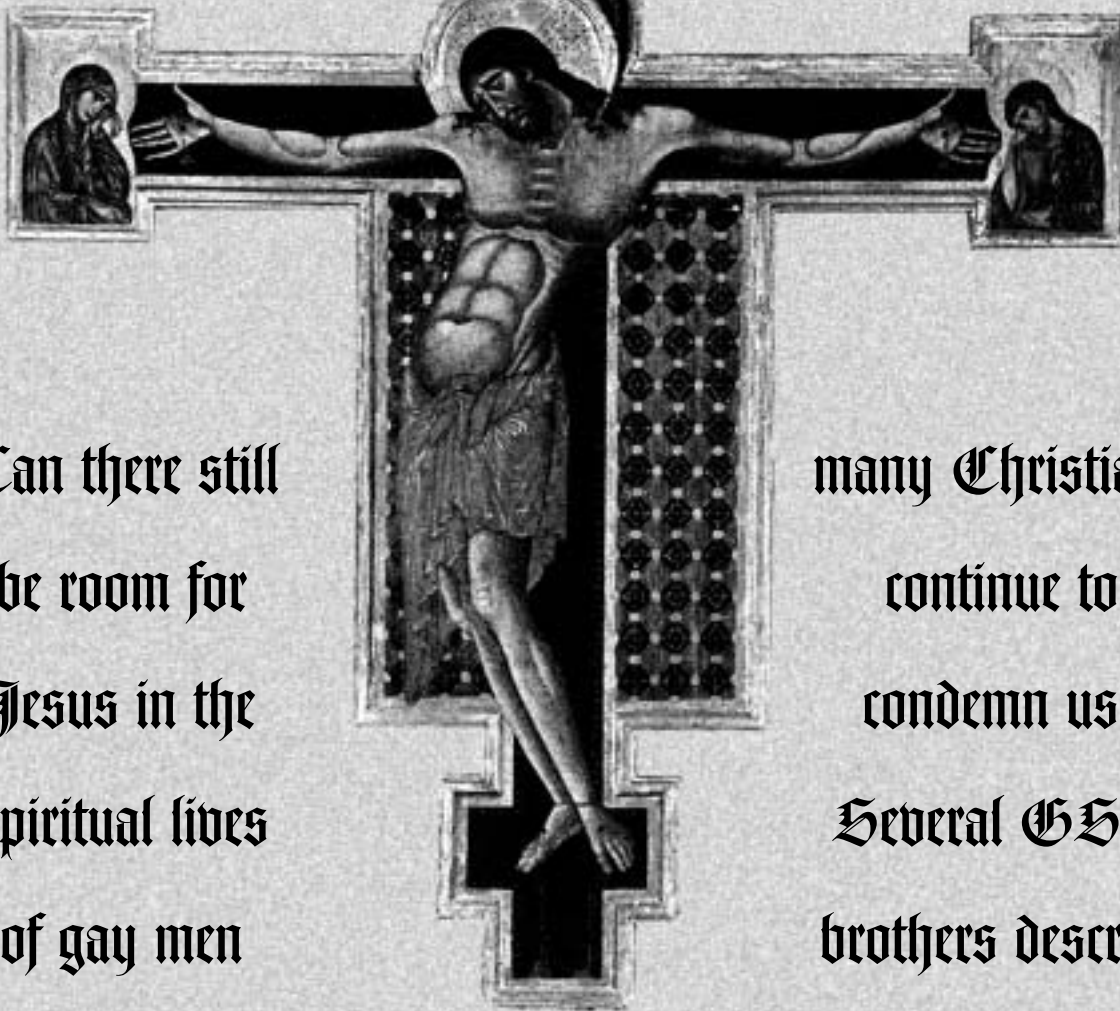


RECLAIMING JESUS



Can there still
be room for
Jesus in the
spiritual lives
of gay men
even though

many Christians
continue to
condemn us?
Several GSW
brothers describe
their experiences.

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ELDER'S
CIRCLE

As you may know Sponge Bob is in trouble again! Yes, he does hold hands with Barnacle Bob. Yes, his world is full of friends, none of whom look at all like each other. His passion for diversity is not veiled at all. But is it really covering a subtle message from the devil?



