

“On the Heretical Imperative, Or, Embracing the Judas Within”

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter, Amen.<<

I discovered to my delight a couple of weeks ago that you can now watch Steven Spielberg’s four *Indiana Jones* films on Netflix. A discovery that has taken me back to my childhood - back when I imagined myself as Harrison Ford’s character - Indiana Jones - complete with make-believe bullwhip and pretend fedora hat. My brothers and I would transform our basement into an ancient temple or a desert dune and pretend that we were on an Indiana Jones-like adventure searching for some lost treasure like the archeologist and professor in the films. We would search a pretend desert in our basement for the lost biblical Ark of the Covenant, or traverse a pretend wide-chasm in search of the Holy Grail cup. And when we weren’t pretending to be Indiana Jones on an adventure, we would transform our basement into a galaxy and then argue with each other over who got to play Harrison Ford’s other notable character, Han Solo from *Star Wars*.

Over the past few weeks I’ve been rewatching the *Indiana Jones* films on Netflix. And one scene in the third film - *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* - caught my eye. The setting is late 1930s Germany, and the Nazis are burning books in Berlin. Indiana Jones is undercover in a Nazi uniform searching for his father’s grail diary that holds clues to discovering the cup of the Holy Grail that a 12th century Christian legend says captured the blood of Christ on the cross. The legend also says that the one who sips from the cup will have eternal life. The Nazis want the diary so they can find the cup; Indiana Jones is trying to stop them. Worried that the Nazis may inadvertently burn the diary amid the hundreds of other books being sent to the flames, Indiana Jones - in his Nazi uniform - searches until he locates the diary and then tries to flee the scene. But he gets swallowed by a parading crowd that moves as one toward Adolf Hitler. Jones bumps into Hitler, and the two stare at each other for a long, pregnant moment. This scene could be a case study in Steven Spielberg’s brilliant use of irony. There Indiana Jones stands in a Nazi uniform, face-to-face with Hitler himself, the grail diary in his hand that holds clues to eternal life - a diary the Nazis are desperately searching for - and all around them books are being burned in the city. I remember the first time I watched this scene as a kid, wondering whether Hitler would confiscate the diary and give it to someone in his entourage, or whether he would grab it and hand it over to an eager hoodlum to toss into the fire. Instead, Hitler takes the diary from Indiana Jones’ hand, pulls out a pen, opens the front cover, and then signs his name before handing the diary back to Harrison Ford’s dumbstruck character.

That scene caught my eye recently not just because of its irony but also because it is an extreme example of trying to stamp out difference in the vain pursuit of purity. Burning books, rejecting alternative perspectives, liquidating groups, labeling people as “heretics,” setting up boundaries to exclude - these are dark tactics in human history and in religious history; and in Christian history, as well. In the second and third centuries one of those alternative perspectives that got labeled “heretical” was that of the so-called gnostics - a group of Christians who saw the world as evil and the coming of Christ as a way to set minds free - to give people *gnosis*, special spiritual knowledge. Gnostics didn’t last long in history.

After the fourth century Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian, he convened a Council at Nicaea to establish orthodox theology, and then, according to his ancient biographer,¹ issued an edict to search for, confiscate, and destroy gnostic books. We knew very little about those books until a peasant in 1945 stumbled upon a clay jar in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, which contained a small library of gnostic texts, buried in the sand to save them from being confiscated and burned.

Christianity has always been diverse. The lines between “heresy” and “orthodoxy” blurry. Since its earliest days, says theologian Peter Rollins, Christianity has been wrestling with itself.² Wrestling with itself over how to understand God as Trinity; wrestling with itself over how to define the divinity and humanity of Christ in the 4th and 5th centuries; wrestling over God’s relationship to the world in the debates between Augustine and Pelagius and their many followers; wrestling over whether papal authority meant God’s authority during the Reformation; wrestling with itself over whether Christians should own slaves in the 19th century, whether Christianity is compatible with the findings of science in the late 19th century, whether God’s role in the world should be redefined after the death of God movement in the 20th century. And this week, the United Methodist Church is on the verge of schism as it wrestles with itself over LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage. Since its earliest days, says Peter Rollins, Christianity has been wrestling with itself.

