

"The Well-Worn Path"  
By Vince Amlin  
From "The Road Less Traveled"  
May 30, 2010

In her book, *A People's History of Christianity*, Diana Butler Bass suggests that we live in a time of spiritual amnesia. Not unlike the author of our scripture today who mourns that, "the people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them," Bass believes that Westerners of many faith traditions, and especially Western Christians, have lost track of their history. She tells the story of a lecture she gave on the medieval church and the Crusades in which she was explaining how, in 1095, Pope Urban II launched a war against Muslims, when one of her students, anxious to pin the whole thing on the Catholics asked, "What did the Protestants say about this?" And Bass explained that there were no Protestants in 1095; the Protestant Reformation wouldn't happen for over 400 years.

Perhaps that is also news to you, perhaps you, like me, are stuck on the fact that there were at least two popes named Urban, and the point of Bass' story is that if so, you are not alone. She claims that "we inhabit a posttraditional world- a world of broken memory- in which some tell history badly, others do not know it at all, and still others use history to manipulate society to their own ends." In these words, we can begin to comprehend the danger which lies in such spiritual amnesia: when one group relinquishes its grip on history, other groups are free to take full ownership and to tell the stories of history in whatever ways they choose.

In a book on evangelism, UCC theologian, Walter Brueggemann makes a similar point as he compares progressive Christianity's relationship with evangelism to liberals' relationship with the American flag. Brueggemann argues that many liberals have difficulty claiming the flag as their own symbol because it has become so closely associated with conservative ideals. Likewise, he suggests that many progressive Christians have spurned the concept of evangelism because it has become so closely tied to a certain kind of high-pressure pitch to get saved. The book was written in 1993, but the situation has only grown worse in the interim, since now the word "evangelical" has become synonymous with one kind of Christian. But "evangelism," at its core, means "sharing good news" a task which seems appropriate for all people of faith. Brueggemann is not interested in continuing the liberal/ conservative divide. Instead, he says that both liberals and conservatives suffer when one group relinquishes its grasp on a historic symbol or concept. This is certainly true of the way that progressives have claimed sole ownership of the concept of justice, and many conservatives have relinquished their hold on that ideal and the history to which it connects them. When the symbols of faith become one-dimensional they are no longer symbols. They lose their richness and their complexity and become tools.

Of course, not every group chooses spiritual amnesia. Many minority groups have such memory loss forced upon them by a majority which defines history in a way that excludes them. LGBT persons, racial and ethnic minorities, those with mental illnesses, and those with physical disabilities have all been relegated to the spiritual road less traveled, far from what has been defined as the well worn path. Women too,

belong in this category. This week in the small group I have been leading on the Song of Songs, a book from the Hebrew Bible, I asked the group if they knew any feminine images for God in the Bible. The general consensus was that we all hoped there might be one or two in there, but no one was quite sure where to look. Luckily I knew the question beforehand, so I could Google it. We explored for 5 or 10 minutes some of those feminine images of God which appear throughout the Bible but which we rarely use or hear. We read in Deuteronomy, and Isaiah of God giving birth and holding Israel in her womb. We read of God as mother and as midwife in the prophets and the Psalms. We read of God as a mother eagle hovering over her nest and of God as a fierce she-bear guarding her cubs. (They didn't like it when I said that was an image of the Sarah Palin God.) We learned that the Hebrew word for spirit is feminine, and that Jesus compares himself with a mother hen, who longs to take Jerusalem under her wings. These examples are not drawn from some less-traveled spiritual pathway. They are not from the Gnostic gospels, or a modern interpretation of the Bible, or the latest Dan Brown novel but are found in the canonical scriptures. Still, their witness has been systematically denied as a way of reinforcing unequal relationships between men and women. And many of us may have become convinced that to understand God as Mother and Father was something novel and perhaps something to be a little sheepish about when we told our friends or family about the way we say the Lord's Prayer.

And one need not have been subjected to such overt revisionist history to know what it means to be placed on the Road Less Traveled. Many of us come from religious situations in which we have been told that our faith, or our beliefs, or our practices are out of bounds. Many of us have internalized these attitudes, believing that the biblical "experts" with whom we grew up must have been right about us or about our beliefs. "If that's what they say evangelism is, I guess they're right. If that's what they say prayer is; if that's what they say faith is; if that's what they say love is...they can keep it.

But the witness of the historical moments we have heard today, of many other moments too numerous to mention, of the Bible, and of the still speaking God in the voices of our sisters and brothers is that the values of love and justice and peace and generosity- which I believe we strive to preach and live here- those values lie, not on some spiritual backroad or byway, but on a well-worn path through history. We are not alone, but are joined by Origen, and Julian of Norwich, and Gotthold Lessing, and Dr. King, and many others named and unnamed. Indeed, the witness of faith is that the well-worn path is not ours, but God's; it was not packed down by the march of feet over time, but cleared at one fell swoop by the God who speaks love into life and declares it good.

I believe that we have a choice about whether to see ourselves on that "Road Less Traveled" or instead to reclaim the history of faith as our own, as God's own, and recognize in our faith the "Well-worn Path." It is a difficult choice. On one hand, we may still hear the voices from our past telling us we do not belong or that God's path does not include us. We may even hear that tension or anxiety in our own church compact. "We join...To learn from our religious heritage, YET to grow by seeking new dimensions of truth." Not AND, but YET. It could suggest that perhaps the truth we speak here about inclusion, and love, and grace is somehow not in line with the history of the people of God. And it is easy to see where we got that idea in a world in which people of all faiths practice violence, and bigotry, and hatred. It is easy to see why we would be

tempted by descriptions of Jews and Muslims and Christians on the nightly news to say, "That's not me. I'm something different. I'm something new."

But I believe that if we take the time to learn and reclaim that history, to explore that path we will know that "yet" as an "and," and we will find in the historical strands of faith a thread of that God we know in many ways and by many names winding through all existence and all time.

Yet, to choose the well-worn path may be even more difficult because it means walking alongside those with whom we do not agree or even those who excluded us in the first place. The road less traveled has a lot less traffic. It can become a comfortable, even an attractive road. There is a poster in the men's restroom here at UCG which reminds me of this. For those for whom that is a road not taken, I'll explain. In the bathroom outside the main office is a poster in which hundreds of sheep are running off a cliff and tumbling down out of frame. A single sheep is headed in the opposite direction, politely saying, "Excusé moi! Excusé moi!" To this poster someone has taped a Far Side comic on a similar theme, in which a group of lemmings—and in case you're wondering, a group of lemmings is apparently called a "slice"—in which a slice of lemmings is headed into the sea, but one is wearing an inner tube and snorkel. Being on the road less traveled can become an important part of our identity, a badge of distinction which we may be loath to let go.

To walk the well-worn path is to acknowledge that, at our core, we are all sheep and even that we may all be cluelessly headed off the side of a cliff. It means recognizing our common humanity and our common need of one another. It may be easy to hear that the people on the other side need us and will be enriched by our presence (of course, who wouldn't?) but I find it harder to hear that I will be enriched by their presence with us. Yet our compact already recognizes that this is the case. "We join as a spiritual community...to welcome into our church those of differing understanding and theological opinion," in other words, our fellow sheep.

Despite both these challenges, I believe we are called to wake from our spiritual amnesia, to reclaim history, and to walk that well worn path. I believe that no matter who may try to place us on a less-traveled road of obscurity and insignificance, we must remember that God has assured us we stand firmly in the well-worn path of her love. And I believe that no matter how we might wish to walk alone, God has called us to love the other sheep, even our enemies, and to walk with them toward understanding. Amen.