of a family. And they weren't even really housebroken. They just kind of leaked everywhere and they died like, all the time. Children were dirty and useless and often unwanted and to teach his disciples about greatness and hospitality, Jesus puts not a chubby-faced angel, but THIS kind of child in the center, folds THIS kind of child into his arms and says when you welcome the likes of THIS child you welcome me.

I am Christian because it is the parts of me that differ very little from 1st century child which are welcomed into the arms of our loving savior. The parts of me that are like A useless child who has dried spot wiped across her unwashed face. A child who *can't* actually understand Jesus' teaching at all, who has nothing to offer, who no one else wants around, who no one else even notices is there. A child who has zero ability to make herself worthy. *These are the* very parts of me that Jesus folds into his arms and says *welcome*.

So, I am not Christian because Christians and church and Christianity are awesome, I am Christian because I am in need of Jesus, and Lord, to whom shall we go – you have the words of eternal life.

I mean, if the church getting things wrong and hurting people and not living up to the Gospel could destroy the Gospel, it would have been destroyed long before it was handed off to us to have our turn at getting it wrong.

We Christians have done our best to kill this thing and yet here it still is. The Church of Jesus Christ has survived papal corruption, the crusades, sectarianism, toothy TV preachers and clown ministry. And it will survive us too. The power of the death and resurrection of Jesus will not be nullified by the church's inability to live up to the promise of life and life abundant.

Because God's ability to make things right is always more powerful than our ability to get things wrong. Seriously, if I believed more in the church than I did in God's ability to redeem our crap I would have gotten out of the game long ago.

But here I am. I am Christian

because Jesus sought me when a stranger wondering from the fold of God. He to rescue me from danger interposed his precious blood.

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