BY CRAIG COOK

Could Sponge Bob really be the Anti-Christ? Did Lucifer really produce a video with Barney and Blue and Sponge Bob too, hoping all the little children would be won over to the dark side? (That's us. We're the dark side.) While all the brain-dead parents look on and say, "Oh gosh, those queers are trying to get the kids again!"

I guess Tinky Winky started all of this a while back and I was as perplexed then as I am now at how devious and hateful "those" people have become, even in their quiet submission to this insanity. Will we ever stop letting our-

selves be subjugated by fundamental religion?

If Christ watched T.V. he would love Sponge Bob. He might think Tink is a little absurd, but...

We truly have become much more divided and much more fearful under this regime. I am so thankful for our circle and our work in this circle.

Stay awake.

Craigalee

Craig Cook is a long-time Atlanta resident.



Gay Spirit Visions

A Mission Statement for Our Second Decade and A New Millennium

We are committed to creating safe, sacred space that is open to all spiritual paths, wherein loving gay men may explore and strengthen spiritual identity.

We are committed to creating a spiritual community with the intent to heal, nurture our gifts and potential, and live with integrity in the world.

We are committed to supporting others in their spiritual growth by sharing experiences and insights.

To fulfill these goals we facilitate annual retreats and conferences, sponsor social events, publish a newsletter, and maintain web-based communications for men who love men.

FINDING THE REAL JESUS

If Jesus came back to earth today, here are some of the things I think he'd do:

- Jesus would protect the environment. He would plant trees and drive an electric car. He would urge developers to reserve plenty of unspoiled land for wildlife. He would work to stop destruction of wilderness everywhere and teach that we are only

BY JENNINGS FORT



one part in the web of life. "It's our responsibility to protect all living things," he'd probably say. Jesus would compost.

- Jesus would work to heal the sick and help the poor. If he

wouldn't perform miracles himself, I think he would spend lots of time visiting and comforting people. Jesus would encourage people to use their money and resources to find cures for disease and infirmity. He would work to find food and clothing for needy people and help them find more dignity. He would spend many nights in homeless shelters.

- Jesus would work to stop war. He would go to Iraq and all places of conflict and, like Gandhi, might go on a hunger strike to shame both sides into finding peace. He would beg these groups to see love as the answer and to release their hatred that only harms themselves.

- Jesus would confront all religious and political figures who use him as a weapon or a money-maker. He would speak directly to the Pope and other Christian leaders who deny women and gay people full participation in the church and equality with heterosexual men. He would look them in the eye and say: "I stand for love and peace, not for power or for money. Those scriptures you quote come from a barbaric society that existed 2,000 years ago. Catch up, people. It's 2005. Don't ever do this again."

Is this an imaginary Jesus? Maybe. I have only a selective belief in the Bible, but I hang on to the hope that Jesus really is an embodiment of love. I certainly

don't think Jesus would condone a lot of what his church does and doesn't do today.

I, and I believe many gay people, have had trouble with Jesus over the years. Most religions I know have homophobia. But I think Christianity stands out in its spiritual disconnection between the teachings of its deity and the homophobia of many of its followers. So why would I believe in someone with a majority of believers who seem to hate gay people? For many years I rejected Jesus and his church. But when I can put aside the hurt and frustration for a pure, uncorrupted idea of Jesus, I begin to see someone I can trust and appreciate. I can begin to open my heart to his real message of love and peace as I can with all the other traditions and mysteries that we love in GSV. Often, it seems gay people reject Christianity totally, based only on the misdeeds of the church. And I'm still angry about that. But to me, the trouble isn't Jesus. It's the misguided, fearful people who act on his behalf.

In this issue of *Visionary* several of our brothers discuss their spiritual journeys on a Christ path. Though the trip hasn't been easy, these men still find a spiritual resonance with Jesus.

If Jesus came back to earth, I think he would be furious and sickened with the way his church has treated gay people. I think he would feel like burning down the church and starting again. But even confronting such a great wrong, he would, I want to believe, forgive these people and love them anyway. In my mind, Jesus would then beg our forgiveness for all the sins his church has committed against gay people. Although I'm not quite ready to follow a Christ-centered spiritual path, I believe I owe it to myself to give Jesus a second chance and make a small place on my altar for him too.



Jennings Fort lives in Atlanta and can be reached at jenman@mindspring.com.