Maybe Christians wrestle and struggle because our older siblings in faith in Judaism have also wrestled and struggled. The name “Israel” means, “one who struggles with God” - a name given to the patriarch Jacob after he wrestled with God in a dream. And he wasn’t the only one who struggled. Moses and Abraham both argued with God, as did Job. Sarah laughed at God. The Psalmists questioned God repeatedly, as did several of the prophets. So, maybe it’s in our faith-DNA as Christians to wrestle and struggle and question; it’s in our DNA because it’s in Judaism’s DNA. And maybe it’s in our DNA because wrestling and struggling and questioning *is* what faith and commitment look like in real life. Peter Rollins describes the life of faith as a paradox: the “absolute commitment to God,” he writes, “involves a deep and sustained wrestling with God.”³ The Celtic Christians of Northumbria call it “embracing the heretical imperative.” It is, they say, to “question everything boldly in order to understand something deeper about who God is, who we are, and what our purpose is in ... the world.” Truth can only be found, they say, “by asking questions” and by “living the questions.”

Yes, maybe wrestling and struggling is part of our spiritual DNA as Judaism’s little siblings. And maybe wrestling and struggling is central to the life of faith. And maybe this implies that the lines between “heresy” and “orthodoxy” are blurry; or, as Rollins says, there is a Judas in all of us. And maybe living the heretical imperative is part of what it means to follow Jesus. Something tells me that Jesus wouldn’t burn books or try to stamp out difference. In fact, in today’s two gospel readings Jesus is presented as a heretic. In the reading from Mark, Jesus goes out of his way to befriend outcasts by eating with tax collectors and sundry sinners. And, writes Mark, this made him the target of criticism. “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” the religious authorities ask. The branch of Judaism that made such a question possible had strict regulations around mixing; it was thought that mixing with perceived “lawless” people - like sinners - or with lackeys of the

¹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, book IV (mid-4th c. CE).

² Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008), 7.

³ Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 32.

Roman Empire - like tax collectors - could spread impurity to those who strived to live uprightly. Jesus ignores this tradition - this fetish with purity - because it damages people. It is precisely those who have been damaged and excluded that he gathers around a common table, using the language of invitation to defend himself. "I have come," says Jesus, "to call not the righteous but sinners." I get the sense that both the word "righteous" and the word "sinners" could be in air quotes in this story, as in, "I have come to call not those *whom you call* 'righteous' but those *whom you call* 'sinners'." The Greek word translated as "call" is an invitation word: "I have come to *invite* ..."; "I have come to *welcome* ...". "I have come to *include* and share fellowship with those who've been excluded." It's Jesus living the heretical imperative: questioning the traditions that ban the mixing of people.

In today's story from John's gospel Jesus lives a similar point. The story of the woman caught in adultery is one of the most beautiful in the gospels, but it probably wasn't part of the original Gospel of John. Which is why our pew bibles put the story in brackets with a footnote saying the story is not in the earliest manuscripts of John's gospel. The Gospel of John went through revisions, and stories about Jesus were added along the way, including, probably this one. We're not sure where this story came from, or when it was added to John's gospel, but it sure does sound like something Jesus would've done. According to the story, Jesus was teaching in the temple in Jerusalem with a crowd surrounding him when a woman is thrown to the ground near his feet by religious zealots who claimed to have caught her in the act of adultery. Notice the *man* is not brought with her even though such an act takes two people to perform. *She's* assumed to be in the wrong; and the zealots are prepared to execute her claiming that the Bible commands it. Jesus, according to the story, doesn't say anything at first, but instead begins writing in the sand. One version of this story adds the words, "he was writing the sins of each of them" in the sand. Imagine if he was doing that - imagine what was going through the accusers' minds: they're ready to condemn one whom they called a "sinner," yet their sins are being written in the sand by this young rabbi with superhuman knowledge. Jesus straightens up after writing in the sand and drops the mic, saying, "let the one without sin cast the first stone at her." It's a story about a sand-drawing, mic-dropping Jesus living the heretical imperative by challenging traditions that would judge a woman but not a man - traditions that would claim to be moral while ignoring hypocrisy.

