

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World Part 4: Finding Christ in Memorial Park

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Scripture: John 14:6; John 1:1-3

I. A Walk in the Park

Last Friday, I attended the City of Omaha's "Celebrate America" concert in Memorial Park. Having parked at St. Margaret Mary's church, I made my way toward the park in the 90-degree summer heat. Within a few yards, I was already feeling the weight of the cooler in my hand. Inside was a small feast I intended to share with a dozen or so friends.

There was the salmon I had smoked that morning over an alder wood fire. There was a bag of crackers, a tub of cream cheese spread, and a jar of capers to go with the salmon. Then there were the juicy Bing and Rainier cherries I'd combined in a Tupperware container. Keeping all of this cool was a six-pack of hoppy Nebraska Brewing Company IPA that I'd set in the freezer for an hour before leaving and set in the bottom of the cooler alongside a couple bottles of chilled wine and seltzer water. (Again, these weren't all for me!)

Shifting the weight from one arm to another as I walked, I had to question the sanity of bringing all this heavy stuff when everyone was just planning on visiting the food trucks. I could have at least packed all of this in the wheeled cooler sitting in the basement, probably feeling under-appreciated at the moment.

As I approached the park, a man and his wife stood on either side of the sidewalk handing out pamphlets. In front of the man was a sandwich board sign. On the side facing me was a quote from the Gospel of John according to the King James Bible where Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6)

"Oh brother," I muttered under my breath. This passage – or rather, a pervasive *understanding* of this passage – has done more to poison the faith of Jesus than any other quote in the Bible.

The pamphleteers brought back a memory from years ago when I was writing my book, "Asphalt Jesus," and the publisher asked me to remove a section of the book on the grounds that it was too controversial.

In that section I related the story about a time when I was invited by an L.A. radio host for a "friendly interview" with him on the air during the morning commute. It turned out to be an ambush.

What perturbed the radio host was my insistence that a God who loves us beyond our wildest imagination would never throw people into the fires of hell to be tortured for eternity. In his view, Christians go to heaven and all others go to a very different place.

After the interview was over, I proceeded to go about my day when my mother called, who had been listening to the interview on the internet. “Eric,” she said, “you’d better get online and listen to what’s happening. People are calling in and you’re getting hammered!”

Sure enough, caller after caller accused me of being everything short of Satan himself, leading people down the slippery slope to hell.

In the section that was cut by my publisher, I engaged in a little speculation: “What if I really was Satan and my goal was to undermine, and even reverse, everything Jesus came for? What would I do?”

I considered many possibilities. Briefly, I considered waging all-out war on Christians. Yet Christian history clearly shows that persecution makes Christianity stronger, not weaker. It’s like Jesus actually knew what he was talking about when he said, “blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God,” (Matthew 5:10) and, “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25) In the early days of Christianity, the Romans couldn’t kill enough Christians to keep up with all the converts who were inspired by those who would rather die under the lordship of Jesus than live under the lordship of Caesar.

So, I considered the opposite approach: convincing Christians that they are perfectly safe and can live life however they want without any danger at all. I’d convince them they can indulge in rampant consumerism, exploit the poor all they want, and launch as many wars as they desire. They can be workaholics. They can be racists, bigots, and misogynists, and homophobes. Basically, I’d convince Christians that, as long as you believe in Jesus, you can do whatever you want because he has born all your sins upon himself. Certainly, this conviction would twist Jesus’s message beyond recognition and cause all kinds of harm both to Christians and anyone who wasn’t like them.

On down the list of possibilities I went until suddenly I hit on a single idea which, if implemented, would do far more to reverse the message of Jesus than any other tactic. I would implant the suggestion into everyone’s mind – just the *suggestion* – that if they did not please the God of their understanding in a certain way, then this God would torture them for eternity after they died.

I realized that if I could convince people that there was a chance God would do something this monstrous to them, it would transform all love into fear.

If you had any inkling that you might lose your salvation if you had so much as a sliver of doubt about your faith, or that someone you love might lose their salvation if they had doubts, why wouldn’t you do everything in your power to keep from questioning your faith and to keep your loved ones from questioning theirs? Fear of God would far surpass love of God.

In fact, if you had any love or compassion for your family, your friends, or even humanity in general, would you not work tirelessly to convert anyone who was not a “believer” if you believed that they would be tortured for eternity if they didn’t believe the right things? If you

had any heart at all, you would try to convert people by any means possible – by hook or by crook. (If by crook, they'll thank you in the end, won't they?)

No, if I were Satan and could implant the terror of hell into as many people as possible, then anyone who had true compassion and love for their neighbor would be handing out pamphlets in the streets, striking up conversation with seatmates on planes about their salvation, and attacking silly ministers on the radio who dared claim that God's love was for all people. Before long, I – as Satan – wouldn't have much to do. Christians would be spreading the message of terror, not love.

Can you imagine why the publisher cut this section from my book?

II. Through Christ

I considered walking past the couple distributing pamphlets at Memorial Park. Certainly, any conversation between us would head south fast, leaving none of us convinced that the other was right.