GSV potlucks in Atlanta, are held the fourth Saturday of the month at 7:30 p.m., unless otherwise noted. **GSV potlucks are drug- and alcohol-free events.**

GSV Heart Circles are held the second Sunday of every month at 7:30 p.m., hosted by Wendell Johnson and Lem Arnold. For location and more information, contact Wendell at louis8@hotmail.com or Lem at lem1951@mindspring.com

February 26 – No potluck scheduled.

March 26 – No potluck scheduled.

Gentlemen, please note... that we don't have hosts for the next two months and several months in the summer and fall.

Hosting a potluck is a simple and effective way to serve GSV. Please let us know if you can host.

Contact Ben Linton at benlinton4@bellsouth.net.

April 23 – GSV Potluck. Hosted by Jim Fason and Chris Uberto, 980 Buckhorn East, Atlanta. Contact them at JFason@aol.com or 770-552-1843.

May 27 - GSV Potluck. Hosted by Patrick Mitchell, 2781 McClave Dr., Doraville, GA. Contact Patrick at TheGardenRetreat@mindspring.com or 770-451-6158.

June 25 - GSV Potluck. Hosted by Michael Goettee, Roy Smoot and Marty Harris, 3263 Wynn Drive, Avondale Estates, GA. Contact Mike at maxglietz@mindspring.com or 404-292-5825



A MEMORIAL TO KING THACKSTON

The Elders of Gay Spirit Visions announce a memorial fund to commemorate the life of our brother **Richard King Thackston (1948 - 2004).**

King was instrumental in bringing labyrinths into our circle. Many of you may remember a Fall Conference several years ago when King and Gerry "Dancing Dolphin" Mitchell brought a labyrinth painted on a large piece of material for us to walk in the Tree House. Another year in the Mountain volleyball court, King constructed a labyrinth illuminated with strings of lights. One of his paintings of a labyrinth-type mandala donated to The Mountain hangs in the entrance area of the Lodge.

With Gay Spirit Visions' inspiration, The Mountain has created a walking labyrinth with a handicap-accessible walkway and rock formation in the walking area.

Contributions to the "King Memorial" will be used to enhance and maintain that labyrinth area.

We invite you to honor our brother King by sending your contribution (tax deductible) to:

Gay Spirit Visions
Post Office Box 339
Decatur, GA 30331.





**8th annual
GSV
Spring
Retreat**

April 8-10, 2005

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RECLAIMING JESUS

NO LONGER JUDGE: JESUS AS HEALER

When I was a child, our Baptist church produced an annual Christmas play called "From the Christ Child to the Judgment." The play included the typical elements of a Christmas pageant — wise men, angels, the manger scene — in its first half. But in the second half, the play fast-forwarded to the future, to the end of time, "the judgment seat of Christ." Jesus was no longer the infant in the manger, "meek and mild." Now he was seated at the right hand of God and passed judgment on all the poor souls brought before him. Most of them ended up cast into hell, the lake of fire — portrayed as the small side-entrance next to the choir loft, its walls covered with aluminum foil. Whenever the angels physically dragged a character into the room, the door opened and a red strobe light flashed against the aluminum foil while the folks inside the room screamed hideously. At this point the damned soul started struggling and the angels became bouncers with wings, casting him roughly into hell as he kicked and screamed, begging for a mercy which didn't come.

The effect was so powerful that all of us children avoided that side entrance all year long, even if it meant walking all the way around the church to enter.

I'm sure if I saw the play now, the acting and the special effects would be laughable. But to a small child, the pageant was terrifying. And so, by exten-

sion, Jesus himself, the merciless judge who cast those poor souls into hell, was terrifying. As early as age 8, I knew I was different: I knew that my fascination with Tarzan and other men was wrong, and if I didn't keep my feelings hidden way down deep inside, I might end up as one of the "homosexuals" our country Baptist preacher railed against from time to time.

And so my relationship with Jesus was not one of love, but one of fear. I knew I had to keep him happy at all costs or else I'd be cast into the everlasting lake of fire.

