

Preface

I have placed most of what would normally constitute the preface of this book into the first chapter. I have done that because it sets the stage for this book and I do not want my readers to skip over this material because they regard any preface only as a throat-clearing operation on the part of the author. Chapter 1 is vital to the work of the whole of this book. So in this preface I will only mention those people who have assisted me in the task of preparing this book and those people and institutions to which this book is dedicated.

I must say that with this book, my twenty-fourth, I feel a sense of completion. I have arrived at a place both spiritually and theologically with which I am content. My life is still a journey along the Christ path into the mystery of God, and that continues to be an ever deepening reality, but the more I walk this path the less I find that words are my communication vehicle of choice and I slip into the wonder of wordlessness. I think those who have been my great teachers must have felt the same thing, for John A. T. Robinson entitled one of his last books *In the End, God* and Paul Tillich entitled one of his *On the Boundary*. I resonate significantly with the retired bishop who once said to me, “The older I get the more deeply I *believe*, but the less *beliefs* I have.” That, I think, is the mystical oneness to which all religious systems point and is thus the final goal of the religious journey. I can now see that boundary.

I have wrestled with the Christian faith for all of my now eighty-two years and I find myself at this moment, to the surprise

of my traditionalist critics, I'm sure, more deeply committed to my Christ and to my faith than ever before. My commitment is, however, to a new understanding of both the Christ and Christianity. I am increasingly drawn to a Christianity that has no separating barriers and that does not bind me into the creeds of antiquity. It is a Christianity that cannot be contained by or expressed through traditional liturgical forms. I have no desire to find certainty or to embrace religious security. I choose rather to live in the unbounded joy of embracing the radical insecurity that is the nature of human life and by doing so to discover that I am in fact walking the Christ path. I also have no desire to walk any other faith path. I have discovered, however, that if I walk the Christ path deeply enough and far enough, it will lead me beyond anything I now know about Christianity. I see that not as a negative statement, but as a positive one. Jesus walked beyond the boundaries of his religion into a new vision of God. I think that this is what I also have done and that is what I want to celebrate. God is ultimate. Christianity is not. The only way I know how to walk into the ultimacy of God, however, is to walk through Christianity. I claim not that the Christian path is the exclusive path, but that it is the only path I know and thus the only path on which I can walk. I claim for myself without equivocation the title "Christian." I define human life through the lens of the Christ experience and that satisfies me. I can honestly say with deep conviction that I am who I am because of my relationship with one called Jesus of Nazareth and that it is through him that the meaning of what I call God has been opened for me.

It is because of that conviction that I have dedicated this book not just to my very special wife, but also to the two churches in which I have lived for the longest number of years and which have nurtured me in the deepest and most significant ways. Churches, by which I mean congregations, are not always given the credit

they deserve for introducing their people to the transformative power of the God they exist to serve. Maybe that is so because so many of them are struggling maintenance organizations, but beyond these struggles they do represent something wondrous and something real. That is what I, at least, have experienced in all of the churches that have shaped my life. Before I speak of the two churches that were the most formative and thus to which my debt is the deepest, let me in this preface say just a word about each of the other congregations in which my life has been lived.

My first experience of Christian community was in the Church of the Holy Comforter, then on South Boulevard in Charlotte, North Carolina, but now located on Park Road. Here I was baptized as an infant and my earliest memories of church rise out of my Sunday school experience in this place. One lay couple stands out for me above all others. Estelle Darrow was my kindergarten teacher for the three years between ages three and five. I remember little content from that time, but I remember loving to go to Sunday school and always being eager to see Mrs. Darrow. Her husband, Herbert, directed the church school, led the opening exercises and was my fifth grade Sunday school teacher. Our subject that year was the Ten Commandments. Mr. Darrow skipped the seventh commandment and went directly from “You shall do no murder” to “You shall not steal.” Noting this omission, I raised my hand and asked, “Mr. Darrow, you skipped commandment number seven. What does it mean to commit adultery?” It was an innocent question. I had no idea what adultery meant. His response, however, was indelible. “You will learn about that when you get older!” he said.

I left this church shortly before my twelfth birthday, not for any negative reason, but in order to sing in the boys’ choir at St. Peter’s, the downtown Episcopal church in Charlotte. In a very short time I was so drawn by that choir and by the experience

of singing in that church that I decided to be confirmed there, rather than at Holy Comforter. My father died about four months after I was confirmed and my choirmaster, a lovely, white-haired musical genius named William Wall Whiddit, was a pastor to me long before I knew what a pastor was. My life was significantly rooted in this church and it became a haven of security for me in my radically anxious and insecure young life. In early 1946 this church also brought into my life my first great mentor. His name was Robert Littlefield Crandall, a former navy chaplain during World War II, serving on the carrier *Wasp* in the South Pacific. The war being over, this man at the ripe old age of thirty-two returned to civilian life to be my rector. He was there during all of my years in high school and college, leaving for Louisiana in late 1952. More perhaps than he ever realized, he was my role model, the one who created in me the desire to be ordained and the one on whom, both consciously and unconsciously, I patterned my priestly life and career.

