

PREFACE

God is the same as nature.
—Sister Julian of Norwich

A six-year-old girl stood in front of her parents and emphatically stated, “Why should I outgrow my invisible friend? Isn’t God your invisible friend?” (Why is this six-year-old so right?)

To live life to the fullest, one has to keep evolving, even at ninety years old. For me, evolving means questioning, changing, growing, and transforming.

My evolving life began in 1932 under the tutelage of my dad, “Ham” (Hamilton), an Episcopal priest, and my mom, “Saint” Pearl.

I was a great Episcopalian, as was Jesus—so I thought.

In 1950, I went to college. This was my first transformation. I became my own person, no longer Ham’s little boy. While there, I divorced God, Jesus, and the Episcopal church and married “St. Cerveza.”

After college, I was commissioned in the Marine Corps (my second transformation), where I found foxhole religion. After serving for three years, I felt that I would rather love people than kill them. (But it was and still is an honor to have served our great country.)

So I went to seminary, where I had my third transforming experience, the start of my spiritual (meaning “authentic”) journey in life.

I had my fourth transformation while in seminary. Riding on my motorcycle, I was broadsided by a fire engine. My best friend was killed in the accident, which left me asking, “Why? Where was God?”

I found that answer: She had nothing to do with the accident. Free will did. (God did not tell me to buy that murdercycle.)

The church might not like that answer because its leaders keep inferring that God is running the earth (or is it now the universe?), God is directly involved in our lives (She “planned” the accident), and God’s “Son” died for our sins. Ugh!

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No way did I want to tell the church that the theology about some master puppeteer god who lived above the flat earth in a mansion made no sense today. So quietly I started calling God “Creation.” No one has called me on that yet.

Then I met and married a wonderful woman and had my fifth transformation. I had been a bachelor for twenty-eight years and now had to learn to be one with my Annie while each of us still maintained our individuality. This has been hard work but most rewarding. We celebrated our sixty-second anniversary in June 2023, and she is still my beautiful best friend.

Our second daughter (born in 1965), a rubella baby, was multichallenged. This was my sixth transforming experience. Annie and I were not at all ready for this challenge, but together, we grew in the faith, became a stronger team, and worked extremely hard to teach her to be independent, which she is. Today she lives and works in Seattle.

As my ministry progressed, I was able to do what Jesus asked me to do, “love the least of these” (Matt. 25:40), and had fantastic ministries.

In 1969, very loudly I stated, “The war in Vietnam is wrong.” The church, where I had a youth ministry involving 2,500 young people, fired me—for being against war. I’m still processing that.

Being fired was my seventh transformation. My faith sustained me, and I kept moving forward, trying to build the Kin-dom (our faith is about real people, kin, not kings) of love in Hawai’i with all sorts of exciting projects.

In 1975, we moved to Southern California for better educational opportunities for our differently abled but bright ten-year-old daughter.

However, the Episcopal Diocese in Los Angeles was not welcoming. I suspect that I was too progressive. I fought for ordaining women clergy, supporting equality for the LGBTQUI community, remarrying divorced people, constantly updating *The Book of Common Prayer*, looking at the Bible through Jewish eyes, redefining God, rediscovering the historical Jesus, changing the role of seminaries, redesigning the institutional church, and standing up against fundamentalism as well as bad government, to name a few items on my agenda.

For the past forty-seven years, while working in secular fields, I have been actively involved in semi progressive churches either as a poorly paid assistant or volunteer.

After I was fired again (1988) by an incompetent priest (he was fired six months later), Annie and I became members of “St. Mattress,” staying in bed on Sunday mornings. Although we missed being members of an agape-centered community, this independence allowed me to be totally honest about my beliefs, doubts, faith, and growth and to expose the roadblocks preventing the institutional church from being all it can be.

In 2008, a clergy friend (a United Church of Christ pastor) asked me where we were going to church. He laughed when I said, “St. Mattress” then responded, “When you have too many bedsores, take a look at Irvine United Congregational Church.” We did and I had another transformation: an Episcopal priest becoming a member of a UCC congregation in the company of other progressive

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retired clergy who were Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Presbyterian and even Southern Baptist. The pastor at that time, the Reverend Dr. Paul Tellström, was most welcoming and became a good friend. He retired in 2019.