It took me years to break away from the fundamentalist religion I grew up with and finally accept myself as the gay man God created me to be. I was fortunate enough to find another spiritual tradition — two of them, actually — to replace the condemnatory religion of my childhood. I began to relate to God in a drastically different way, through the Franciscan prayer I learned in the Episcopal Church I joined when I finally came out of the closet: "Gentle loving God, mother of my soul, hold me as your own." His was a very different God from the one I grew up with! This was a God who didn't judge me, but who nurtured me, accepted me as just as I am — and who saw my sexuality not as a sin, but as a precious gift. I remember how dumbfounded I was, during those early days out of the closet, when I read Chris Glaser's image of spirituality and sexuality as two equally important and sacred partners in the dance of the soul (from his wonderful book of prayers, *Coming Out to God*). I began to open myself to the healing presence of God, who sought to integrate these two aspects of my soul,

not to elevate one above the other. I began to experience this healing presence in a real and personal way and I slowly came to recognize that for me, this healing presence was (and still is) Jesus.

And so I began to relate to Jesus not as my judge, but as my Healer. I began to read the Gospel stories of Jesus (including those in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas) in a new way. Jesus was a Healer, a wisdom teacher who could sometimes be hard to understand, but whose presence always brought healing and wholeness to those open to receive it. In fact, the only ones who angered Jesus were the religious fundamentalists of his day, the ones who sought to exclude the "sinners" Jesus accepted and loved.

My relationship with Jesus the Healer was also deepened by my study of Sufism. If you've read the beautiful poetry of the great Sufi mystic Rumi, you know that Sufis see God as the Divine Beloved. Rumi saw in his love and longing for his beloved male friend, Shams of Tabriz, a mirror of his love and longing for God, the Divine Beloved. One of the *zikrs* (sacred chants) of the Sufi tradition is "Ishq Allah, Mabud Allah!" — God is Love, God is the Beloved. The Love, the Lover, and the Beloved are One. As I came to know God more deeply through the spiritual practices I learned in the Sufi Healing Order, I came to see Jesus as the Divine Beloved, the lover of my soul.

This is my favorite poem by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks in his book, *The Essential Rumi*:

I called through your door,
"The mystics are gathering
in the street. Come out!"

"Leave me alone.
I'm sick."

Continued on next page

WHY WOULD A GAY MAN LOVE JESUS?

About 10 years ago, after 20 years of gay activism in the Lutheran church, I decided that I had enough. The arrogance, pig-headedness and mean-spiritedness I'd encountered in the church had taken their toll. I decided I could no longer build a spirituality around being pissed off and I could no longer be part of organized Christendom.

I spent several years staying away from churches of all sorts while I explored other paths — chiefly Hinduism, Buddhism and a little Paganism. And you know what? It felt good and healing. I had no stake in these other traditions, so when I encountered homo-ignorance in one or the other, I could shrug it off. I wasn't interested in becoming a devout Hindu or determining if Taoism was really The Way, so I felt completely free to take what was useful to me and leave the rest.

And yet, something was missing for me. While each path I encountered had something beautiful to add to my understanding of the Divine, none spoke the language of my soul. In my most private heart-of-hearts, I still prayed and spoke with God in an intimate way that was Christian.

I decided to treat Christianity the same way I did other faith traditions: I would take what was useful to me and let go of


what didn't speak to me. What speaks to me? I love the story of the incarnation, of God putting on human flesh and living with us. I love how in his God-flesh, Jesus had no use for the self-righteous church leaders of his day, but instead ate with whores and thieves. Jesus understood that suffering is part of the human condition and that the response of a loving God is to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. I love the experience of Jesus as friend, as lover.

I love the call for justice that to me is at the heart of the best of Christianity, the compassionate Jesus who cares for the poor and the sick and the outcast. Hell, Jesus didn't just care for outcasts; he *was* one. Including being an outcast from the dominant religious paradigm of his community. Very much like us, like me.

The qualities of love, compassion, justice and community that Jesus taught and embodied are what keep me connected to the Christian tradition. But the business of Christianity is very problematic for a gay man. Like most of us, I've experienced the church not as the Body of Christ, but often as its opposite: unloving, cold, unjust and exclusionary. The challenge has been to find ways to nurture my spirituality without allowing it to be too caught up in religion, to separate the wheat from the chaff and to distinguish Christ from Christianity (at least, most of it).

As a gay man who wants to travel a Christian path, there are certain things I've found to be essential. One has been

to give up "false idols." Biblical literalism (what I grew up with as a kid) is one of those idols. Another is excessive concern about church bureaucrats and what they say. Let's face it: popes, bishops, theologians and other ordained people frequently say stupid and hateful things. If you think of these people as representatives of God, that's disturbing. If you think of them as a one motley crew of human beings among many, it's just irritating. They can't hurt me, and I certainly am not going to give these people veto power over how I choose to live my spirituality!