I was ordained to the diaconate in St. Peter's in 1955. Robert Crandall came back from Louisiana to be the preacher at that service, so he and that church literally launched me into my professional career. I have been able to return in my later life to St. Peter's in Charlotte on several occasions to tell them what they meant to me. These were wonderfully satisfying moments. I also spoke in this church at the burial of my mother.

In September of 1949 I left Charlotte and St. Peter's Church to enroll at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. While at that great university I attended regularly the Chapel of the Cross, the Episcopal church located literally on its campus. The rector, David W. Yates, and the university Episcopal chaplain, L. Bartine Sherman, were both incredibly gifted men to whom I looked up with appreciation.

In my senior year at the university I served on the weekends

as the “lay reader in charge” at St. Mark’s Church in Roxboro, North Carolina, located about thirty miles from Chapel Hill, and there I had my first experience of what it means to lead a congregation. The people at St. Mark’s were kind to put up with both my inexperience and my immaturity and I have many happy memories that bind me still to that lovely church in that wonderful small town.

While studying for the priesthood at Virginia Theological Seminary from 1952 through 1955, I had two “field work” assignments, as we called them. The first was at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in downtown Alexandria, Virginia. The rector of this church was William Henry Mead, who would later become the bishop of Delaware. He was a brilliant orator whose sermons introduced me to the power of the pulpit, a force I would never forget.

The second was a rural chapel in Culpepper County, Virginia. St. Paul’s Church, Raccoon Ford, was its name, and there I spent the Sundays of my senior year in seminary. Leaving my home in Alexandria about 5:00 A.M., I would drive into the beautiful Virginia countryside to get to Raccoon Ford in time to teach Sunday school, to conduct the morning worship service, to preach, to have Sunday dinner with a church family, to visit parishioners on Sunday afternoon and finally to lead the youth group on Sunday evening. I would then drive back to my apartment near the seminary, arriving about 10:00 P.M. on Sunday night, exhausted, but also exhilarated. There were many dynamics in that rural congregation that helped me to understand how communities work. My supervisor was the Rev. David Lewis, then the rector in Culpepper, who later became the suffragan bishop of Virginia. He and his wife, Carol, were wonderful, gracious and gifted people whose friendship I treasured.

St. Joseph’s Episcopal Church in West Durham, North Caro-

lina, located quite literally between Duke University and the Erwin Cotton Mills, was the first church I served after ordination. It was also the place in which I was ordained as a priest on December 28, 1955, with the same David Lewis, my former supervisor, serving as the preacher on that occasion. St. Joseph's welcomed my newly-minted ministry and tolerated my excessive zeal and intense ambition to be the best priest I could be. The location of this church was both its challenge and its opportunity. My two church wardens symbolized this community. Milton (Piggy) Barefoot, a lifelong member of the mill community, was my senior warden, and Dr. Herman Salinger, the head of Duke University's German department and a published poet, was my junior warden. In this first assignment I had the challenge and the opportunity of bringing these two worlds together and I learned much from both.

Next came Calvary Parish in Tarboro, North Carolina, and its neighboring church, St. Luke's. Calvary was the place on my career path in which I grew up and I owe so very much to the members of that congregation and community, especially to those longtime members who were quite sure that I was "over the top." The late 1950s and early 60s were not an easy time in history in America. Early in my ministry in Tarboro I had the honor of being named "Public Enemy Number One" in Edgecombe County, North Carolina, by the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan. Before departing, however, I was named Tarboro's "Man of the Year" by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. My indebtedness to that church is enormous.

One diagonal block away from Calvary Church was St. Luke's Episcopal Church, an African-American congregation built to illustrate and to maintain segregation, but the identity, impact and witness of that congregation remains both alive and vital in me to this day. The world has moved on from that dark time in South-

ern history: Today the members of St. Luke's are now completely welcome in Calvary Church and many friendships bind the two congregations together. I served these two congregations, however, from 1957 through 1965, when segregation was breaking up and frightened, hostile feelings were running high. The people of St. Luke's quite literally loved the racism out of me and inspired me to see both the role and the power of the church in the relentless quest for human justice. The members of St. Luke's gave an integrity to the rest of my ministry that it could never have had without them. While in Tarboro I also served three rural missions in Edgecombe County: St. Mary's Church in Speed, Grace Church in Lawrence and St. Ignatius' Church in Old Sparta.

