WhyChristian? Treasure Buried in the (Mine)field of Religion

There’s a secret FB support group for moms of LGBTQ kids who are in religious settings that don’t support them. Called Serendipitydoodah Moms, 2K strong. Emily and I have done some FBLive sessions for these moms and learned that many couldn’t find any church home that would support their love of God and their love for their LGBTQ kids. So, we invited anyone interested to be part of BOF through an online connection—catch our services via live stream or podcast and be part of a monthly FB live group that we’re going to host with them.

Over 100 have signed up and some are tuning in right now. Here’s how one of the moms introduced herself: “Since I live on a boat called Grateful in the blue ocean, I am feeling so eager to join this community. The churches in the small islands of the West Indies for the most part reject, vocally, anything remotely considered "gay." I hope my involvement here will give me strength and grace to demonstrate love for all God’s children.” [Are you catching that? This mom wants to be an ally in a culture that punishes LGBTQ allies.]

Maybe we could mug for the video and give these moms a shout out: (Welcome Momma Bears!)

These moms represent a much broader phenomenon that inspired series, WhyChrisian? How do we find faith when the religious landscape can be so treacherous for so many people?

LET’S START WITH A STORY FROM KATHLEEN ROEDER
Jesus told a little parable in Matthew 13: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

Think of Jesus as a treasure buried in all sort of different fields. One of the main fields is called religion. For too many, religion is a minefield. Back in my old charismatic community days (more on that soon) we used to encounter various “prophets”—one was a guy named Bob Jones, from Ozarks. [Describe method.] His words for me: “Well looky here! This one has an anointing! [Don’t be impressed everyone had an anointing.] This is one who walks as thru a minefield at midnight. [Thought: that does not sound appealing!]

MV: Exclusion & Embrace. Field of religion too often defined by exclusion while treasure buried in field is about embrace.

**Oldest buddy Marc (Headley) here today**—refugee from his home in Florida. Marc’s family one of first Jewish families to move into our NW Detroit neighborhood. Some neighbors who told their kids to stay away from these Jewish kids in our all white, all Gentile 1950’s Detroit neighborhood. Bigotry of that time didn’t think to hide behind euphemisms like the “alt-right”

Marc and I lost touch for decades and reconnected a few years ago. What a blessing! Marc reminded me that my late wife Nancy and I paid him a visit in Toronto when we were new Jesus freaks—doing our best to pry him loose from his atheism.

So today I thought I’d tell my sojourn through the minefield story.

If you know my story may recall that my high-school girlfriend, Nancy Rozell, and I got married when we were 18—for usual reason teenagers got married,
“unplanned pregnancy.” I don’t think we felt much guilt about that pregnancy, but we felt a lot of shame. 1970—everyone knew teenagers might have sex, but contraception hard to obtain, and still lots of social stigma for being “pregnant of out wedlock.” All but couple of friends evaporated. One of the friends who didn’t was Brian. Brian was part of early movement called Jesus People. Instead of distancing, he reached out to us. Earliest days of Jesus movement: counter cultural left leaning anti-war hippies unconnected from most institutional religion: a perfect fit for us. All about connecting to Jesus as their path to God (JC SUPERSTAR/GODSPELL)

What Brian and his girlfriend Barb did was embrace us. And they modeled possibility of a personal connection with God. (First time I heard Brian pray out loud at table—like God was an old friend)

So much religion today—especially since rise of Religious Right in late 1970’s—is a kind of moral crusade. First iteration of RR called “Moral Majority.” Name says it all. Religious Right is an alliance between RC & Evangelicals (2 largest groups in American Christianity). Has essentially branded American Christianity as a Moral Crusade—asserting political power wherever possible.

That had nothing to do with my early experience of Jesus. What I inhaled in early 1970’s was a faith of embrace, not exclusion. In early years, I can’t recall anyone railing against homosexuality or any other hot buttons—it was a movement of spiritual connection not moral crusading.

Our first church near downtown Detroit: Messiah Lutheran a unique community that took in hippie Jesus freaks, neighborhood people, suburbanites who drove in for the great preaching, and down andouters from the Cass corridor. I remember mid-week Bible studies with at least one
inebriated participant. This was as inclusive a community as I can remember and it had an imprinting impact on my brand-new faith.

Pastor had a huge impact on my dad—who suffered undiagnosed PTSD from WW2. In 1972 my dad took a massive overdose—landed in ICU, body systems shutting down...Dick Bieber from Messiah Church came to visit while me and another new Jesus freak were praying in the hospital chapel. Dick was talking to my dad in the coma. Nurse said, “Sorry pastor but he can’t hear a word you’re saying.” As Dick started to leave my dad piped up, “Thanks for coming Dick!” Doctors overhead on rounds saying it was “the closest thing to witchcraft” they’d ever seen.