Another false idol has been the presumption and arrogance of much of Christianity itself. I love the way I find the divine in Christianity, but I don't see it as superior to the way a Jew finds the divine in Judaism, or a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh find God in their religions. There are 1,000 paths through the forest, someone said. For me, a mature spirituality means paying attention to Wicca, Buddhism and other paths, even if they are not my own path. At the same time, there is great wisdom in the teaching of the Dalai Lama that it is better to dig one well 100 feet deep, rather than 100 wells each 1 foot deep. For me, that deeper well lies in following Jesus. 

John Ballew, M.S., is a licensed professional counselor in private practice in Atlanta. He specializes in issues related to coming out, spirituality, sexuality and relationships. Contact him through his Web site at www.bodymindsoul.org.

NO LONGER JUDGE...


Continued from page 5

"I don't care if you're dead!
Jesus is here, and he wants
to resurrect somebody!"

The Jesus I grew up with, the angry judge who wanted to send me to hell for being gay, is dead. And in his place is resur-

rected a healing presence who gives me the love and acceptance I need for my own resurrection, my own journey toward healing and wholeness, day to day.

I still believe Jesus is the Son of God — but I now know that we are *all* sons and daughters of God. In my love for Jesus the Healer, Jesus the Divine Beloved, I can now recognize the divinity in myself and in us all — just as Rumi recognized

the beauty of God in the beauty of the face of his beloved Shams of Tabriz. 

Darrell Grizzle is a licensed professional counselor who lives in Marietta, GA, with his partner, Michael Varnum, and their mystical cat, Kato. His "Blog of the Grateful Bear" is at wildfaith.blogspot.com

LIVING THE TRUE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Reclaiming my faith? Pondering this I realized that I haven't lost my faith per-se. But I've become disillusioned by the un-Christian attitudes of some of the mainstream Christian faiths, especially my own, Roman Catholicism.

By Catholic standards, I'm not in good standing because I don't follow all the



BY BEN LINTON

church's teachings. At best I'm a "Cafeteria Catholic." For me it isn't about taking what I like and leaving the rest. It's about my commitment to live Christ's commandment, "to love God with all of my heart,

all of my soul and my entire mind, love my neighbor as myself and do not judge." I put this into practice by applying to my life the *Rule of St. Benedict*, the 1,500-year-old guide of living the Gospels in community for monks. The vows of obedience, conversion and stability are the grounding principles of living the Gospels every day.

My first exposure to this philosophy was as a seminarian at the Benedictine priory in Savannah. There was something about St. Benedict's Rule that has resonated with me over the years. It helped me maintain my faith and live as a Christian even when my church is less than welcoming.

The Rule's first word is "obsculta." It means "to listen," but it's much more than just hearing. It's listening with attention. Obedience comes from the word "ob-audire" which means "to hear." Obedience is not subservient submission to authority. Obedience is hearing and listening to God in sacred reading, prayers and in church and community leaders. I'm also to listen for God in all of the people around me, not just the ones I like. God can speak to me in the client who tries my patience, the demanding boss, the impatient driver behind me or the patient one in front of me. This also applies to mundane tasks. It's easy to look for God in the sunset, the stars and

other glorious things. It's quite different to find God in the toilet you're scrubbing or the laundry you're doing. While listening, I attempt to discern what God is asking of me. When I realize the request, I'm to act on it immediately without hesitation. But being human, I question the command and Benedict allows for that. If I think the request is unreasonable, I'm to state my request. If I'm still asked to perform the task, I'm to do it cheerfully without grumbling. I have to remember this when I'm asked to do a task I think is beneath me. If I fail, I usually learn something new about myself.