However, now that we are here on the Tri-Faith Commons, I can't help but think of all my Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers (among others) who must continually hear essentially that God actively hates them, and will go on hating them for eternity, unless they believe in Jesus the way certain Christians do. Of course, if this message is true, then one might forgive someone for provoking an uncomfortable conversation with a non-believer. But if it is not true, then how is this message not an act of spiritual terrorism?

I figured that if our conversation achieved no other purpose than to take away the impression that the silence of Christians walking by implied agreement with their message, then perhaps it would be worth it. I'm just less and less willing to keep silent these days and let such messages go out to my friends unchallenged.

So, I engaged them both in conversation as politely as I could. I listened to them at length. Once in a while I'd ask a question or point out an inconsistency that stumped them. Then they'd hand me another pamphlet saying, "You really should read this one, too." I walked away with a lot of pamphlets! But no conversion – on either side!

Reaching the park and finding my concert-going companions, I opened my cooler and reflected on Jesus's statement about how no one comes to the Father except "through me." I think this is one of the most beautiful passages in scripture, which is why I get so worked up when people poison it by adding assumptions that simply are not there.

That word "through," as in "through me" is curious. The King James Version of the pamphleteers translates the Greek "*dia*" as "by," not "through": "No one comes to the Father except *by* me."

"By me" sounds like Jesus is blocking the way to the Father until he lets them pass by. But modern translations recognize that the better word is "through," not "by." In this case, Jesus

isn't guarding the way. Rather he is the way itself. What could it mean that Christ is way itself, not the guardian of the way?

Curiously, there is another place in John's gospel where this word "through" is used with respect to Christ. It is in the very first chapter where it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. *All things came into being **through** him, and without him not one thing came into being.*"

In other words, if God is love, then every material thing in the Universe is intrinsically connected to God – and God's love – because Christ is the way *through* which God's love became incarnate.

What does this mean? It means that if you want to know what God's love looks like, look at Jesus, but don't just look *at* him. Look *through* him to everything around you. Jesus is the human lens by which you come to discover that God's love is manifest in all things. Therefore, if you are mindful, you discover that God's love also looks like a tree, a flower, a flowing creek. It looks like the wood inside this sanctuary, and the slate on the floor.

If you want to know what God's love smells like, tastes like, sounds like, and feels like, then be mindful of everything you touch, taste, see, and hear. It is all in relationship with God because it is all an expression of God's love. The material world is, quite literally, God's love incarnate.

Here's how I experienced Christ – in the way that John's Gospel speaks of Christ – last Friday in Memorial Park:

I opened my cooler, took out a cracker, spread cream cheese on that cracker, and placed a piece of my alder-smoked salmon on top of it. Before taking a bite, I gave thanks for the wheat used to create my cracker – wheat that once grew in a farmer's field as an incarnation of God's love; wheat that human hands had cared for and eventually harvested – these human beings being incarnations of God's love (not as pure as Jesus, but incarnations nonetheless). I gave thanks for the mill that ground the wheat of God's love into the flour of God's love, and the hands that helped the transformation.

I also gave thanks for all the different relationships – known and unknown – that made countless peaceful transactions that resulted in the flour making its way to the factory and on to Trader Joe's where I purchased the flour in the form of crackers. I gave thanks for this church that employs me, that allowed me the income to purchase the cracker and the car that transported both me and the cracker to Memorial Park.

I then gave thanks for the animals and people who were responsible for producing the cream cheese. If the economist, Milton Friedman, could identify three hundred different processes and peaceful transactions between people from all over the world just to produce a #2 pencil, I reminded myself that there must be countless peaceful encounters between people around the world that brought me this dab of cream cheese on my cracker and the plastic tub it came in.

Then I turned to the salmon. I gave thanks for the fish whose body had been broken for me, and for the alder tree, whose body had been cut for me. I gave thanks for the people

responsible for processing and distributing the wood and the salmon, whose time and life energy had been expended for me.

As I took all this into my mouth, I gave thanks to a God who, through 14 billion years of evolutionary processes, created my taste buds so that I could experience not only bodily sustenance but soulful joy. And I gave thanks for my soul that was experiencing this joy.

Then I turned to the cherries ...

Eventually I considered the park itself, the musicians, and the friends around me. The hand of a loving God could be seen and experienced in all these things and many more.

Later, I thought back to my conversation with those pamphleteers on the way to the park. They spoke of hell as a place for those who have no connection to God or God's love. I thought, "Hell must be a pretty empty place, for every created thing and every created person is already connected *through Christ*."

Then, I realized that hell is not as empty as it may seem from this perspective. We all spend more time there than we would probably like to admit.

Hell is being surrounded by God and failing to see God. Hell is being filled with God and believing that God is absent. Hell is being connected to God in every way, shape, and form imaginable (and those you can't imagine), and failing to notice. Hell is attending a concert in Memorial Park filled with 60,000 people in the audience and dozens of musicians who have devoted their lives to creating beauty and believing that few of them are connected to God and will ever experience heaven.