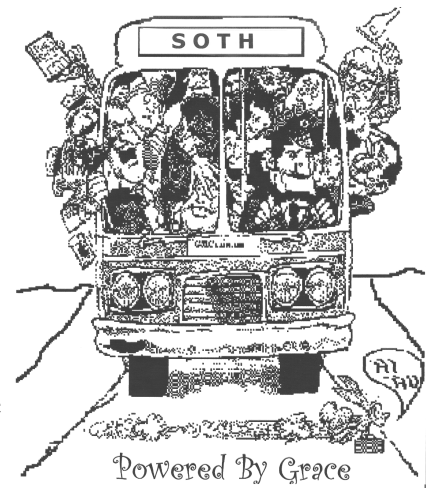


Beyond Belief to Relationship

Members of Shepherd of the Heart Community Church completed their viewing of the fall foliage from the top of Cottonwood Pass. The leaves were a spectacular sight. As the sun began to set, it became chilly and you could see your breath in the air. As members were waiting to board Powered By Grace, Hans Engelbertson said to Ole Haugvaldstad, "Is it cold enough for you?" Ole said, "You call dis cold? Dis is shirt sleeve vader. When ve lived in Minnesota it vas so cold dat da dogs vere frozen to da fire hydrants and Lena's teeth would keep us up at night chattering in da glass." Billy Swensen, eight year old son of Elmer Swensen looked up and said, "It that true Ole?" "Ya", Ole said, "And da chickens, day laid frozen eggs." Pastor Henry leaned over to Billy and said "hyperbole". Billy said, "What's that?" "Ole is speaking in hyperbole. It's kind of like saying 'I could eat a horse'", Henry said. "It means I am very hungry, but not that I could really eat a horse. Or, when Jesus said, 'If your eye causes you to sin, cut it out'. He doesn't mean to cut out your eye. He's just emphasizing a point." Then Ole said, "Ya, in da old country, ve ate some horses too. And Lars, he valked by Victoria's Secret and now he only has one eye." "OOKAY", Henry said, "Let's move along now." Soon everyone was seated and Powered By Grace roared as she began to descend Cottonwood Pass.



The conversation on the bus was very animated. Suddenly, everything went dark. All the lights in the bus went out, even the headlights. You could barely see the road. Hubert Lautenschlager, the Chairperson of the Council was driving. He yelled out, "What should I do now!!" You could see in the dim moonlight a sharp right hand switchback ahead with a steep cliff on the left. Joshua said, "Don't worry, you can see enough. Keep going. We'll be fine." Mrs. Hinklemeier yelled, "Are you nuts!! We're all going to die!! Hit the brakes!!" Children began screaming and babies crying. Hubert slowed down a little and easily made the turn. As his eyes got used to the dark he could see better. "I think we'll be OK", Hubert said, "I can see well enough". The bus became silent and you could sense fear. Then clouds moved over the moon. It became pitch black and no one could see anything. As Hubert began to slow down, Joshua said, "Now, let go of the steering wheel, Hubert, and trust. Can you trust Grace not only to power the bus, but steer it too? I know you believe, Hubert, but can you go beyond belief to trust? Can you let go of control and trust Grace?" Mrs. Hinklemeier was standing in the middle of the bus with her mouth open, unable to speak. She was white with fear and ready to collapse. Hubert looked at Pastor. "Faith is easy to talk about." Henry said, "But trust is where the rubber meets the road in our spiritual lives. Let's trust Grace. Let go of the steering wheel."

When Hubert let go of the steering wheel, Joseph Gilman caught Mrs. Hinklemeier as she collapsed. He sat her on a seat and as he looked up all the lights came back on. Powered By Grace was exactly where she should be on the road. You could sense the relief as everyone leaned back in their seats. As Hubert took hold of the steering wheel, he said to Henry, "When I let go, I felt a calming peace come over me even though I wasn't sure what would happen." "This was an important lesson." Henry said. Then he stood and spoke to all the members on the bus.

