

**FAITH PILGRIMAGE PAPER**

***A LIFETIME OF SEEKING GOD; A BRIEF LOOK AT MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY THUS FAR***

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## A Lifetime of Seeking God; A Brief Look at My Spiritual Journey Thus Far.

I have always been searching for God or better knowledge of who They is and what They wants as well as my role in Their plan.

I use the pronouns They, Them, Their to represent God, this serves two purposes: 1). God does not have a gender Therefore, to use a gender-specific pronoun would favor one gender over another and subconsciously suggest God is either male or Female 2). By using the plural "They" it honors the understanding of the Trinity, all three figures in the Godhead separate and distinct yet equally God and eternally one.

From the Time I was a small child I have always had a sense of right and wrong and a need for social justice. I can remember seeing neighborhood kids mocking, making fun of, and running away for a new child in our neighborhood that had a leg deformity. I was consumed with disgust and resolved to tried to make this person my friend. There were many incidents in my early childhood in which I think back and cannot understand why I did the things that I did. Another time some kids on my street tried to say that in our area we had to worship and believe in mother nature. I can't recall the exact words I said but something to the effect of, "I believe in Jesus." What is perplexing about this is we never went to church. The only thing I knew about Christianity was the children's song my mother would sing to me: Jesus loves the little children, Jesus loves me this I know, etc. We had a family Bible, some religious statues of Mary, Moses, and a Jesus bust made of wood but really no religious teaching. I can remember seeing the Warner Sallman paintings of Jesus knocking at the door, and the Good Shepherd at my grandmother's house along with a large family-style white leather Bible that had a picture section that I loved to look at when I was four or five years old. So, why did I have such a sense of God, a love for doing right and seek justice?

Later in my pre-teen years, we did attend some Church but not regularly. My father was in the Navy and professed to be a Roman Catholic, but far from being a devoted one, so when we did go it was to a Catholic service. In fact, I could not be sure we ever went to services in consecutive weeks and I can only remember going to services less than a dozen times. I got very little if anything from the experience.

In my middle teen years, I was drawn to seek an understanding of God. I was greatly into sports, baseball in particular, and noticed that many of my sports heroes professed a faith in Christ. I took on a bargaining theology, I would praise God and They would assist me in becoming a better ballplayer. Oh, the naïveté of youth. So, I tried to read the Bible. I said tried because I only had a King James Version of the New Testament and I was lost in the language. Interesting how one can lose interest when translation fails to convey understanding.

It wasn't until I was eighteen that I began to attend church regularly. I was dating a girl whose father was an elder in a Christian Church. Needless to say, if I wanted to date his daughter I was expected to be in church. I eventually married this woman and became a member of the church there. This is where I learned of other translations of the Bible, especially the NIV, and began to read it through from front to back. I learned much at this time and as I grew, I noticed a lot of inconsistencies from the members of the church. Unfortunately, at this stage of my spiritual journey, my desire for God had become a desire to prove myself right and expose those I thought were hypocrites. This continued to be a major factor in my spiritual life for some time. While I still wanted to seek God and understand Them better, there was always this feeling that I needed to know so I could preach and teach all the regulations, the legalities that God expected of us as followers. This passion led me to attend Bible college (Kentucky Christian University) with aspirations to become a minister in the Christian Church/ Church of Christ denomination. I

oversaw three different ministries while going to school. I grew significantly in knowledge about the Bible and how to be an influential person in the Church.

It was at this time that my first wife left me. My denominational teaching and my doctrinal understanding were simply, a person could not be a leader in the Church if they were divorced. I left school and the church and went into the army (I enlisted as a flight medic) to support my family (my wife left me with four children). After a few years in the army, having only a few encounters with church, I met my wife Cindy and my life changed. We married within only a few months of knowing each other and became the Brady Bunch in real life. She had two daughters from her first marriage and me with my four, we were only missing Alice for our maid. Now my family was six Children and a wife that gave me a desire to seek God once again. The next fourteen years were probably where I grew most in understanding and love for God.

I believe it has been a blessing that I was in an ecumenical and interfaith setting while serving in the military. I was exposed to several Protestant denominations, (Baptist, Church of Christ/Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, Church of God, Pentecostal Church, Episcopal Church, Seventh Day Adventist, even Mormon) and spent some time assisting the Catholic Chaplain. I was fortunate enough to spend the last two years of my military career working for the base Chapel. This experience brought me in direct contact with all of these different flavors of Christianity as well as a few conversations with some non-Christian faiths, Islam and Buddhist. This has afforded me to see Christ and God from the high church of Catholicism and the Episcopal Church to the low church services of Hispanic Pentecostal Church. The common denominator shared by all these faiths, including the Jewish and Muslims, is the belief in Love.