I have had a rich and full ministry here, all as a volunteer, in the midst of a diverse, accepting, and socially active group of Followers. I have continued evolving here as I share the message that Jesus was about agape, the highest form of love.

My most radical and probably impossible project: replace the gruesome symbol of Christianity, a torturous cross, with a dove, a symbol of love and peace.

My hope is that you are interested in changing and evolving in your life. In order to change, we need to know where we came from, what we were originally taught (in religious school or by our parents and teachers), whether it is still applicable today, and what new directions we might want to follow. So let's start at the beginning.

Peace Love Joy Hope

Bil

POSTSCRIPT

I wrote my first book, *Let Us Pray*, in 1985.

My second book, *How to Get to Heaven without Going to Church*, was written in 1997 and was really the start of my Progressive Christianity journey.

My third book, *What's Love Got to Do with It? "Everything," Says Jesus*, was written in 2008.

My fourth book, *Cramming for the Finals*, was written in 2017.

I think too many Christian churches would rather die than change! But however my books were written, edited, or accepted, the series shows my growth as a Progressive. This book, once again, shows my development into Progressive Christianity.

In the workbook (at the back of this book), I list suggested readings at the end of every chapter to help you with your own spiritual growth.

INTRODUCTION



WHERE DO WE START?

All Christians should be heretics.

—Rev. David Keighley, *Poems, Piety, and Psyche*

I think the number one problem with our society is that no one will assume responsibility for anything!

But please don't quote me!

Do you want to look deeper into your faith? It can be scary, like any change. Remember going from middle school or junior high to senior high school? Lots of unknowns. Apprehension. “Can I do it? Do I want to do it?” This is similar. The best thing is that you can find folks who will help you through. Remember, this is a gradual process. You won’t be graded, but it is important for you to define where you are now. Sometimes you have to take a statement that interests you and simply play with it in your mind before you make any decisions. You have to feel free to ask questions, have doubts. This is the most important part of growing.

A PRIMARY BELIEF FOUNDATION

Who was Jesus? What was his message? Was it that he “undeaded” or conquered death? Or “He died for our sins?” Maybe it was about his magic tricks or the Golden Rule? Perhaps it was about agape, unconditional love. Do you have another idea?

How to Make Love (the Agape kind) with Jesus

I suspect most Christians would say, “Jesus died on a cross for our sins.”

I was never much for the idea that a Jewish peasant from Galilee “undeaded” for my mess-ups so that I do not have to be responsible. I see the Easter stories very differently.

My answer is that Jesus was about agape. *Please feel free to quote me this time.* It has taken many years for me to arrive at this point, but it has also added a new dimension to my life.

The first step in explaining my belief will be to review the process of evolving and its key components, especially as it concerns our faith. Next, we will need to dehumanize God and rehumanize Jesus so that we can experience some new revelations about who the human Jesus was and what he did.

The institutional church might not be happy about this because almost all the dogma, doctrine, and tradition of the historical church will disappear. However, what will emerge is a rich, fulfilling, life-changing transformation.

Today I have so many new tools in my theological toolkit than did my dad (Episcopal clergy) or the church of my youth than I did or even while in seminary. Let us look at these tools.

The list starts with all the technology at my fingertips, which brings new information right to my desk.

Next is all the new material found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt, and other ancient libraries.

We cannot forget advanced archaeology techniques or the scholars who are able to look at new information without ecclesiastical biases because they are scholars, not ordained clergy.

The exploration of space has been very important because the findings have helped put the universe and my theology into a new perspective.

Interfaith cooperation has been a plus. Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, and others have also discovered that we are all dealing with humanity and its challenges, which has helped make interfaith cooperation a must. Thank you to Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) and his ecumenical encyclical (a papal letter).

The most important thing to remember with all this newness is that the primary message of Jesus *never* gets old. The Great Commandment, from the Old Testament, about loving self, neighbor, and Creation (Matt. 22:37–38) is incredibly old but will be relevant as long as there are people.

THE PROCESS OF EVOLVING

I know the universe around me is evolving and constantly changing to a different state or condition. My body, face, and brain are vastly different than they were forty, sixty, or eighty years ago. I am evolving into an old man, whether I want to or not.

