

\*\*There is an Irish parable  
About a young, brash, arrogant Lawyer  
That went a monastery

Where he found the oldest and wisest monk  
And he said  
“I want you to teach me  
the truths of the Christian faith

I want to understand the wisdom  
Of the God  
Of the Judea-Christian religion”

The monk says  
“Get out of here  
You are too young  
You are too arrogant  
Come back ten years  
When you grow up.”

The Lawyers says,  
“I am ready,  
I have studied and understand  
the law  
And logic  
And philosophy  
Surely, I can understand God.”

The monk laughs  
And says,

“okay, I will test you  
I will ask you one question  
And if you get it right I will teach you  
If not,  
Go away.”

“Two men come down a chimney  
One has soot in his face  
One doesn't  
Who wipes their eyes.”

The Lawyer says  
“that is easy,  
The one with soot,  
Of course.”

The Monks says,  
“no, don't be so stupid  
the without the soot  
He sees the soot on the other persons face  
And thinks he has it on his face  
Now, Go away  
you aren't ready.”

The lawyer pleads  
“Come on  
One more time  
I will get it  
I know I can”

The monk says fine

“Two men come down a chimney  
One has soot in his face  
One doesn't  
Who wipes their eyes.”

The lawyer says

“well, we just kind of went over this  
the one without the soot.”  
The monk says,  
“stop being so stupid  
You are wasting my time

How can you come down the chimney

With soot in your face  
And not wipe your eyes  
Go away.”

The lawyer pleads

“no, no, just give me one more chance,  
Please  
I know,  
Well I think I can do this.”

“Fine,” the monk says,

“Two men come down a chimney  
One has soot in his face  
One doesn't  
Who wipes their eyes.”

The lawyer perplexed says,  
    “I have no idea,”  
    And the monk says  
        “Good, now you can learn about God.”

\*\*See, the point of the parable,  
    Is to tell Christians  
        That some of the first things  
            You must give up  
                To be a Christian  
                    To know God

Are preconceived notions about God  
    And the idea  
        That there is one singular answer

The idea,  
    That we can just pin it down  
        In one answer  
            And then put it in this little box  
                And say that is my God

\*\*when Moses was in the wilderness  
    And he saw the burning bush  
        And was talking to God  
            And asks God’s name  
                And God says what we translate  
                    Yahweh

And we say that word means

I am who I am  
And that is not really correct

The Word is untranslatable  
And I don't mean untranslatable into English  
But untranslatable even in Hebrew

The word doesn't have vowels  
We don't know exactly what it means  
But best we can tell it means

I am who I am  
I am who I will be  
I am who I was  
I will be who I am  
I was who I will be

Get the point  
It can't be one answer  
It is many

And good Jewish scholars  
Say this is God  
Showing Moses you can't ever  
Completely understand me

I am too big for this world  
I am too big for your logic  
Don't put me in a box

\*\*That is why at the time of Jesus  
You had so many Rabbi's out there  
Because every Rabbi had a different understanding  
Of scripture

Every Rabbi would put their own flair  
Into what they thought  
The texts meant

One Rabbi would say  
I think that text means to wash your hands  
Another would say  
No, it means we should spiritual wash  
Ourselves

And another would say  
No, it means we wash our hands  
And our heads  
To go the extra mile

As long as they stayed  
Within the conversation of the scripture  
They could go back and forth  
And debate  
And dialogue

Because they understood  
That God was bigger  
Than one Rabbi  
(at least until Jesus came)

Than one understanding  
Than one singular answer

\*\*What we have to realize  
Is Christianity is a journey  
We are entering into  
a two thousand year old conversation

About a God that is bigger than  
Anything we can ever understand

So, you can't reduce it  
To some singular answer  
That makes me feel better  
About what I already believe

This conversation started long before us  
And martyrs gave their lives for it  
Wars were fought for it  
People died to bring this conversation  
To you and I

So we can't enter it lightly  
But we enter the conversation  
Respectfully  
Lovingly  
And with open minds  
And open hearts

Understanding

We can't pin down God  
To one singular answer

\*Look at denominations  
Every denomination in this world  
Things they are right

And if you ask me  
No denomination  
Is completely right  
And this coming from a Lutheran pastor

There are elements of truth  
In all denominations  
But then there are also things  
That aren't right  
Or are at least debatable

That is why  
You will never see me bashing another denomination  
I am right  
And you are wrong

Instead,  
I enter the conversation with them  
And say here is where we are coming from  
And I know what I believe  
And I know why I believe

But I want to hear where you are coming from

So we can find some common ground  
On which to do God's will

\*\*That is what I love about Upward  
Especially the Kettering one we are involved with  
Because there are three churches

Missouri Synod

ELCA

And Baptist

That on the national level

Don't have much dialogue

"Because disagree theological"

But on the local level

We can put that aside

To make sure kids come to know Christ

Because that is important

Somebody who has never been to church

Does not care about your denominations

Theological understanding

Of John 20

They want to know

If that God who created everything

Really loves me

If God

Really forgives ALL

My sins

\*\*maybe there is only one singular answer

That is Jesus

And then after there is so many questions

That real important thing

Is not the right answer

But journey to get there

The relationship with the almighty

Walking with God

\*\*There is an old story

About a young boy who has no money

But he wants to get his mom something special

For her birthday

He knows she loves the beach

So he walked a day's journey to the beach

To get some sand

And a day's journey to get back

In his haste to get home

And in the door

He dropped the jar full of sand

Outside in the dirt

He went in

Eyes full of tears

And told his mom what happened

She threw her arms around him  
And thanked him  
As she kissed his cheeks.