St. John's in Lynchburg, Virginia, was the next step in my career, and a wonderfully significant step it was. St. John's was filled with bright, well-educated, somewhat affluent social leaders who had, so far as I could tell, never been required to think much about their faith. During those years I shared this town with the late Jerry Falwell and I watched him grow from a local preacher into becoming a nationally known religious and political figure. I also made the decision in this congregation to organize my developing ministry around teaching and so I inaugurated a Sunday morning adult Bible class dedicated to sharing with the people in the pews the same biblical scholarship available in the academies of higher learning. This class grew to an attendance that constantly overran the space in our large auditorium. It also shaped my future ministry, convincing me that if I tried to protect either God or educated laypeople from truth, because it was inconvenient, I would never be an effective leader of the church of the future. I was at St. John's less than five full years, but it was a major building block in my life. That now brings me to the two churches to which this book is dedicated.

I moved to St. Paul's in Richmond in the fall of 1969. No church

I have ever served or known has meant what this one meant and still means to me. St. Paul's stood literally across the street from the capitol building of the state of Virginia. It has been the spiritual home to people like General Robert E. Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, as well as to many of that state's governors, since it is not only in the heart of downtown Richmond, but is also quite literally less than a block from the mansion where Virginia's governors live while in office. Yet despite its deep history and rather traditional understanding of the Christian faith, this church had a reputation for calling young, liberal-minded, challenging clergy and then engaging them deeply until the tension between the liberal rector and the conservative, but thoughtful, congregation produced an incredible quality of both life and growth for both. Five of the six rectors who were privileged to serve that church between 1920 and 1976 were chosen to be bishops in such diverse places across our nation as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Arkansas, Arizona and New Jersey. It was the greatest church I have ever watched operate and I was incredibly fortunate to have been its rector for seven years. My indebtedness to St. Paul's, more than any other congregation that I served, is immeasurable. The early books that inaugurated my writing career were the direct by-product of the adult class I taught from September through May of each year that I was there. Leaving that church to become the bishop of Newark in 1976 was one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. St. Paul's present rector, Wallace Adams-Riley, and its associates, Kate Jenkins, Melanie Mullen and Claudia Merritt, are in the mold of this church's clergy over the years. Wallace is young, bright, energetic, outspoken and progressive. He is clearly a future leader of the Episcopal Church. His kindness to me and his constant invitations to return to be part of his Lenten program or to teach the still extant adult Bible class on a Sunday morning are deeply appreciated. Two of our daughters

continue to live in Richmond with their families and that draws us back to that city with regularity. To continue to be part of a church I love so deeply, almost forty years after my departure as its rector, is a rare experience for which I am grateful. So I thank this congregation and its present rector for making this continuing relationship possible.

When I was elected bishop of Newark in 1976 we bought a home in Morristown, New Jersey, just four blocks from St. Peter's Church, a nineteenth-century neo-gothic structure located on South Street near the town center. The rector at that time was Hughes Garvin, a tall, dignified and loving man, who welcomed me and my wife, Joan, into this church and into his affections. As my wife's sickness developed and began to move toward the inevitable moment of her death, Hughes' kindness and understanding were deeply appreciated. When she died in August of 1988 we had her funeral in St. Peter's and its congregation nurtured me in both my grief and my loneliness. The associate minister during the early years of my association with this church was the Rev. Dr. Philip Cato, a brilliant man whose PhD from Duke was in the Intellectual History of Western Civilization, a very ostentatious subject for a doctorate! Philip, however, may have actually been the brightest priest with whom I was ever associated. He was three years younger than I, but as fate would have it, I had actually known him since he was nine years old! At that tender age he had joined the boys' choir at St. Peter's Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, when I was a "senior chorister." It is a small world! In his Morristown career, Philip gave to St. Peter's Church an intellectual toughness so often missing in Christian congregations, and week after week his sermons were powerful, provocative and memorable. He also taught the adult class on Sunday morning and he insisted that the Sunday school for children was to be an educational venture of the first order. To

assist him in this task he recruited, trained and raised to significant leadership in that church a laywoman named Christine Mary Barney, who soon directed the entire educational program for ages one to ninety-nine, as she has said. She was twice elected to serve on that church's vestry. In 1990 I married Christine Barney in St. Peter's Church, so it is fair to say that this church also gave to me my wife, whose abilities and affection expanded my life and my career in ways I could never have predicted. In time, she even became my editor. My books and the weekly columns that I have written over the past fourteen years bear the imprint of her genius and her uncompromising love has made me a whole person, introducing me to aspects of life that I had never known before.

