

## A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

September 16, 2012

This morning (Sunday) I decided to take Pinot for a walk along the river, on the Little Rock side. It was a pleasant, cloudy September morning, after a weekend of rain. We walked for about an hour.

The river market area draws an interesting and economically diverse crowd. On the one hand, it is a tourist area. The William Jefferson Clinton library is close, and there are several upper-class restaurants, hotels, museums, and shops in the area. Apartments in the area are expensive, and reportedly include clientele such as actor Ted Danson.



On the other hand, the area also draws the homeless and destitute. Inside the river market, especially when the weather is very cold, one can sometimes hardly find a place to sit without being very close to someone who smells like they have been months without a bath. It is common to be asked for a handout, and the fact that a majority of these panhandlers are black adds to the discomfort of white patrons. (I have often wondered what is the police department's policy on identifying and discouraging the panhandlers.)

When I was younger, the river market area was horrible. It was sort of a forgotten industrial area with lots of empty buildings that were attractive to the loser, down-and-out-type folks. In the past couple of decades, however, Little Rock has done a wonderful job of investing in this area of the city such as to reclaim it from its ghetto-type existence. It is one of my favorite places to film and "people watch," as you can tell if you pay attention to my YouTube and Facebook postings (especially my videos).

As Pinot and I made our way down toward the water, we discovered a group of white people having church (or "bible study," as we used to call it) under one of the nice pavilions provided there. These were nice people. They had good-smelling coffee brewing and snacks, and there were none of the nasty homeless types making their way up there to listen to their message of faith or partake of their goodies. The homeless were not welcomed at this pavilion, although it is difficult to explain how we all knew that. There were no tattoos in sight, no backpacks, no cigarettes, and nobody sitting on the ground.

Pinot and I would have been welcomed, but I was not feeling spiritually needy at the moment, so we just passed on by.

The message that could be heard in passing was the usual: Jesus died for us, so we should have faith and live for Him. I can't remember much else about what was being said, for the same reason that one can hardly ever remember much about a Sunday morning church message.

To one side of that pavilion was a play area that included a huge culvert that is positioned such that it is a neat tunnel for children to play in. Instead of any children, though, there was a pile of dirty clothes, makeshift bedding, and empty styrofoam food trays. This was where someone slept last night.

As we made our way further down the river, away from the market area, the signs of homelessness became more and more apparent. Mostly men and mostly black, they would stare at me as I walked by with my iPhone 4, my headphones, and my poodle (who was looking particularly well cared for today, because he just went to the groomer yesterday and was still wearing his blue bandana around his neck and blue polish on his toenails).

They know I am not homeless. If I get too close to them, they will sometimes speak and try to make pleasant small talk; this usually is leading up to asking for money.

Finally, at the far end of the trail, under a busy overpass, there was another church service going on. This one was different from the first one. Much different. Here, there were no tables provided by the city, because this is not a pavilion; it is just a bridge. The chairs that were there were presumably provided by the person providing the sermon, but there were as many folks sitting on the ground or standing nearby as were seated in the provided chairs.

There was a large van (not the kind with lots of seats that carries people, but more of a mobile command center type van) that said something like "From His Throne Ministries" on the side. It is unknown if this vehicle is owned and operated by a church, or if it IS the church.

The preacher was a white lady with an unpleasant voice; she wore a headset microphone that was connected to an amplifier so that everyone could hear her above the noise of the cars overhead. She was making some analogy between fig trees and the kingdom of God, and how fig trees are some of the only trees in the world that form fruit before forming leaves. This, she said, is like God's kingdom, but I did not stay around long enough for her to make me fully understand the likeness between God's kingdom and fig trees.

Here, it was apparent that anyone was everyone is welcome, although Pinot and I would have been out of place, because it was also apparent that Pinot and I both eat better and bathe more often than most of the folks there. But even the posture and facial expressions of these churchgoers was different.

At the pavilion, everyone had been sitting up straight in his or her chair or bench and was at least trying to give the impression that they were paying attention and not hung over from last night's activities. (Only one person at the pavilion--a teenage girl--gave the impression that she was trying to figure out how the morning message was relevant to her life.)

Not so under the bridge. Here, some people were not even facing the right direction. Some were trying to roll or light cigarettes in the breeze, while others chatted among themselves or just stared at the ground, looking dejected, hung over, and beaten. They were dirty. They

smelled. Their hair and clothes were unkempt. The path that led these folks here was strewn with disaster, loss, bad decisions, worse luck, and general hopelessness and despair. I wondered how many of them were actually trying to understand about fig trees, and how many just wanted a cup of free hot coffee. I tried to decide which ministry was doing more good. Which was more "right." Which made more sense. Which (if any) was more deserving of a donation.

I tried, but it was too hard. There is too much information I don't have, and too much about life (especially in the world of the homeless) that I do not understand, even after nearly five decades of living.

The only thing that I could decide was that the actual message of both preachers was equally worthless. Both messages amounted to a spoonful of zeros, just like almost all of the messages I heard in thirty plus years of going to church. They both gave the usual message that people in organized religions get every week. Believe, give, have faith, pray, God is love . . . give. Give. They rely on clever analogies and charisma, as well as a general belief that God's message is a mystery anyway (so don't worry if you don't really understand), to make their congregations feel like they are getting something useful.

The only real difference I could discover between the two sermons was the people in attendance. The people at the pavilion, I felt, were there to show themselves (and God) what good people they are. Their NEED to be there was inside themselves, created for them by their parents and their culture. Here I am, doing what I am supposed to do.

The people under the bridge, on the other hand, were looking for some more tangible relief. Maybe just the relief provided by free coffee. Maybe they wanted to hear some words of hope. Maybe they were saying, "God (or maybe, "Goddamit"), surely there must be something better than this shitty life!"

I never was able to figure it out. I'm sure my good church-going friends and family (who are all quite certain THEY know something about this that I don't know) will offer me lots of explanations. Meanwhile, I remain ignorant and undecided.

Also, I did not offer any money to either. But if I did have to choose, I would probably be more likely to give to the bridge-goers. Based on my studies of Jesus, I think those are the people He would have been more likely to hang out with.

That was my church, my religious experience, this Sunday.