But humans do have a choice as to whether we want our thinking to get old or to evolve. Too many folks have no interest in evolving because it demands change, sometimes producing pain or discomfort.

Where Do We Start?

A good friend of mine had no interest in changing his theology and would admit that it was still at an early Sunday school level, but he claimed it worked for him. Every time I wrote a new book or paper, he would remind me that he had no interest in reading it because his mind was made up and he did not want to be confused with the facts. This was always friendly banter and I appreciated that he was open about his opinion. Many people are not. But I felt sorry that he had this approach to living.

Following are the necessary traits one must possess if one wants to evolve.

Desire to Evolve

The first attribute is wanting to evolve or change. Personally, I love change. That is how I grow, regardless of my age. I want my mind to be challenged with new ideas. In the 1980s, the computer became an important household tool. I decided I wanted to learn to use it, as challenging as it was. As the complexity of the computer world evolves, I try to stay current, but it is not easy.

I have friends who refused to learn computer skills when they had the chance: it was too challenging. Unfortunately, thirty years later they feel left out. For example, the COVID vaccination opportunity was highly dependent on having computer skills, and without them it was next to impossible to figure out how to schedule a vaccination.

Ability to Think

The second ingredient in evolving is knowing how to think. I can hear some of you saying, “But everyone knows how to think.” Not really. If you live in a Communist country or a dictatorship, you can think only what the leader wants you to think. Maybe you work for a company that simply wants you to do what you’re told. In the Roman Catholic and fundamentalist churches, members are discouraged from thinking on their own. If you do, you will be asked to leave. In my Episcopal church, which some consider liberal, the leaders allow me to think only so much before I have to stop or lie or leave.

For example, if I were to tell my bishop that I am an A-theist (I do not believe in a humanlike god UpThere), he would either defrock me or suggest I transfer my membership to a Unity-Unitarian church. I do not think most of the Episcopal bishops appreciate my referring to their God as NoOneUpThere or suggesting that god is a man-made concept.

Interest in Listening

Third, evolving demands the art of listening. Good listening is a skill that’s not easy to master because we are often busy getting ready to say what we want to say. We interrupt, yell, throw in a put-down, and sometimes walk away, especially if we disagree.

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Let me share an example. For fifty-plus years I put the Gospel of John in the “Useless” file. John made next to no sense to me. (I had closed my mind. Bad idea!) Then in 2018, I was in a Bible study class reading that gospel. I let everyone know my disdain for the gospel, but the leader, the Reverend Ken Wyant, a retired UCC pastor, started making sense about the power of that gospel. For a change, I listened, and now I see John as a powerful ally for demonstrating that Jesus was about agape, not resurrection fairy tales, all because I listened.

Are you willing to concentrate on listening to new ideas? Listening does not mean you have to accept the ideas. It simply means you have to hear the presenter in total. Listening is not as easy as one might think.

Desire to Transform Oneself

The final step in evolving has to do with the desire to transform one’s life. Not everyone wants to transform. I know lots of people who love to hate, hang on to their anger, insist on not forgiving, want their pound of flesh, have to have their own way, want to be homeless, and refuse to change.

Some folks think their lives are fine. Others seem to be on a quest to be all they can be. I know I use only about 10 percent of my brain. I would love to use just 2 percent more. Maybe I should take a course in Koine Greek (New Testament Greek) or add five minutes more of walking to our daily schedule. I just finished a course entitled “Preaching and the Future Church.” Even at ninety years old, I want to transform my preaching.

This book is about changing, growing, transforming, and evolving.

I invite you to come along.

*In the Gospels, Jesus is asked 182 questions. He answers maybe 8 of them.
He himself asks 307. Maybe faith isn’t about certainty, but learning
to ask—and to sit in the complexity of—good questions.*

—Kevin Nye

CHAPTER 1



UNDERSTANDING AGAPE

My little ones, let's not talk about love. Let's put love into action and make it real.

—1 John 3:18 (*Cotton Patch Gospel*)

It was Christmas morning and Dad was reading his four-year-old the Nativity story. When his son asked, “What’s a stable?” Dad thought for a moment and then put his definition into terms his son could relate to: “It’s like your brother’s room without a stereo.”

