

W.C.FIELDS AND THE BIBLE

March 22, 2009 at St. James Westminster, London, ON

- Archdeacon Ken Anderson -

John 3: 14-21

W.C. Fields was quite a character.

A cynic, a wit, a souse.

Those of us who are old-time movie buffs remember some of his more infamous lines:

“Anybody who hates dogs and little boys can’t be all bad.”

“Start everyday with a smile ... and get it over with.”

“The laziest man I ever met put popcorn in his pancakes so they would turn over by themselves.”

Most of his sayings can’t be repeated in polite company, and probably not from the pulpit, either!

For Fields, nothing was sacred.

With his wicked sense of humour he would poke fun at anyone or anything.

A story is told of a neighbourhood boy passing by W.C. Field’s home
one Sunday morning on his way to church.

He was surprised to see W.C. on the front porch sitting on a wooden chair,
feet up on an orange crate.

What was even more surprising was that W.C. Fields had a cigar in one hand
and a Bible in the other.

The boy ventured closer and said:

“Gee, Mr. Fields, I didn’t know you were a religious man.”

W.C. flicked his trademark cigar,

fingered through the Bible and muttered out of the corner of his mouth:

“Just lookin’ for loopholes, m’boy. Just lookin’ for loopholes.”

Lots of people go through life looking for loopholes.

We hire lawyers to look for loopholes in contracts we wish we hadn’t signed.

We find ingenious ways to wriggle out of commitments we have made.

Some churches who are totally intolerant of divorce say that if the couple never had sexual
relationships, or if one of the partners was not baptized,
they were not really wed in the eyes of God;
so, if they’ve never really been married,
divorce doesn’t even come into the picture.

Loopholes, alibis, excuses let us off the hook.

We’ve heard so much about the way fundamentalists look at the Bible. They are literalists.

They look at every word ... at each and every sentence ...

and believe that it fully and absolutely comes directly from the mouth of God.

I grew up in that tradition and I can remember the disappointment in my mother’s eyes

when I started finding contradictions, even errors in the Bible,

and wrote my Master’s thesis on that issue.

She thought that if I, or anyone else, found discrepancies in scripture,

this would give us the rationale, the loophole, to throw it all overboard.

So she stood firmly by her fundamentalism ... she had a joyful, bubbly faith,

but couldn’t allow much rational, critical thinking to muddy the waters.

Remember the Sunday School teacher who ask her young children
how Noah spent his time on the ark?

There was no response.

“Do you suppose he did a lot of fishing?” she suggested.

“What” asked a surprised little boy, “with only two worms?”

There is an absurdity in fundamentalism.

In some ways, I think it actually allows us to *diminish* our understanding
of the great works of God, and the scriptures

... to pigeon-hole it into narrow categories of magic and miracle.

But in one sense my mother was right.

In our much more liberal society, there are many who see the scriptures as limiting, ill-informed,
full of loopholes at best, should be thrown out at worst.

Pick and choose, sort and discard.

The loopholes make it easier to throw it all away.

One little error here, another discrepancy there, and ... *none* of it can now be trusted.

On the more positive side, all the loopholes, all the more difficult passages,
force me to look deeper and deeper, beneath the words, to discover what God is really saying.

I was taken to task for a sermon I preached two weeks ago.

A parishioner suggested that the story of Abraham and Lot
should *not* be “among the living texts of the Bible”.

That Lot, who acted in a thoroughly despicable way towards his daughters,
should not be allowed to use drunkenness as an excuse for his abominations.

He was not a good or righteous man, insisted this parishioner.

It might have been better if he had been turned into a pillar of salt instead of his wife.

That the sermon was preached on International Woman’s Day was a further blow.

Archaic, Sharia-like laws in the Old Testament should be expunged.

I was challenged and stirred by this response.

Someone’s listening. Someone’s objecting. Someone’s holding me to task.

Someone’s thinking critically about the scriptures.

I had been on one track. This person on another.

It’s not even that we substantially disagreed but the legitimate point I was making
was not the one she needed to hear, and I should have been more sensitive to that,
and the complexity of the text.

When I say we should think critically, it is not to suggest that we constantly harp and criticize.

Thinking critically means to find out as much as we can about
our faith, about the Bible, and apply our God-given gift of reason.

There’s the world of difference between looking for loopholes and thinking critically.

The passage we heard today, John 3:16, is, or should be, the best known passage in the Bible.
It has been nicknamed “the Gospel in a nut shell”.

It summarizes it all.

There’ll be picky little things here, incomprehensible passages there,

but if you were only to memorize one verse in all the Bible, it would be John 3:16.

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that all who believe in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.”*

Let me attempt to break that down,
without diminishing it:

God loves the world; he loves all he has created;
especially he loves men and women and children.
We have been made in God's own image; we have a special place in God's creation.
There are far too many denominations and individual Christians
who emphasize God's punishment, who delight in pointing fingers at sinners ...
but the most important verse in the Bible tells us that God loves us.

He loves us so much, he wants so badly to keep us out of harm's way,
and he knows we can be obstinate and thick-skinned,
he sent his Son, Jesus, to model the life he wants us to enjoy.
Jesus gave his very life, his all, so that we might live forevermore.
Always, not just for a day, not just next month, or year, or decade, but forevermore.
That's the great promise,
and I hope you won't tear it apart or water it down by looking for loopholes.

I've been with four families over the past few weeks that have had to come
face to face with sudden death, in all cases the death of a son or daughter.
Sudden death. Unsettling death. People shaken to the bone.
They, and any of us who have faced tragedy or enormous upheaval,
need to know of God's abiding, sustaining love.
Full stop.
No ifs, ands or loopholes!

I went to the Canadian Bible Society Book Store here in London
and asked the clerks to recommend an easy to read study-Bible.
It so happens that the version called, "The Promise" is on sale now
with a DVD thrown in.
When I was there I picked up a little book for Sophia, also.
At two years old, she can learn to count to ten, using stories from the Bible.
Our own Church Library has many more resources
to help you on your journey.
For that is what we are doing really, isn't it?
Going on a journey of faith together.
Trying to bring out the best in ourselves and others; receiving spiritual food from the scriptures;
asking for help from above.

I've been thinking of this theme of loopholes for some time and how we use them
to dodge responsibility.
I discovered loopholes are prevalent in all our cultures.
I got home, yesterday, after spending the better part of a week
on the Caribbean coast of Mexico (great holiday by the way).
When we landed in the airport at Cancun
a shuttle-bus transported us to our hotel an hour's further south.
On the windows of the bus were several decals all saying,
"No alcohol is to be served while this bus is in motion.
Limit of two beers per person, \$3 US. Tips are welcome!"
How strange, I thought. It's not to be served, but there is a limit of two ...with a reward, a tip,
for the server. Until three minutes out of the airport it all became clear.
The bus driver pulled the coach over to the side of the road,
popped open a case of cold Mexican Corona,
and offered them to all the passengers ... for the bargain price of \$3.

You see, the bus was not in motion ... it was stopped at a layby for a moment.
And the law said nothing about *consuming* alcohol on the bus,
just about *servng* alcohol on a moving vehicle.

Yes, indeed, we are a society that sometimes spends more time
getting out of commitments, getting around obligations, looking for loopholes,
that we forget God calls us to something more honourable, far greater.
To grasp life, to celebrate it, rather than to hide from it.

God calls us into vibrant, joyful, healthy living with him,
and no matter what you think of some of the small errors and inconsistencies
in the Bible, one thing is abundantly clear:

*“God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that all who believe in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.”*