

I love to read. I mean—I REALLY love to read. Reading rivals chocolate as one of the great loves of my life.

I love to read lots of things, theology—of course—history, psychology, comparative religion—heck I’ve even read self-help books. (Nope. I’m not telling you which ones.)

But as much as I love to read non-fiction, my passion is fiction. Give me a good fantasy or sci-fi book—I’m happy as a clam. I love historical fiction, I love mysteries and sometimes I even like a good romance.

Some people have felt the need to tell me that some of what I read—or WHO I read, is “questionable” even “heretical”. Oh, really. Some people evidently think I should be reading nothing but Augustine (I loathe Augustine), or old Christian writers from hundreds of years ago.

I have a secret to share. I almost never read the books of the church fathers. If you were female, I doubt you would either.

And I have a problem with people who seem to suggest that God spoke to humanity with any more passion and truth in the early days of the church than God speaks to us now. You know—only listen to the “approved—“old”--sources.”

But who makes that decision of what is orthodox and what is not? Why, of course, it’s the people in charge, and who have no desire to let go of that power.

So people question when I read Diana Butler Bass, Rob Bell, Jack Spong, Phyllis Tickle, Brian McClaren, Marcus Borg, saying they’re sometimes unorthodox. Heaven’s some aren’t even Anglican!

Good!

God helps us grow every time we are exposed to new thoughts through reading. In fact, I believe God especially *encourages* heretical reading, if—when we say “heretical” we mean reading about ideas that are outside the accepted or established norms.

Reading from differing perspectives allows us to see the world through someone else's eyes, to learn and encounter stories, truths, and characters we could not meet on our own. How else do we grow beyond our limited experiences unless we encounter and learn from those who have different experiences?

Jesus knew this. It's why he went out of his way to talk with people very outside the mainstream—people of other faiths, the outcast, the sick—even those within his own faith that had very different ideas.

In Jesus' day, the three most powerful and "orthodox" sects in Judaism were the Essenes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Each of these groups had contrasting – but to them "orthodox" views.

In Sunday School I was taught that the thing that differentiated the Sadducees from the Pharisees was that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead—and that made them SAD, you see.

Sorry. The things they used to teach in Sunday School.

The Gospel today recounts how the Sadducees tried with self-satisfied glee to trap Jesus in one of his "heretical" beliefs: the resurrection of the dead. They tried to stump him with a ridiculous story about a woman who kept marrying into an obviously very sickly family. They tried to illustrate how Jesus' obviously outrageous teaching about resurrection was full of holes.

Jesus countered by showing them a picture of life after death that was quite different. To the Sadducees and Pharisees, how Jesus read and interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures was heretical. He said and did things that were contrary to both scripture and to accepted teaching.

And while Jesus' teaching managed to anger both the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, Jesus brought new light to the eyes of those who were open to what he had to say.

To the most Jews, though probably not to those who held the most power, scripture was intended to be part of a lively dialogue, a life-giving and dynamic lesson in understanding God and each other.

Commentaries on the scriptures—called midrash-- were offered regularly-- responding to difficult and uncertain times. Scripture wasn't seen as an unchanging and infallible document. It was seen as a tool to sharpen the faith.

God encourages us to encounter him in any and every way we can. Some say we "shouldn't" read or think about anything that isn't accepted church doctrine. I say phooey.

Why would God have given us brains with which to think and tongues with which to converse if not to broaden our minds and our hearts?

God-breathed scriptures are inspiring, not imprisoning. They guide our paths but don't slavishly determine every step we take. Reading scripture is like taking deep breaths of God, they energize and motivate rather than imprison and suffocate.

And God-inspired writings didn't end in 325AD with the closing of the biblical canon, because God is not subject to our canons. God continues to speak through all sort of writings, and theatre, and even movies. God inspires our spirit daily—and I'll continue to read broadly, so I can encounter new ideas, see the world through someone else's eyes, experience God through someone else's experience. And I hope you'll never be scared away from reading widely. Because God's influence is wide.

God's spirit is not limited to particular genres, people or orthodoxies. And Jesus' spirit, word, and ideas obviously weren't either—as the Saducees discovered. So if people who try to limit your reading, or your experience of others remember the prophetic reading this morning from Haggai: " God's spirit lives with us. Do not fear. "

Or you'll be Sad, you see.

Go forth into the world: reading, praying, thinking—in the power of the Spirit.
Amen.