In his book *The Orthodox Heretic*, Peter Rollins tells a different version of this story. The story Rollins tells is about the last heretic in church history to be condemned to death.⁴ It's an uncomfortable story but a powerful one. The heretic was a young man, writes Rollins, accused of distorting God in his false teachings. As was the custom at the time, Rollins goes on, the accused was given an opportunity to recant his views, but he refused. Indeed, he admitted to being a heretic. And so, he was brought before the court in order to hear his sentence. The judge listened as various people testified to words and images that the young man had used in explaining the ways of God. The judge determined that these teachings were misleading and could potentially lead to conflict and disagreement within the one true church. And so, the judge decreed that the heretic should be executed. After the sentence was passed, the judge asked the young man if he had any final words to say. "One thing only, your honor," he replied. "I do not dispute your sentence. Indeed, I could not, as the charges made against me are quite true. And neither will I plead for my life." But, if it would please the court, on the day of my execution I would like to choose the person from the crowd who will end my life. The judge thought this odd, but agreed. The day arrived and

⁴ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015 [2009]), ch. 33.

a crowd gathered in the town square. The judge spoke up promising the condemned man that whomever he pointed to in the crowd would carry out the deed. As the young heretic's eyes darted through the gathered crowd, people began to feel uncomfortable. A dark and foreboding fear descended among the people, for no one wanted this on their conscience. Slowly the entire crowd went quiet, until no one stirred. The condemned man spoke, "I stand before you now, helpless as a child, condemned to death for heresy. I am guilty as charged, for I have held a distorted, muddled, and inaccurate view of the divine. I have only one request: that my life be ended by one among you who is innocent of this charge." Peter Rollins ends the story there, but you get the sense that no one in the crowd stepped forward.

These stories - the condemned heretic, the mic-dropping and sand-drawing Jesus, the Jesus who welcomed those who were labeled "sinners," the ugliness of stamping out gnosticism in early church history - these stories come to mind for me this week as our siblings in the United Methodist Church, by just 54 votes among 800 delegates, doubled-down on what some have called traditionalism - strengthening bans on queer clergy and same-sex marriage.⁵ The decision unleashed a torrent of comments on Twitter. Reverend Nadia Boltz-Weber tweeted: "There is God. And then there is the church. The less we conflate the two, the better. The church may reject God's children, but God never does. To my queer siblings, I'm so sorry. You are glorious." And Union Seminary tweeted: "Churches defended slavery. Churches became apologists for Hitler. Churches promoted segregation and apartheid. Churches said women shouldn't preach. To all [in the United Methodist Church] who grieve today, remember that churches don't always act in accordance with God's will. Sometimes, they defy it."

...Let me close today with words from UCC writer Ashley Harness, who modified the words of Jesus' mic-dropping Sermon on the Mount, to help focus the church of today:⁶

"May this blessing," she writes, "remind you today of your original belovedness, your original blessing from the God of justice and love: Blessed are those who resist. Blessed are the women, cis- and transgender. Blessed are the LGBTQ. Blessed are the sacred choices of women Blessed are the babies and children. Blessed are the aging and elders. Blessed are the poor and those who work too many jobs to make ends meet, and those who cannot find a job. Blessed are the refugees and immigrants, no matter their legal status. Blessed are the uninsured and those who fear they will lose their insurance. Blessed are those who weep and mourn and live with mental illness. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those who have survived sexual violence and abuse. Blessed are those who speak their truth. Blessed are those who proclaim, 'Black Lives Matter.' Blessed are the indigenous and blessed are their sovereign, sacred lands. Blessed is the Earth under the siege of climate change. Blessed are those who are differently abled. Blessed are the Muslims threatened with a registry. Blessed are the Jews who are threatened with bombs. Blessed are all those who are persecuted. Blessed are those who stand in solidarity. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers." Amen.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/26/us/united-methodists-vote.html>

⁶ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_make_me_a_living_blessing