

Joel Hildebrand said “Very few people do anything creative after the age of 35. The reason is that very few people do anything creative before the age of 35. I enjoy reading clever sayings like that because there is almost always some truth in them. It is however, important to keep in mind that it is very unlikely that the sayings are total truth. I cut them out and file them somewhere; I’m not sure where, and therefore rarely ever see them again. I am also pretty selective in which sayings I enjoy while others have little or no meaning for me, but they could be very interesting and even important to other people.

Our personal experiences in life, the important people we have been in contact with are significant factors in how we accept and understand information and events in our lives. That suggests to me an important background for enjoying or being indifferent to clever sayings.

The same can probably be said about our understanding of the Bible. Those same experiences and people will be factors in how we understand the words of the Bible. For many Episcopalians who have bought into our Church’s basis of faith of Scripture, tradition, and reason, it also seems reasonable that the Prophets and scribes were similarly affected. They received the “Word of the Lord” and understood it through their own experiences and influences. The Episcopal Church says “We call them (Holy Scriptures) the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible”. That is on page 853 of the Book of Common Prayer.

I don’t question that the Prophets and scribes were inspired but was their inspiration a true understanding of God’s message. What was the true message of God in the Old testament story of Lot protecting his visitors from a mob by offering his virgin daughters to them? What is the true message in psalm 68, verses 21-23 when it says “God shall crush the heads of his enemies and the hairy scalps of those who go on still with their wickedness.” The Lord said “ I will bring back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea; that your foot may be dipped in blood. The tongues of your dogs in the blood of your enemies.

In Exodus it says if you violate the Sabbath you should be stoned to death. In Leviticus it says if you don’t honor your father and mother you should be stoned to death. With my background and experiences I can read those passages and see something different, a different vision of the nature of God. That we honor the Sabbath with the simple act of going to church. It has been easy to honor my father and mother because I grew up in a loving and supportive family, not one of abuse. And maybe the Lot story is like a parable which points out that we will have times of difficulty and it is appropriate and good to make sacrifices. There is scripture that says “go into the country, kill all the men, women and children and all their cattle and sheep and there is scripture that says “ Blessed are the peacemakers.”

I believe that for many of us, through our relationships and experiences, we develop our own personal concept, consciously or unconsciously, of the nature of God. For some that might be a loving, forgiving and patient God while others believe God can be angry, loving and even jealous if we don’t worship in the right way.

Our concept of the nature of God is very likely to influence how we are inspired by the Word of God whether that’s before or after age 35.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses some strong critical statements. He said to Peter "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things". Or as the Revised Standard Version of the bible we were using "You are not on the side of God, but of men". In last weeks Gospel reading Jesus said "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church". I can't help but believe that the Roman Catholic Church finds last weeks Gospel reading significantly more inspired by God than this week's Gospel while Episcopalians probably reverse that order. What I do see in today's Gospel is that Peter who has lived as a companion to the Living God, who has heard his words directly from his lips, who has seen how he interacts and treats people, still has trouble understanding the inspired Word of God. Are we likely to be better at it than he was?

In contrast to the strong language of the Gospel, we have Paul's letter to the Romans. "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord." Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live in harmony, live peaceably, never avenge yourself.

For the person who writes Cliff Notes for Christians, or Christianity for Dummies, I hope they pay close attention to this part of Paul's letter to the Romans. I may be wrong but I believe that Paul had a good understanding of the inspired Word of God. But that interpretation comes from my believing that the nature of God is loving, forgiving and patient. I am also influenced by the fact that he is the only writer of New Testament scripture who actually knew people who knew Jesus.

The Anglican Church and our Episcopal Church is struggling today from what appears to be different ways we have been inspired by the Word of God. The Anglican Communion, including the Episcopal Church has a long history of being able to be one church with many points of view. Robin Williams made that point with one of those clever sayings. "Whatever you believe, there is probably at least one other Episcopalian that agrees with you". If you think there is some truth in what he says, think about how much diversity there is among the more than 80 million Anglicans around the world.

The Rev. Bradley Pace, transitional deacon at Trinity Church in Wheaton, Il. and probably under age 35, made an important point on this issue of different points of view. Each group wants to make their point of view the right orthodoxy (the right belief). He said: "But should I be so arrogant as to insist that everyone believe exactly the same things about God or the Bible or the Holy Eucharist as I do? And can I in good conscience say that those who don't agree with me aren't real Christians even though they are trying to make sense of "the mind of God" as best they can? Is it really fair to say that the Episcopal Church, because it disagrees with much of the Anglican Communion (although on important and fundamental issues) is not truly Christian"? He continued "so long as we are trying our best—trying to love God and our neighbor; trying to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers; trying to live faithfully according to our collective insights from Scripture, tradition, and reason—aren't we being Episcopalians and Christians?"

It is my hope that we of the Anglican Communion can be a little more creative both before and after age 35.