

Word for word

by [William C. Placher](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

Reynolds Price isn't a churchgoer, he tells us right at the start. He grew up in the South without ever hearing a sermon condemning segregation, he's drawn to a kind of mysticism of which he thinks institutional churches have always been understandably suspicious, and he can't live with the way churches condemn gay people. So he thinks of himself as an "outlaw Christian."

But a Christian nevertheless: someone who believes Jesus was raised from the dead, someone who tries to follow him as best he can. Price has even had a vision. Years ago, facing radical surgery the next morning for a cancer of the spine that was likely to be terminal, he found himself suddenly by the Sea of Galilee, facing Jesus. "Your sins are forgiven," the Lord said. "What about curing my cancer?" Price asked. "That too," Jesus said and disappeared. Price has been paralyzed from the waist down since his operation, but the cancer hasn't returned. Make of it what you will. Price is more inclined to report than to try to explain.

As a novelist, poet and, for more than 40 years, a teacher of English at Duke University, Price brings a storyteller's sensitivity to reading the Bible. As a southerner, he's also a product of the part of our country most in love with narrative. In *A Palpable God* (1978) he translated a range of biblical stories and commented on them; in *Three Gospels* (1996) he translated Mark and John and added his own telling of the gospel story. In *Letter to a Man in the Fire* (1999) he wrote to a young man facing death from cancer, discussing whether God exists or cares.

A Serious Way of Wondering began as lectures on Jesus' ethics, given just before and after 9/11. The book retells the core of the gospel story, with digressions on ethics, autobiography and social commentary. Price also offers three short imagined narratives: Jesus' postresurrection appearances to a homosexual and a suicide and his conversation, after the crowd departed, with the woman taken in adultery. These stories deal with important ethical issues (the last with society's unfair treatment of women), and they are far too good to ruin by giving away how they turn out.

Price sees a fundamental tension in the gospel reports of Jesus' ethics. On the one hand, there's a gospel of love. Love your neighbor as yourself, feed my sheep, do not resist an evil person--such principles seem at the heart of Jesus' teaching. On the other hand, there are harsh condemnations and warnings of what awaits those who face eternal punishment.

Price votes for love over judgment. He's not sure whether the passages on judgment represent voices other than Jesus' or earlier stages of Jesus' development or what. Nevertheless, "While I know that I can't resolve even to my own satisfaction all the contradictions in his verbal teaching, I'm long since convinced by his recorded actions--all of which are informed by a compassion that relents only for brief bursts of anger at his enemies--that by the end of his life Jesus had become almost entirely antinomian--against the Law." He even speculates (here I get nervous) that it was after the resurrection that Jesus was clearest about the boundlessness of God's love.

Like many thoughtful people with training in history and literary narrative but from outside the guild of New Testament scholarship, Price trusts the New Testament much more than do the currently dominant voices within that guild. Too many of them, he says, seem "uniquely prone --once they've earned their scholarly credentials--to shoot themselves in the foot when confronted with evidence that would satisfy almost any other historian of ancient life."

Price notes that he has nieces and nephews who can tell, word for word, stories he heard from his father about his grandfather. Indeed, they often revel in a particular turn of phrase, remembered from childhood repetition. Yet the distance in time separating them from their great-grandfather is less than that which separated the gospel writers from Jesus. Price is not eager to proclaim some radical new truth about Jesus. He rather likes many of the old truths, and nothing here will surprise those who have been reading scholars conservative about history but liberal about ethics. But Price sure knows how to tell stories.

When I was in graduate school 30 years ago, the ruling model for the study of the Gospels came from the school of Rudolf Bultmann: you were supposed to break the stories into their smallest chunks and then ask about each chunk where and why it would have been remembered or invented. Today's Jesus Seminar employs an even more skeptical variation on such an approach. My teacher Hans Frei and a few others were making a different kind of proposal back then. They reminded us that

the most obvious characteristic of the Gospels is that they are stories--novella-length pieces of realistic narrative prose. If we want to understand them, we must pay attention to how they work as stories--how they begin and end, how the development of incident creates character, and so on. But such questions get lost if we break the stories into small pieces right at the start.

Many more theologians and biblical scholars these days are attending, in principle, to the story character of the Gospels. But not enough of us are southern, or Irish, or Texan. We lack many of the gifts of telling tales. We point to the stories, but we're less good at bringing them alive. Little in our academic training provides much help. It is good to have an outlaw storyteller like Reynolds Price turn up from time to time to help us reimagine gospel truth.