The second vow, conversion of manners, ties into listening. Through listening, I hear how or what I need to change. It's around the community of family, work, friends and GSV that I can experience the ongoing process of becoming more Christ-like. To do this, I have to be open to change. If I'm to be spiritual, I must accept change and growth, taking responsibility for what has to be changed in me and confronting myself. I have to be open to what God is calling me to do. This was never promised to be easy. It's not easy to let go of control, the things that control me and the fear of failure. In his book *Always We Begin Again*, Christian writer John McQuiston II sums it up best:

"...To form a loving image of our God, and to love our true God, with all our hearts, with all our minds, and with all our strength, and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. If we follow the spirit of these two charges, we will not need any others. But because we are merely human, we should remind ourselves, to relieve the unhappy, to visit the sick, to clothe the destitute, to shelter the oppressed, not to take ourselves too seriously, not to want more than we need, not to love possessions, not to carry resentment, to support the troubled, to encourage good humor, to forgive our enemies, to show mercy to the weak, not to want praise, not to be proud, not to be slothful, not to offer unwanted

advice, to pray frequently, to distrust one's own will, to speak the truth to ourselves and others.... "

I have to manifest Christ in my thoughts, words and deeds with integrity and this isn't easy. It's a place where I find myself falling again and again, being transformed in Christ spiritually, emotionally and psychologically, giving myself permission to fail, knowing I can count on God's mercy.

My communities lead to the third vow, stability. Stability is accepting where I am now, the people in my life now, my community, my spiritual path and my church as a way to find God. Stability doesn't mean staying with a violent spouse or dead-end job. Stability teaches me how to deal with the mundane and daily frustrations in this moment. It requires me to be responsible for myself, no matter how much I want to fight, ignore or run. I have to face my inner truth, listening to what the situation is asking me to do at this moment. If I'm trusting God, then I have to be prepared to act on what I am being lead to do.

It isn't easy being gay and Catholic at this point in time. I've had a difficult time attempting to be the best Christian and Catholic that I can be when it seems the rest of the world is telling me I'm unworthy of being a Christian, let alone of God's love. In listening to God through scripture, the *Rule of St. Benedict*, my family, friends and GSV brothers, I've been able to discern that I'm a good and decent spiritual Christian. In following the *Rule of St. Benedict*, I've learned to continually attempt change, realizing I'm not perfect and that I will fall time and time again. But the God of mercy is there to help me up again and then I must show that same mercy to others. Stability teaches me that I can stand for what I believe even in the face of criticism and hatred. I look for God in those people and pray that they can see God in me. Come to think of it, I don't know that I need to reclaim Christ; I think some of the so called Christian institutions do. 

Ben "Numinous" Linton is GSV Elder of Service. He lives in Atlanta where he is a credit counselor, working with the homeless and jobless to manage their debt. Currently he is discerning which direction his career path will take him.

A COSMIC CHRIST CONSCIOUSNESS

I grew up in New England attending a Southern Baptist evangelical church. The emphasis was on salvation and the preaching was a pulpit-pounding fire and brimstone philosophy. Each week we would hear about a litany of sins which could land you in hell and, according to the sins listed, my alcoholic, dysfunctional family and I were all headed there. Let's just say the fear of God had been planted in me so deeply that I headed off to Bible school as a young adult and joined the ex-gay ministry for eight years in an attempt to rid myself of my disco era sinfulness.



I had used ex-gay ministry literature and tapes to de-program myself of those awful sins of bath houses and tearoom sex. I was so successful, I even married a woman, all along attending my Homosexuality Anonymous meetings faithfully. The marriage didn't last but my dedication to the ex-gay ministry continued. It was not a hopeful ministry because, over the years, many of the ex-gay founders' and leaders' ministries backslid into the gay subculture. A twist of fate happened when the fall of the Jim and Tammy Faye Baker empire combined with the Jimmy Swaggart prostitute scandal, caused me to become disillusioned with born-again Christians.

Not knowing where to go, I started visiting other denominations outside the Bible belt mentality that I was used to. I eventually felt most comfortable at a charismatic Catholic folk mass. That Lent, a group of Franciscans spoke at our church about ministering to men dying of AIDS and I decided to join them. As I ministered to the men and started to see God's spirit at work loving these men in the death and dying process, I started wondering if my homosexuality was loveable by God. My answer came in the form of a book called *Original Blessing* by Matthew Fox. In the book I learned that my sexuality was not original sin but rather an original blessing given to me by God to be used lovingly and spiritually. I met my lover in the Franciscan community and we opened a lay

Franciscan retreat center where we taught Matthew Fox' principles of creation spirituality which honors eastern and western mysticism and all the pagan earth-based religions. The concept of the Cosmic Christ is that all of the world religions and the cosmos are the body of Christ.