You have heard and maybe believe that Jesus arose from the dead, he died for our sins, and he is the Son of God plus. Now you are going to read new ideas that might contradict the old. This could make you feel uncomfortable, maybe guilty because the ideas go against what your family believes, or fearful of going to hell. You may be able to change those past ideas by simply opening your mind to a new one. You are going to learn about the Greek word *agape*, and you just need to understand it as a concept. At some point, you will read that Jesus wasn’t about dying for your sins but was much more about practicing the concept of agape. If it makes sense, keep reading. If it doesn’t make sense, keep reading. There is more to it.

First, let’s try to understand the term *agape*. The quick translation of that word is “love,” but I need to explain it in a more relatable way, like Dad did with the word *stable*. The English language has only one word for love, and it is used for a large variety of different subjects. People talk about loving their

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cars, ice cream, wine, a movie, their significant other, or their pet, but no one else really understands the intensity of feeling that their use of the word *love* implies. I hope there is a great deal of difference between loving ice cream and loving your significant other.

Unfortunately, no one but the speaker knows that intensity. Some people have told me that they loved their spouse, but their dog gave them what they wanted, unconditional love. Their spouse gave them love with all kinds of conditions.

The major language of the New Testament writings was Greek, although a few manuscripts were written in Aramaic. For our study of the word *love*, we will look at the Greek language.

TYPES OF LOVE

Greek has four different words for love, each signifying a different meaning and intensity.

Philia

Love at its lowest intensity is *philia*, an emotion that exists between friends, between people at work, and even toward things. Several cities are called Philadelphia, which translates into “the city of brotherly love.” *Philia* is probably closer to the idea of “like” than love. It demands little other than acknowledgment, a certain level of caring, and a minimal amount of emotional involvement.

Storge

The next level of love is called *storge*. It is the affection among siblings and parents and perhaps relatives or close friends. Maybe you do not even like a certain family member, but if anyone says or does anything negative to that person, you rise to his or her defense. This is *storge* love, which demands something in return, usually loyalty.

Let me try an example close to home. Our middle daughter was a rubella (German measles) baby, resulting in her being deaf and legally blind, as well as having many other issues. At the age of thirty-two, she walked into a moving car because she did not see it. She was in a coma for two weeks, and when she came out of it, she had to learn how to walk, talk, sign, eat, and do life all over. The damage was so severe that it affected her organizational skills, her ability to follow through, and some of her social and people skills. She became a different person. Our other two daughters now have made it their job to help steer her through life. This is not always an easy task, but it is something *storge* love does.

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Eros

The next love word is *eros*, or erotic love involving our sensual/sexual being. This love exists mostly between two people who are committed to each other. It is a much deeper love than the above two. It ties deeply into our emotions and very definitely demands something in return.

Anne and I have been married for sixty-two years. She is my eros and still my best friend. I have had strong sensual/sexual feelings for her since our first date. We have a great time doing life together. I still find her beautiful, wrinkles and all. There has been lots of genuine forgiveness over the years, so neither of us carries negative baggage. I have never loved someone as much as I love her, but eros still demands that she love me. If she didn't, we would need to go our separate ways.

Agape

The fourth word for love in the Greek language is *agape*. It demands nothing in return and is given freely with no strings attached. It cannot be earned, purchased, pleaded for, or cajoled. It is simply given. *Agape* is the word the writers used when Jesus spoke about love in the gospels (116 times). This kind of love is more difficult to achieve because as fallible human beings we almost always expect something in return, either directly or indirectly. Agape expects nothing.

For example, when I was in college, our family vacationed every year in a town off the southern New Jersey coastline. In my sophomore year in college, I became a lifeguard for the city of Stone Harbor, New Jersey. One day, I was alone on the lifeguard stand when I noticed a boy on his bicycle pedaling in the sand toward me. When he arrived, he was out of breath but managed to say, "Hey, mister, there's a little girl drowning down at Sixty-Seventh Street and there aren't any lifeguards around."

I knew Sixty-Seventh Street was not in our city, but I also knew that someone was drowning and that I needed to do something about it. I told the boy I was going to borrow his bike. I would blow my whistle and other lifeguards would come running. He should tell them about the little girl drowning on Sixty-Seventh Street. I told him they would drive him there so that he could pick up his bike.