He said,  
“Mom, I dropped it,  
I have nothing to give you.

She said the gift was not  
But the journey

\*\*Maybe that is the same thing  
With Christianity

Maybe if we are truly following Jesus  
Jesus isn't the answer  
As we always say  
But rather Jesus is the question

The question that shakes our beliefs  
The question that causes us to look  
Back at our own lives and actions  
The question that causes us to realize  
I don't know it all  
But I can follow the one that does

\*\*Interestingly  
Paul very rarely uses the word saved  
Even though it gets translated the way

In our English Bibles

But Paul, more often than not, uses a participle

“Being save,”

Meaning there is never appoint when we arrive

When we are good enough

When we have it all nailed down

But we are always

In the process of coming

To know Jesus

Of coming to know God.

\*\*I love that first lesson

From Genesis

Because we are always looking

For the singular answer

But notice what God does

There is a wrestling match

Jacob is wrestling with God

And Jacob starts to prevail

So, he won't let go of God

And demands a blessing

And look at the blessing God gives him

This is a blessing,

Mind you,

He doesn't give him religion wrapped up

In a little ball

The blessing

God gives Jacob

Is to wrestle

To wrestle with people

To wrestle with God

To wrestle with himself

Maybe

We need to reclaim that blessing

And enter the conversation

To grow closer to God

\*A friend of mine

Who is a pastor a Methodist pastor  
called me

Almost a year ago

And said, "I am thinking about  
leaving the ministry."

And said I, "good"

Not the answer he expected

Mind you

But as we talked,

I told him the pastors who knew it all

Who feel an entitlement to being a pastor

Always in the collar to show you who they are

They have to be "pastor so and so"

They scare me

It is the pastor's who struggle

Who wrestle

Who aren't always sure

They are even suppose to be representing God

In this manner

Those are the ones I trust the most

Because in their struggle

They are going back to God

They are seeking

Not an answer

But a wisdom

A fresh understanding

\*\*Rob Bell,

A pretty famous Pastor and Author

From up in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Shares in his book,

“Velvet Elvis”

And think about that for just a moment

Why do you think he would title a religious book

“Velvet Elvis”

Because what if we would have stopped

With the Velvet Elvis

What if we would have said

“oh, that is it,

No need to paint anymore  
That is perfect.”

We would all have velvet Elvis paintings  
In our house right now  
But luckily we said  
That is part of the conversation  
Not the conversation

And believe it or not  
The Velvet Elvis  
Is part of the same conversation  
As the Sistine Chapel

It is all part of the conversation  
Where it ends  
Only God knows

\*\*But in his book,  
Rob says  
That we have to be careful of making  
Pillars of our beliefs  
Pillars of faith

Because,  
What happens  
If I pull the center out of a pillar  
The rest falls

So soon,

I have to protect my pillar  
So it doesn't fall

I conserve what I already believe  
So that my pillar doesn't fall

And in my protecting my pillar  
I sometimes I stop listening to God  
I stop listening to the conversation  
I only want to keep what I already believe  
From tumbling down around me

That is where the Jews were  
When Jesus came  
That is why they couldn't listen to him  
Even though some of them knew he was right

Because not only would he have pulled  
Their beliefs down  
But if they would have listened to him  
He would have pulled the fabric  
Of the whole society they worked  
So hard to keep  
down around them

maybe instead of pillars  
which are parts of walls  
that keep people out

We need to have springs of faith

Springs are strong  
They are durable  
But they have some give  
And some bounce

\*\*I love our gospel lesson  
The Parable of the prodigal son  
And not for the reason  
Many other Christians love it

I like it because of how it ends

\*\*I don't know about you,  
But I am not a fan of movies  
That everything ends well  
He saves the day  
He gets the girl  
And all is right with the world

Because if you look around  
That isn't the world  
In which we live

\*\*Look at the end of this parable  
Jesus doesn't wrap this parable  
Up for us in some little ball  
To make us all feel well

Look how this parable end  
It doesn't end with the oldest son

Saying  
“you are right dad,  
I am a jerk,  
Lets go get a beer.”

It doesn't end  
The dad says  
This brother of yours was lost  
But now he is found

And it ends  
We don't if the eldest son comes to the party  
We don't what happens  
After that point

The only thing we know  
Is the God figure  
The father is in the middle  
Loving each of them  
Working for reconcilliation

And I think Jesus initially does that  
To show us  
Sometimes life doesn't just wrap up  
In a neat little ball

\*\*I guess maybe that is the trick  
And the goal of Christianity  
To enter the conversation  
Knowing that other than Jesus

There is no one singular answer

And to live in that tension  
Of so many answers  
So many questions  
So many thoughts  
So many beliefs

And just continuing to love each other  
And work together for the common good  
Of all mankind

See consumerism  
Has killed the conversation in the church  
If we don't get what we want  
Or hear what we want to hear  
We just go somewhere else

Instead of going into that conversation  
Where we can come to a great knowledge  
Of God  
And of each  
Which will only make us grow stronger

\*\*Our society says it has to be either/or  
Either you do this  
Or you are that

Luther said,  
We are both and

We are never saint or sinner  
But saint and sinner  
At the same time

That is something that is hard  
For us to wrap our western minds around  
Both/and  
But maybe we need to reclaim that  
From Luther

\*\*Maybe we can live in the tension  
Of both/and  
Is giving up the quest  
For one singular answer

realizing our God is huge  
But there is plenty of room  
In the shadow of the cross.