My lover was 20 years older than me and not willing to have a sexual union, due to Catholic guilt about gay sex. So after 4½ years I decided I had put off coming out of the closet long enough. I left him and the Franciscans in New Hampshire to finally come out. This brought me to Vermont where I joined the gay community. I also came out as an artist and studied art and spirituality in the holistic studies program of Vermont College and emerged in local galleries as a collage artist. My roommate was a radical faerie and drag performance artist so I came out in the fullness of my faerie fabulosity. Through the faeries, I discovered the goddess in many cultures and started to celebrate her in my artwork. Although I loved the faeries I was not as "radical" as they were and, as a Franciscan, decided to join Dignity, the Catholic gay-affirmative group. I loved decorating the Dignity altars and creating art and ritual.

By 2001 I graduated with my B.A. and had become known internationally as a collage artist. That year I had also become the president of Dignity Vermont. In the spring of 2002 my whole life was turned upside down when I opened the Sunday paper and saw an article about my Dignity priest being exposed as a pedophile. I informed the New England and national Dignity offices about the crisis and resigned as president. The crisis in the Catholic church actually started to affect my life personally because I was raped by a priest as a child and decided to call a lawyer. The past two years have been hard for me as a survivor of clergy abuse but I don't regret holding the church accountable. I now live in Asheville, NC, and am part of a creation spirituality group called Jubilee Community.

Art Blue has his own business *MotherEarth GiftTiles.com* and can be contacted at artblue1111@hotmail.com

ST. SERGIUS AND

Around the year 303, Sergius and Bacchus were martyred in Resapha, south of the Euphrates River. Their shrine has been called the Canterbury of the East, because it was second only to Jerusalem as a place of pilgrimage. They have churches all over the Middle East with the oldest in Cairo. At least five churches are dedicated to them in Rome. Tens of thousands of modern men bear the name Sergius in some form or other. They were the official patrons of the Byzantine armies for nearly 1,000 years and desert nomads still consider them special patrons.

Warrior saints and icons of masculine courage and strength, they must both laugh and weep at us from their vantage point in heaven. Christians have swept a significant aspect of their lives under the rug. According to early Greek manuscripts – written before things were "tidied up" – scattered throughout Europe, Sergius and Bacchus were "erasti" or lovers.

Sergius and Bacchus were Christians and officers in the Roman army. When they refused to attend mandatory sacri-



ST. BACCHUS

fices to Jupiter; they were arrested and imprisoned. To humiliate them as soldiers, they were forced to walk through the streets of Resapha in women's clothing. According to Greek manuscripts, however, they embraced this shame with joy, going to meet their groom like brides on their wedding day. They were then separated and Bacchus was tortured to death. Sergius survived his torture longer and at night began to lose heart in his prison cell. Bacchus appeared to him and encouraged him to persevere. It's here that the old manuscripts are particularly amazing. Though in standard stories, a wavering martyr is promised heaven or Jesus as his reward, Bacchus encourages Sergius to persevere because "your reward will be me."

It's understandable that this information might make the Christian church uncomfortable. Here are bona fide saints popular throughout Europe and Latin America because of all the miracles they perform. But they no longer fit into the shrinking Christian ethos. Though the Christian church has persecuted homosexuals for centuries, both the Roman and Orthodox churches celebrate the feast of Sergius and Bacchus on Oct. 7. Still the church persecutes homosexuals in the ecclesiastical realm and beyond.

Christianity has spiritually raped many groups of people: women and gay folk in general, Native Americans in particular and people of various cultures throughout the world. But now people are beginning to gather in small groups to find and hear their own stories. These stories are the stuff from which true theology is made for they contain precious seeds from the ripened fruit of many lives. The gay lovers Sergius and Bacchus, who rejoice in heaven, are worthy patrons of their search for life. May they guide us toward a future in which diversity can be seen a blessing rather than a threat.

—Harold Cole, January 1995

JESUS, A MODEL OF COMING OUT

(Summarized from Helminiak's up-coming book from The Haworth Press, *Queer Quest: Sexual Identity and Spiritual Growth*)

Christianity presents Jesus as a model for every person. Including GLBTI people?

In fact, recent research suggests that

BY DANIEL A.
HELMINIAK



Jesus was actually what today we would call gay. In *The Man Jesus Loved*, Theodore Jennings convincingly makes that argument. Of course, other scholars question Jennings' conclusion.

Probably we could never be certain about Jesus' sexual orientation.