Next St. Peter's Church gave me the friendship of a rector named David Hegg and his wife, Judith. David was probably the best and most effective overall parish priest that I have ever known.

Today this church is served by my current rector, Janet Broderick, and her associate, Melissa Hall, and in my retirement both of these gifted priests have welcomed me into a leadership role in this congregation, which now includes many of our closest personal friends. Both Christine and I feel a deep sense of belonging in this faith community, and so through the words of this preface and the dedication of this book to St. Peter's in Morristown and to St. Paul's in Richmond I now express my gratitude publicly to all those who make up these two wonderful and vital congregations.

There is one other church to which I feel a sense of indebtedness. St. Martin's Episcopal Church, located in the small Vermont town of Fairlee, is the church we attend when visiting our Vermont children and grandchildren. I have never seen more than thirty people at a worship service in this church, not even on Christmas Eve, but what a gracious and loving congregation it

is. That quality stems directly from its part-time rector, a priest who is also a retired public school teacher, named John Morris. Together with his elegant wife, Susan, they have built in this part of rural Vermont a community of theological openness, liturgical integrity and the kind of caring that creates life. One of the treats of visiting our grandchildren is to experience worship with them in this place. I dedicate this book to St. Peter's and to St. Paul's, but I salute with thanksgiving each of these other churches that have touched my life so deeply.

There are some additional individuals to whom gratitude for this book is also due.

First to Andrew Scrimgeour, the Dean of the Libraries at Drew University, who has been my personal research assistant, making available to me the treasures not only in the university library, but also in the theological library. The Theological School at Drew University, while affiliated with the United Methodist Church, is universal in its resources and in its appeal. Andy, who is also Chair of the Board of the Westar Institute, and thus of the Jesus Seminar, has encouraged me in any number of ways. He has provided me with study space, given me my own library carrel, done research for me, allowed the long-term use of certain volumes and been a good friend in the midst of it all. I am delighted to thank him in this way quite publicly.

Second I thank those clergy and places at which lectures on the material now in this book first found public expression: the Gladstone Library in Hawarden, Wales, where Peter Francis serves as Warden; the Lutheran Church in New Market, Ontario, served by Pastor Dawn Hutchins; the Plymouth Church in Victoria, British Columbia, served by Pastor Michael Coveney; St. Paul's Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, served by Rector Susan Butler; First Congregational United Church of Christ in Hendersonville, North Carolina, served by Pastor Richard Weidler; the

Clemson United Methodist Church in Clemson, South Carolina, served by Pastor Keith Ray; the Church of the Incarnation in Highlands, North Carolina, served by Rector Bruce Walker; my own St. Peter's in Morristown, served by Rector Janet Broderick; and last St. Paul's Church in Richmond, served by Rector Wallace Adams-Riley.

Third to Lydia Yorke, a doctoral student at Drew Theological School, whom I hired to turn my handwritten legal pads into the legible type of Microsoft Word.

Fourth to the members of my family I extend my profound appreciation for their love, support and caring. I have already referred to my wife, Christine. Now let me add that her love is the most sustaining gift I have ever had and I return it to her with a fervor that sometimes seems unusual for people of our ages, and I am grateful beyond measure for all that she is and all that she does.

Next, I express my gratitude to my three very unusual and wonderful daughters, Ellen, Katharine and Jaquelin, whose careers in banking, law and science still amaze me. One of the greatest gifts of life is to become good friends with your adult children. We have shared in that privilege with all three and with their husbands and partners, Gus Epps, Jack Catlett and Virgil Speriosu. They have also given us grandchildren, granddogs and grandcats. So to Shelby and Jay Catlett, to John and Lydia Hylton and to Jersey Rose, Elsie Lou, Brown Dog and Nolan the Cat, I express my appreciation.

Finally, my marriage to Christine gave me the pleasure of being a stepfather to two incredible people, Brian Yancy Barney, probably the most patient and gentle six-foot-four son anyone has ever had, and Rachel Elizabeth Barney, who has packed more into her now forty-one years of life than almost anyone I've ever known. To them I also say a genuine thank-you. Brian, who works for

the telephone company in rural Vermont, is married to Julieann Hoyt, a brilliant and still growing young woman, and they are the parents of twins, Katherine and Colin, who are now ten years old and who have given us a second chance at the wonderful task of grandparenting.

Rachel is now practicing medicine in Delaware after careers as a paramedic in the South Bronx and a helicopter pilot in the United States Marine Corps (which included three tours of active combat in the Second Iraq War), followed by going to medical school in Beer Sheva, Israel.

There is no greater blessing in life than the gift of a family. Christine and I feel every day the enormity of this blessing.

John Shelby Spong
Morris Plains, NJ
2013