Church embraced my often irascible father who found a saving faith there...literally saved his life. I heard a lot about Jesus in that church, but not a peep of moral majority talk.

By 1973, Nancy and I got involved in a charismatic community called The Word of God here in town. Much like Community Kathleen grew up in...Epicenter of global renewal movement called Catholic Charismatic Renewal. At height 3K people including kids. It was intense-intentional and charismatic community. Lots of people living communally (60 single people...some of those years with common finances)

Especially at first there was a lot of embrace in that community. It’s where I learned to share more vulnerably with others—offer support and seek help for things I was struggling with. Learned how to work out interpersonal conflicts directly.

And lots of opportunity to try out charismatic-Pentecostal God experience. I spoke in tongues, learned to listen to Spirit (more focus on the Spirit in this
group, maybe less on Jesus). I got slain in the Spirit, danced in the Spirit (be happy you didn’t see that.) [Men’s retreat—take shirts off and raise a loud shout!]

**Very strange mix of Pentecostal but also highly educated:** main leaders were Catholic-Intellectual-Fundamentalist. It had the attention of church hierarchy—visits bishops & cardinals...in early years focus of national-international religious buzz.

But over time, this moral crusade thing, with its exclusionary impulse crept in. Part of a rising reaction to excesses of the cultural revolution of 1960’s—drug, sex, rock & roll. People in the community throwing out their Rolling Stones albums. Talk of the dangers of Secular Humanism and Feminism.

**Just to give you a clue:** female leaders (only leaders for other women, not men) were called “handmaids.” I know. Sounds kind of creepy now. I have an inglorious past. But wait, there’s more.

I rose in ranks of leadership in this community and was eventually the equivalent of “ordained.” Nancy’s dad came to the ceremony. Pioneer auditorium filled with loud charismatic singing-praying. Young guys right behind me and my father-in-law (a cigarette smoking, martini drinking GM guy out of Mad Max). They were having a lot of fun praying very loudly in tongues for an extended period. Stan was shell-shocked. After service and reception, I’m walking Stan back to his car when he gave me best compliment I’ve ever received: “I don’t know what the hell you’re doing with your life, but you have created a beautiful family.”
As I got deeper into leadership evidence began to accumulate that there was lots of bad fruit from this reactive approach. (Early wake up moment: Talk with Maja re women pastors.)

By late 80’s a group of leaders—after a couple of years of serious soul searching—made painful decision that we needed to take responsibility for this bad fruit and publically repent. Which we did. I was tasked with giving that talk to packed auditorium at Pioneer HS with press in attendance. Searing experience. Seeing the write up-in A2 Observer was the worst.

You don’t plan your life to be the guy giving that talk. It just happens. I stumbled into an era of intense religious ferment. That ferment—that began as the Jesus movement, slowly got taken over by the powers that animate so much fear-based/reactive Christianity. The thing that saved my soul through all that was this profound experience of coming to see that I was wrong, when I thought I was so right.

As a matter of discernment, I’ve learned not to trust that “I’m right” feeling. The feeling I trust is the “I’m loved” feeling.

Part of reason I got swept along as W/G shifted from counter-cultural to counter-counter-cultural mode, from embrace to more and more exclusion (the fruit of that “I’m right” feeling) ...is blinding power of privilege. The thing was led by (mostly white) males and I was a white male. It’s hard to see the injustice of a system that you are the beneficiary of.

In the religious sphere the feeling of being right is like crack cocaine—addictive fake joy...but it slowly impedes your ability to experience true joy.
Real joy has nothing to do with being right and everything to do with being loved.

**To me, that’s the Jesus treasure—not being right, being loved.**

For me, the 1990’s was a period of recovery from profound religious disillusionment. Separating the good from the bad of intense experience is a lot of hard work and it took time.

When you’re game for intense spiritual experience like I was, you end up doing a lot of things that are 1 part genuine and 9 parts foolishness. But genuine is like a sweet perfume whose scent you can’t shake. And the essence of that scent has nothing to do with feeling right and everything to do with feeling loved.

That openness to spiritual experience—knowing that the nub of it was not feeling of being right but feeling of being loved—came in handy when it was time for me to rethink LGBTQ.

Long story told elsewhere, but the church I led as part of Vineyard. Just before I became a national leader in VUSA, I became email friends with a old mystic lady, Phyllis Tickle—who unbeknownst to be at first was a fierce LGBTQ ally.

Eventually visited her mostly gay church in Memphis. I had been prepared for that visit by a powerful spiritual experience. CAVE.

**ON BEING LIKED IMAGE**

**QUIET REFLECTION**
Lots of voices in our heads—internalized voices of people around us. Voices that purport to be God in our heads. Sorting out the real voice from pretend voices is heart of spirituality.

What if the reliable voice of God in our heads is the one that says, simply: *I’m here. I’m not going away. I’m for you. Get used to being liked. I’ve got plenty of time.*