

A Good Word for Ken Godwin
April 19, 2018

My pastoral colleagues who convene annually for retreat have a running joke that we are going to write a book based on our experiences called, “You Can't Make This Stuff Up!” Each year as we share the joys and commiserate about the oddity called “pastoral life” there are new chapters to add. Mine for this coming summer might be entitled “Atheists Make the Best Deacons – and Their Buddhist Wives Make the Best Christians!”

While he was not uncomfortable with that designation, from our conversations together I think “agnostic” might have been a more apt description of my friend, Dr. Ken Godwin. From the Greek roots *agnos* and *gnosis*, meaning “not knowing,” agnostics say there's a lot more about God we cannot know (even if there's God) than we can know. Frankly, I am not too uncomfortable using that word to describe a humble approach to theology – and this Baptist minister had gotten pretty comfortable serving with a deacon who had a lot less certainty about a supreme being than about the supreme value of community. The whole Christian Church would do well with a little less certainty and a lot more service.

In his list of those “*gifts of the spirit*,” the Apostle Paul names faith as one of the gifts. That implication may be troubling, namely, if it is just one of the gifts, maybe some people do not get it? That is, what Paul says, and his affirmation meets with my experience of people.

If “faith” means something like a blind assent to a set of religious beliefs, then some people indeed do not have it. Ken did not. (He didn't even want it!) His academic discipline had made him a confirmed empiricist. There was nothing “blind” in Ken's acceptance of anything. And, on the other hand if “faith” means something more like “being faithful,” which is actually more true to its Greek origin, some people also do not get that. But Ken Godwin had the gift of faithfulness, in abundance.

Ken was faithful in the pursuit of truth. Ken was faithful in his vision of justice. Ken Godwin, who wasn't so certain about God, was unwavering in his commitment to community, even to the one, small Christian church that had first taught him those values.

There were a lot of things Ken Godwin did not to believe. That never stopped him from being faithful.

Ken was probably as influential a mentor as I have ever had. For almost 18 years he has been a source of almost limitless information and inspiration, of stinging challenge and comfort, of wise words and a tireless, quiet witness. I will forever be grateful for what Ken taught me about evolution and humanity and government and justice, and, by challenging my beliefs, all that Ken taught me about God.

I have often said that I do not believe in the same god many atheists do not believe in, so Ken's theology and mine were actually a lot closer than some people could imagine. Every time I got an email from Ken I was reminded of the irony of our relationship, and every message made me hope that maybe the transcendent "More" to which I ascribe my faith actually was smiling on us.

You see, the emails would come from "Godwin K. at gmail.com" (godwink@gmail.com), but as I read them, I often had a sense that I was listening for a word from "god wink." I know I'm being clever, but I actually mean this. The emails came from Ken, but most of them spoke to me of an even deeper source of wisdom and truth.

For Ken Godwin, whose life of faithfulness will always make me grateful, and might just make "God wink" for all eternity,

May it be so. Amen.