

When Joan was a little girl she was diagnosed with extreme near-sightedness and fitted with eyeglasses. This past month, she went to Dan Whipple, our resident ophthalmologist, who did something to the surface of her eyes involving a hammer and chisel and now she can see for the first time in forty years and boy, is she mad. All these years I've been telling her I was handsome, and now the truth is out. The medicine wore off, the fuzziness went away, she looked at me and said, "You've got to be kidding."

"People change," I told her. "I've changed."

We detoured for a few weeks to focus on other things, but I'd like for us to return to thinking about the two Christianities. We've talked about the traditional assertions of Christianity—that we were born into sin, that God kept track of us, either to punish our failures or reward our virtues, that Christianity was the only way to God, that the Bible was written by God, given to the Church, and has remained protected from error for thousands of years. We were taught that believing those things was what it meant to be Christian. But more and more Christians are finding those distinctions unhelpful. Not only do they defy reason, they are inconsistent with our experience of a loving God. And so we've changed.

This change has not been easy. I was speaking with a bright, articulate woman this past week, and she confessed to feelings of great fear as she moved from her childhood faith to a faith more consistent with her experience of God. Her transition wasn't helped by her parents, who told her she was going to hell.

I don't wish to vilify traditional Christianity. It did many wonderful things—it fed the hungry, educated people, worked for justice, helped the poor—and those are customs we want to continue. But for all its virtues, traditional Christianity was often inhospitable to sincere questioning and had a knack for making good people feel guilty for thinking differently. For that, and other reasons, more and more thoughtful people are leaving the Church than are joining it.

It is dreadful when people are forced to leave the Church because their understanding of God is more expansive than the Church will permit.

When I began pastoring, the yearly meeting had me sign a piece of paper saying I would always agree with the theology expressed in *Faith and Practice*. I'd forgotten all about it, but last summer when the yearly meeting started dogging me about my theology, they dredged up that document, showed it to me, and said, "You promised not to change."

When I signed that paper, I was 23 years old, had not attended college or seminary, had not read widely, had not been exposed to a variety of thought. That anyone should be asked to sign a document saying their views of God will never change is foolish. Don't we want people to read and study and be in Christian community precisely so their understanding of God will change? It was foolish of the yearly meeting to ask me to sign

that document, it was foolish of me to sign it. But I wanted to be a pastor. Now, all these years later, I have changed, and my beliefs about God have changed.

Ironically, they don't want me to be a pastor because my views have changed. But if they hadn't changed, I couldn't have remained a pastor. Once you've sailed the globe, you can't keep saying the earth is flat. My former beliefs couldn't be sustained, so I had to choose between rejecting God altogether, or re-examining what I'd been taught about God and allowing my beliefs about God to change.

As I was struggling with this, and by the way, I still wrestle with it, I was blessed to meet many thoughtful people who helped me negotiate the passage out of my childhood faith into a more sustainable, meaningful faith. It changed my life! It opened up my world, expanded my mind and soul, and brought me much joy. I can't imagine going back to my childhood faith.

Unfortunately, while I was changing, our yearly meeting was growing more authoritarian and is now like those parents who insist their children make the same choices they've made. But what happens when you insist your teenage or adult children make the same choices you've made? They either distance themselves, they leave, physically or emotionally. Or they go along, but grudgingly and without any sense of joy. The family theme is one of obedience and compulsion.

All of this has made me think about the two most common approaches in our relationship with God. The first approach is to arrive at an understanding of God as soon as possible, embrace a set of beliefs early in our spiritual journeys, and never change them. This happens often with many people. While such a faith isn't very compelling and is at risk of falling apart when confronted by the inevitable complexities of life, there is a certain comfort to it that many people find attractive. That's one approach to God. We arrive early at certain beliefs, grab onto them, and keep them as long as we can, usually until some crisis forces us to re-consider them, but then we're angry and we feel as if God has betrayed us. We've all met folks whose religious beliefs caused them to feel betrayed by God when something bad happened to them. "How could God do this to me? God was supposed to take care of me." They feel God has violated their contract and they become angry and bitter, and sometimes they never get over it.

But there is another approach to God which involves holding on to our beliefs a little more loosely, so we can more easily lay them aside when they're no longer helpful and pick up something else. And let me use the analogy of pioneer travel to help us understand that approach. Put on your coonskin caps or bonnets and imagine we're in our covered wagons, traveling along, looking for somewhere to live, and we come upon a small valley. It has everything we need to live. It is not the most beautiful place, but neither is it unsightly. It is adequate for our purposes. But we resist the temptation to put down roots and stay forever. We don't start digging a basement and cutting trees for a house. We might pause in that valley and rest. We might build a lean-to and stay through the winter, particularly if we don't have the physical or emotional strength to go

further, but always in the backs of our minds is the vision of a more lovely land over the horizon. So as soon as we're rested, we hitch up the oxen and press on.

The first approach to God says, "This understanding of God was good enough for my parents, pastor and Sunday school teacher, so I'm going to stay right here."

The second approach says, "There is much beauty and mystery and goodness in life. God is infinitely more than I can imagine. Life is difficult, but it also has the potential for much joy. I'm going to move forward and discover as much of it as I can."

Now the church folk who write the creeds and the historical declarations and sit on the Great Boards of Orthodoxy are always about getting the rest of us to stay in the valley. "Oh, this is best we can do. We must stay here. This is the only place we can live." Then they start making rules, requiring us to stay in that one theological spot, wanting us to sign papers to that effect. But all the time they're doing that, we're wanting to see the view from the mountains. We have the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual energy necessary for such a journey and we want to take it. We want to pack our bags, read the maps, and take a trip!

And those maps are helpful—the doctrines, the Scriptures, the traditions. We don't want to discard those. But neither do we want to be so busy studying them we miss the beauty of the journey. There might be a side road no one has ever mapped, that will take us through the most beautiful terrain. And, you know, rivers change their courses and maps become outdated, so it's good to acquaint ourselves with the maps, but it also pays to be open to alternative routes and possibilities.

When I received my first Bible, I loved reading the stories about Jesus, and especially enjoyed looking at the maps in the back. If you've ever studied a map of the Bible lands, you know the distance from Egypt to Israel isn't that far. But it took Moses and the Israelites forty years to get from one to the other. Why so long? Perhaps that was God's way of helping people understand that it wasn't always wise to settle down in the first place you come to.

I remember when I came home from my first date. I'd had a terrible time and was worried I was going to have to marry the girl. Not because we'd done anything necessitating marriage, but because I thought that's how dating worked. You went on a first date, then on a second date, then in a few years you got married. And I didn't want to marry that girl! So I was anxious, and when my parents asked me why, I told them I didn't want to get married. My mother said, "You don't have to marry the first person you date." I was so relieved to learn I wasn't bound to my first romantic interest. Our first ideas, our first jobs, our first relationships, our first theologies, our first impressions, are certainly important and can be helpful, but we need to grow. Because people change. Our world changes. Our lives change. Our perceptions of God change. So we stay open to growth and movement and God's Spirit, which is always urging us forward, and we keep the oxen hitched.