"When relegated to the mind, faith can become an inoculation for the real thing. It attempts to lock God up in the Bible and consigns the experience of God to the lives of people in biblical

times 2000 to 6000 years ago. This has little transformative power in the life of the believer, or in society. Sunday school faith of memorization and believing certain doctrines to be true must evolve into an adult *relationship with God*, which affects all aspects of one's life. When the lights went out on the bus, it required us to let go of control and enter into a relationship of trust with God. Letting go of the steering wheels of our lives is not easy, yet that is what we are called to do. Sometimes it is forced through illness, the death of loved ones, the loss of a job, divorce, or other events we would rather not happen. The hallmark of a maturing faith is trust and letting go of the need to control. It is also more peaceful, but, as we saw, it involves risk and the experience of vulnerability."

"So", Hans Engelbertson said, "Are you saying that a relationship with God is not the same as believing in God?" "That's right." Pastor said. "When the lights went out in the bus, or some other challenge happened in your personal life, something more than belief was necessary. A loving relationship of trust in God is needed where one is moved to put faith into action. This action may be to do nothing. Author and professor Marcus Borg puts it this way: *Rather than God being an article of belief, God becomes an experiential reality. The Jewish tradition in which Jesus stood speaks of persons who "know" God, and the Hebrew word for "know" is the same word used for sexual intercourse. God can be "known" in that direct and intimate way, not merely believed in...God is not to be thought of as a remote and transcendent creator far removed from this world, but imaged as all around us—as "The one in whom we live and move and have our being," as the book of Acts puts it... This has implications for how we think about the Christian life. It shifts the focus of the Christian life from believing in God to being in relationship with God.* Borg helps us understand what our Christian faith has said for years—God desires to be alive and active in the lives of people. In the scriptures, the followers of Christ were not 'believers' they were 'disciples'. A disciple is in deep relationship with the Master and begins to act and think like the Master. It entails far more than 'belief'. The mature Christian is called to be a disciple and may find themselves led by the Master into places previously unimagined.

Pastor went on to say, "Martin Luther used the term 'marriage' to refer to the relationship between the Christian and Christ. *In The Freedom of a Christian, a devotional pamphlet published in 1520, Luther said, 'Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom.'* With this marriage metaphor, Luther offers a vivid image of the loving relationship between Christ and the believer. But he also warns us not to take it too literally, explaining that 'human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage' between Christ and the believer. Luther's insistence that intimate union with Christ in faith is a reality for all believers is nothing short of groundbreaking. Instead of celebrating spiritual marriage as a higher calling for those who gave up earthly intimacy and family life, Luther described a relationship with Christ that was available to all Christians—regardless of their merit or status in life. He offered an understanding of a loving union with Christ that was fully compatible with one's life and responsibilities in the world. *In The Freedom of a Christian, Luther goes on to state: Now let faith come between them and sins, death and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. Luther called this a "happy exchange," happy for us because we're the ones who benefit from it. Christ isn't interested in choosing the spouse with the best dowry, but in how much he has to give to us. We bring all our garbage and dump it at the cross. Christ willingly pays off all our debt and then lovingly showers rich gifts upon us.*

Lloyd Lundberg had been listening closely and desired to progress in his relationship with Christ. He asked Pastor Henry, “How can I enter into this marriage that Luther refers to or the discipleship you mentioned?” Henry said, “Your appetite for union with Christ is itself God’s gift. Sometimes you may feel like a dry sponge thirsting for the consolation that only God can give. This is a gift to be thankful for and which many are oblivious to. Your spiritual journey began when you were born. You long to return to the God from which you came. When you were Baptized you were grasped by the infinitely strong hand of God who will never let you go. But, the struggles and anxieties of life soon cloud our spiritual destiny and we can forget who we really are—Spiritual beings in physical bodies seeking union with God.

The church is here to remind you who you really are and to nurture you along your spiritual journey. Rather than doing anything differently, do it with a renewed understanding. When you come to services, see that you are gathering with others thirsting for God who also need love and nurture. When you listen to the scriptures and sermon, do so looking for the gentle voice of God seeking to inspire and guide you. When you approach the altar for Holy Communion, realize in a deeper way that it is the living Christ you are receiving who seeks to forgive, nurture and strengthen you. When you sing and worship, realize God is the audience who delights in the praises of his people. When you serve others, realize you are Christ’s voice, hands and feet. In times when you feel inadequate or a failure, remember Christ was perceived by many to ‘fail’ on the cross and it became his greatest victory. Take time to be consciously alone with God in scripture reading, prayer and meditation. Remember, your appetite for God is God’s greatest gift. God longs to have intimacy with you and this is where you will find true and lasting peace.”

~ Henry