I was medically retired from the army after fourteen years of service. It seemed, after returning home from Iraq, I required several surgeries causing my medical retirement.

The next few years I attended a seminary in Tennessee (Emanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan), again going back to the denominational roots.

At that time, I experienced some disenchantments with two church ministries. I also witnessed a respected professor asked to leave the seminary for bringing to light things the denomination did not want to address, basically the misogynistic language found in the Old Testament. Upon these disappointments, I decided I needed to step away from everything again. I asked myself, "Is this the church that Christ wanted?" Subsequently, I again stopped attending church for almost three years.

My wife and I moved from Tennessee to Florida to be closer to our fathers who are both getting up in age, we wanted to be close, so we can help if anything were to happen. After coming to Florida and after the 2018 presidential election, I began to notice all the hate there was in our country. I noticed the disdain for the minorities and the contempt for and oppression of poor people. I said to myself, and many times to my wife, this is not how a "Christian nation" acts. Where is the love? It was not until then I come to understand that Christ's Love should be the foundation of our faith, that I was able to reconcile my faith with my knowledge. I now saw that in the Church, even if the people were not perfect, the world needed people that loved God. This love is best shown, best manifested in the love of our fellow human beings. It was at this time in my life that I finally got it, the Church was not about rules, it was not about knowing scripture, it was about love. Love is the most important thing anyone can have. Love is what sent Christ to earth and kept him on the cross. Love is what powers the world, in coming together and sharing in this great creation.

It was at this time that I resolved to teach the world to love, to put away petty things, and just love. So, I decided to return to seminary and complete my education. From my experiences with the chaplains in the military, I know how many hold an underlying lack of respect for those pastors who fail to achieve at the least an MDiv degree. Consequently, needing only a year's worth of credits to complete my degree, I decided to finish where I first started, Emmanuel Christian Seminary. I completed my MDiv degree in May of 2020. It is now time to put my understanding of "just love" into action. I know this sounds too simplistic, but it really is, simply love. While the concept may be simplistic the application is very difficult, but that is what we are called to do. We cannot say we love God without first loving those around us. This is where Eugene Peterson, Author of *The Pastor*, comes into play in influencing my thoughts of pastoring. In an interview about pastoring a pastor and his experiences of being a pastor, Peterson said, "I will not look at people as problems to be fixed and I will not look at people as resources to be used... I will look at them as people that need to be loved." This is one thing that I will never forget, a pure lesson about the people in the pews. Armed with this thought I seek to show love as Jesus loved. I now seek to convey this understanding of love first and foremost. When weighing anything in theology, in relationship to the Bible, or anything that we call doctrine, we must view it through the window of love. We cannot say we understand God without first trying to understand the people living around us. We cannot seek a better world without loving our enemies as God has set the example. I now understand that if I were to reach one person and teach them to love unconditionally like Jesus showed us, then I have done good in the world.

I believe that my goal to become a spiritual/community leader, as well as a catalyst for social change and equality, is not a vocation, but rather a calling. It is not a job. It is a way of life. I believe a position of church leadership is not a position of power but a position of love. If

you are in a ministry position for power, you are not doing it for the right reasons. Leadership is a responsibility to serve those that have given you their trust. Without that trust, you are not a leader but rather a boss, commander, a manager of people telling them what to do. A good leader leads by example, knowing those who are following and encouraging every one of them to keep up their good work in a way that respects their own ability and pace. I believe a leader is not above anyone they are leading. Using the analogy of the Church being the Body of Christ, a pastor is just one more part of Christ's body. All parts are important if the Body is to be healthy. Most of all, I believe that as God is Love a leader should exhibit and be known for their love. As I move onward in my life and spiritual journey, I look forward to being the spiritual leader of a congregation, and community. I am motivated to be an active part of bringing healing to our deeply divided nation. This healing must start with love and understanding. I feel the pastor and the local church will be a vehicle of love to teach, by example, how all people can live in unified equality while still holding on to their individual uniqueness. The common purpose and mission, of the congregation I will lead should be bringing people together through love and mutual respect of person. For, we are all children of God, made in God's image. There is nothing more beautiful than unity in diversity.