When I approached on the bike, I saw a small crowd and asked where the little girl was. The people gathered there were Hispanic and spoke little English. They pointed to the ocean, conveyed that the girl was twelve and said, "No swim." I knew that she had been in the ocean for at least a half hour. Then, by gesturing, I told them that I would swim out in her direction.

After about fifteen minutes, I saw her. I could not believe she was still afloat. Finally, I got close enough to grab her, and soon the other lifeguards helped me bring in the little girl. The medics resuscitated her, and I was sure she was going to make it.

I went back to my station, where the captain of the lifeguards came over to me and sort of scolded me for doing a rescue in a city other than Stone Harbor.

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I never thought of the story again because it was just one of the many rescues I had made over the years. Later, when I learned about agape, I remembered this story. It had all the elements of unconditional love. I did not know the girl and she did not know me. She was in a heap of trouble, and without a rescue she would have died. I, too, could have lost my life. I knew that I was not supposed to save people in Avalon but intuitively I knew I had to risk my life to save the girl's. This is agape, unconditional love—what I believe is the foundation stone of Jesus's ministry.

AGAPE DAD

Now let us look at a parable best known as “The Prodigal Son.” I prefer to call it “The Father Who Showed Agape.” It is found only in the Gospel of Luke 15:11–32.

It starts with the younger son, who talked his father into giving him his inheritance before he died. Quickly, the son spent it all on fast living. Penniless, he was then forced to live with the pigs and to eat their food.

Here comes agape, unconditional love, forgiveness, and caring. Dad saw him approaching in the distance, ran to him, hugged and kissed him, and ordered his servants to wrap him in the best robe, put a ring on his finger, and kill a fatted calf to celebrate his return. Never does the story suggest that the son received a tongue-lashing, punishment, or banishment. This is unconditional love. Here are Luke's words: “This son of mine was dead and has come back to life [this sounds a lot like Easter]; he was lost and is now found. And they started celebrating.”

For many, this is the heart of the resurrection experience. All of us have been figuratively “dead” because of some horrendous experience. However, with the tools of agape, we can turn that into an Easter, a positive experience.

Jesus and this parable always push me to a higher plane, which demands that we accept all people, no matter where they are on their life's journey. There can be no exceptions or lists of unacceptables because Followers of Jesus accept everyone unconditionally, no matter what.

AGAPE IN ACTION

Another parable, “The Good Samaritan,” found in Luke 10: 25–37, should be called “Agape in Action.”

The story emphasizes two major themes about agape. The first is when a lawyer was testing Jesus and asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus told the story of a man, and we can only surmise he was Jewish, who was going from Jerusalem (2,600 feet high) down to Jericho when he was robbed, savagely beaten, stripped naked, and left to die. A Jewish priest (rabbi) and a Levite (important person in the Temple) passed by the man. However, a Samaritan man stopped, saw the Jewish man's horrible physical condition, bandaged his wounds, put

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him on his own animal, went to an inn, paid what amounted to two days' hotel costs, and promised to pay the innkeeper the rest of the bill when he returned. (Another Easter story?) The Samaritan had never met or seen this man before. Nor can we forget that Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for centuries and their tribes were bitter enemies. Despite these factors, this Samaritan demonstrated agape and directly and indirectly cared for his tribe's enemy.

Remember, Jesus demanded that we "love our enemies" (Luke 6:28). This story is about giving unconditional love with no strings attached, totally accepting (both giver and receiver), and showing agape to one's enemies. The caring aspect was way beyond all expectations. This is another great story about the power of agape.

I love the ending of this story, as Jesus asks the lawyer this question: "Which of these three do you think was the neighbor?" (as in "Love your neighbor as yourself"). The lawyer said, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus said to him (and to me and you), "Go and do likewise."

Is there any doubt that agape was Jesus's primary message? As a Follower, my job is to keep loving "the hell" (the negative) out of every human being. It has taken me many years to evolve to this place. Unfortunately, the church's idea that Jesus died for us rotten sinners was in the way of my seeing clearly what I now believe is obvious.

Now let's clarify some ideas so that you and I can have a better mutual understanding. These are ideas with a different twist, such as love versus like, tough love, indifference, conscience, and justice. You could discover a different way of looking at some important issues.

If your faith causes you to love fewer people instead of more people, we're doing it wrong. . . . Because love wins.

—Unknown