Nonetheless, Jesus does provide a model for gay people. Coming out is essentially a matter of authenticity. Jesus shows what it means to be authentic. So his case speaks to anyone coming out in any way. This argument concerns personal identity, not sexual identity. This argument appeals to the heart of traditional Christianity: the belief that Jesus was God.

To get my point, you have to understand something about interpreting the Bible. For example, the main lesson of my book, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, is the need to look at what the biblical authors themselves meant when they wrote their texts, not at what the texts in English translation might suggest to our 21st-century minds. On that basis, it is clear that the Bible had no notion of "homosexuality" and no concern whatsoever about it. The prohibition in Leviticus 18:22 regards one male-male sex act only—anal penetration. That prohibition involved religious taboo, ritual uncleanness, not the nature of human sexuality. Knowledge of the text's original historical and cultural context reveals an understanding very different from ours.

Scholars have also dug beneath the Gospel accounts of Jesus. The results are equally provocative.

The Gospels were written as testaments of early Christian faith. They do not recount the precise words and deeds of

Jesus. Rather, they portray what the early Christians came to understand about Jesus. To this extent, the Gospels are true, but they are not history in our sense of the word. Nonetheless, we can know something of Jesus himself. Scholars have pieced together a sketch of the man Jesus who is the basis of the Gospel faith.

As it turns out, Jesus never claimed to be God. This fact does not necessarily mean that he was not God, only that he had no clear idea of his identity. But who has? We humans have to risk being ourselves even though we don't fully understand what being ourselves means. Gay people understand this human requirement. As a real human being, Jesus lived by this same requirement.

Gospel statements to the effect that Jesus was God occur only in John. There Jesus says things like "Before Abraham came to be, I am" and "the Father and I are one." These statements express the theology of John, not the actual words of Jesus. There is little that is similar to such statements in the other three Gospels.

Jesus did not even claim to be the Messiah. Compare Jesus' comments at his trial before the Jewish High Priest. In Mark 14:61-62, when asked if he were "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One," Jesus responds, "I am," but he then changes the subject and talks about the Son of Man, not the Messiah. This "I am" is part of Mark's theology, not Jesus' own words, for it matches the understanding of Jesus that Mark announces in the first sentence of his Gospel, and it matches Mark's teaching about a suffering Messiah that Mark 8:29-33 develops. In contrast, in the same situation Matthew 26:63-64 has Jesus distance himself from the question about the Messiah and say, "It is you who say so." And Luke 22:67-69 has Jesus evade the question altogether.

As best as can be determined, Jesus thought of himself as a prophet. Perhaps he also referred to himself as Son of Man, a term with a complex and ambiguous meaning.


The upshot is that Jesus did not seem to be too clear about his identity. He did not seem to know how to conceive of himself. Was Jesus perhaps struggling with inner

feelings and hunches? Was he dealing with inklings that he could not express well and that others would not understand? Then, did Jesus have to come to grips with his own true self in a way similar to a person's grappling with his or her homosexuality? That Jesus did is precisely what I am suggesting.

At the Council of Nicaea in 312 C.E., the Church proclaimed that Jesus was, indeed, God. On the basis of Jesus' teachings and deeds, Christian faith had always revered Jesus as God. Why not, then, state outright that he was God? And so the Council did.

Take the Council at its word. At least for the sake of argument, allow this traditional belief about Jesus. Then consider the dilemma that his being God created for Jesus.

At some level of consciousness, this sensitive man must have been in touch with his deepest identity. But how could he express or even conceive this relentless inner sense? If he said, "I am God," his words would have meant that he was "the Father in heaven," and he knew he was not. If he said, "I am the Son of God," all would have agreed, but in Jewish usage "Son of God" applied to anyone profoundly blessed. If he used the words of Nicaea, "I am consubstantial to the Father," people would have thought him a raving lunatic. Besides, as a first-century Jew, he did not know the technical formula of Nicaea. There was no ready-made way to conceptualize what Jesus was. Why should there be? Such a thing had never happened before. So Jesus was left to live out his life in trust and faith. Relying only on the insistence that burned in his heart, at a great price he was true to himself. And history has never been the same.

Grant that Jesus was really God, and this insight follows: The example of the central figure of Christianity teaches gay people to be true to themselves and, in costly honesty and loving good-will, to come out. 

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