

Vonnegut: The conflicts and conundrums of faith



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Writer Kurt Vonnegut was a humanist freethinker. He also had a deep respect for Jesus and his teachings, in particular, the Sermon on the Mount. And for that reason, Vonnegut didn't have much patience with those who claim to follow Jesus while ignoring his basic teachings. He wrote: "For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings ... I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere." What he's identifying relates to the age-old tension between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the Church. (Quotes in this column are drawn from "Vonnegut, Jefferson and Jesus," by Wayne Laufert in "The Humanist," summer 2022).

Life often presents conflicting images. If we're paying attention, there are potential lessons hidden right in the open, if our eyes are open.

In chaplain days, I often climbed a hillside to visit the tent-homes of the

"urban refugees" in my congregation. Some had impressive views of downtown, the tallest mountain in the county and sometimes San Francisco Bay. Extreme poverty within view of extreme wealth. A jarring contradiction. Multi-million dollar homes surrounded this "open space" where it was illegal to set up a hand-me-down tent.

Just out of seminary, I attended a small church in a predominantly Black community separated by a busy freeway from one of the wealthiest cities in the country. Mostly white on one side, mostly Black on the other. In between: a freeway – a concrete conundrum – a steady drumming stream of Jaguars and jalopies, BMWs and beat up Beetles.

Speaking of variations in vehicles, I once drove a vanload of "streetpeople" from our relatively comfortable suburbs to the City of San Francisco. While we walked along the marina, one of our group, a Native American man, laid down on the grass to take a nap (where he lives, sleeping in a park is illegal). When taking a photograph of him snoozing, I noticed a stretch Hummer driving by. That photo captured a powerful point of disparity.

My daughter's grade school was across the street from our small apartment situated in a mostly immigrant and low-income neighborhood. In the evenings we often walked by a business park where we could peek in windows to

see the latest creations of George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic. While they were constructing special effects for worldwide blockbuster films, those who lived nearby struggled to pay rent.

I brought a woman who lived under the freeway to speak in front of a Rotary Club luncheon. I'm guessing the businesspersons weren't expecting to experience such a powerful message of resilience standing before them that day. They returned to their jobs, homes and families. I dropped her off back at her camp beneath the highway. Was anyone the same?

These stories reflect living conundrums (I certainly hear them drumming in my head). I was grateful to witness the principles of the Sermon on the Mount embodied in congregations, housed and unhoused. That was the greatest joy. Shared principles of peace, mercy and kindness practiced by women and men with nothing, right alongside women and men with everything. And what they gave each other was truly priceless.

Vonnegut's grandfather left Kurt a pointed question: "If what Jesus said was good, what can it matter whether he was God or not?" This common sense thinking is refreshing and can potentially restore one's faith in humanity, if not religion.

Living through conflicts is much better alongside others. Living with the co-

nundrums can be almost musical. Living into the contradictions without denying or ignoring them, makes everyone a little stronger. Whatever our personal stories, our life narratives, we each have a word, a line, a sentence, a paragraph, a page, a chapter to publish. And if no one else will publish our story, we live it, breathe it, and trust someone somewhere will see or hear and find encouragement and basic goodness.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote of his own humanistic faith: "Jesus is particularly stimulating to me, since he noticed what I can't help noticing, that life is so hard most people are losers or feel like losers." For him, the man of Nazareth, whether he was divine or not, taught us we have dignity even in defeat. I find that honesty so much healthier, more human and humble than what we often hear from the fearfully faithful. A down to earth perspective helps us balance our views and vision. We can learn to see what most never see. We can face the contradictions and ironies of life with more courage, because we're literally written into The Story together.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.