

The Aflac duck got in trouble.
Anyone follow this? He got in trouble on Twitter.
Anyone here follow the Aflac duck on Twitter?

He was "tweeting" some insensitive jokes
about the earthquake and tsunami in Japan.
Aflac has a lot of insurance business in Japan – as it turns out.
The Aflac duck got fired.

I didn't even know that the Aflac duck tweeted (or quacked) on Twitter.

Finding a new voice for this famous duck
has turned into a new kind of American Idol contest.
Some 30,000 people applied for the position of "spokes duck"
for the insurance company.



It got me thinking about ducks.
Remember those signs you see often on rural roads
or residential areas near a waterway -
bright yellow road signs with silhouettes of ducklings?

The sign warns us to slow down - it's a duck crossing.
Spring is a time to see the little fuzzy yellow ducklings
waddling or swimming behind their mother.
They look so devoted to the mother
and are so completely lock-stepped on her -
they blindly follow right into traffic or over the edge of a waterfall.

Why do they do that?

It turns out that flocking birds like ducks and geese
are genetically programmed – after cracking out of their shell -
to "imprint" on the first creature they see.

And that is usually a duck.
Otherwise - they might keep wandering off
and getting too up-close to a cat or a car.

Baby ducks imprint on the first moving creature they see.

But – imprinting can go wrong.
If they hatch in an incubator – it might be a human.
If a dog is nearby and paws at the cracking shell -
mom may end up being a dog rather than a duck.¹



Enough about ducks – but let's remember "imprinting."

Some people who think they are following Christ -
have just been imprinted by a culture that calls itself Christian.

They have no dynamic relationship – no faith that is vital to their lives.
They have not encountered God as Paul did
in a transformational moment of unity -
through this window of the risen Christ.

They may go to church but it's just because a lot of people do.
They keep it all at arm's distance – so to speak.
They may take in religion cafeteria style – a little here and there.
They may call themselves Christian because they think it's the thing to do.

They think of Christianity as the culture -
like saying we live in a Christian nation -
which is not a bad thing necessarily but not all that related to vital living.

Some behaviors of cultures that call themselves Christian
have been terribly dangerous.
There were the bloody Crusades and Inquisitions –
carried out by people - in the name of Christ.
Onward Christian Soldiers!
It was a terrible and twisted imprinting that confused Christ with culture.

It allowed the church to embrace Jim Crow laws
and apartheid up through the 20th century.

It was the imprinting of racial prejudice.

You might even say it makes for "quack" theology.
People just did it because someone in front of them did.

As if they were all ducks - an insult to the bird world – I guess.

"Quack" theology allowed the Nazis to enjoy church on Sunday
after manning the crematorium at the concentration camps.

"Quack" theology thought it reasonable to burn heretics –
and accuse women of being witches.

"Quack" theology slammed jetliners into skyscrapers.
"Quack" theology allows for strapping bombs onto the bodies of children.
"Quack" theology burned Korans just a few weeks ago.



This may all sound strange
but it is related to what Paul is trying to work through
in his letter to the Romans.
He uses the word "flesh" but we would more likely call it "culture."
The structures and processes around us that influence
our behavior – our opinions – our lives -
sometimes things we follow without thinking -
a kind of imprinting.

It is to look at the glitter and not the gold.
It is to look at the artificial and not the authentic.
It is to lust for what something looks like
rather than care for what it is.

Paul uses the phrase "people who live in the flesh"
in contrast with those who "through faith live in the Spirit."

It seems like he's trying to use all the images he can bring to bear
to share his experience with his listeners or readers.
And many of his words are lost on us
because translations are always flawed
and words mean different things across cultures.

The spirit is a living presence not an idea imprinted on our minds.

The spirit is a living presence that gives grounding for our lives –
so we are not running from one desire to another.
And yet - we can go through our lives
never recognizing - never listening carefully for the presence.

The living presence of the Spirit
helps us step out of the line – not march to all the drummers around us –
and think about what is and what can be –
rather than staying right in step with the loud quacking of the world -
the loud quacking of a society that
teaches by its behavior that we must consume to no limit.

We bow at the altar of the almighty dollar.
Sometimes we bow at empty altars
and we wonder why we are not satisfied.



Paul writes so passionately about the resurrection of Christ
as a discovery of the Spirit
rather than a code of conduct - or a creed or a ritual.

Paul didn't even know Jesus.
He met the risen Christ on a road -
when he was hell-bent on wiping out these new groups of Jews and Gentiles
who could swear they still felt his presence
after he was long gone.

That's what we call the resurrected Jesus.

He called it being "in Christ."
We might use that phrase – or we might find that a phrase like
"being in the force field of the divine" - closer to current thinking.

Things look different when you are in the force field.
The mystics sometimes use the term "the third eye" -
another way of seeing.

In some ways experiencing the risen Christ is to become more aware
of the divine in our lives.
We might call it the real thing.

It also draws us toward less dualistic thinking -
either/or and good/bad thinking
characterized by much of rational thinking.

That kind of thinking as been imprinted on us
and while it can be good in some instances –
it is not spiritually mature.
Enhancing our sight
is a way for us to open ourselves to new insights.

Here is an example – of enhanced sight
or experience of the world
that we often miss
when let ourselves be too imprinted by culture
or even consumed by it.



William J. Locke has a novel about a woman
who had all the money she could ever want.

She has spent half a lifetime
touring the sights and galleries of the world's greatest art.

And now she has become bored and weary.
She meets a Frenchman who has no money.
But – he has a love for beauty and a self-acquired knowledge of art.
And in his company –
the two of them traveling together -
suddenly things became different to her.

In her words, "I never knew what things were like
until you taught me how to look at them."

...how to look...how to look...



It is often easier to make Jesus into a religion
instead of a journey toward God - and a relationship with God -
a relationship that helps you find greater joy in life and in one another.



So - in the past few minutes we have gone from misbehaving ducks
to baby ducks imprinting on their little minds
to follow the first thing they see.

To the dangerous imprinting that can come when we don't think about what we are following

To Paul's letter about living with the spirit
and how that sure beats the religion of the past.

And then to the woman who went around the world
to see all of the art she could find -
until finally someone helped her experience the beauty
the artist was trying to convey.



Perhaps that is a little like Paul
discovering the beauty of life
rather than the rigor of dogmatic religion.

Perhaps it is a little like Paul
finding that the rules and way of life
that had been imprinted on him
no longer served him well.

"Quack Theology or the Real Thing" based on Romans 8:6-11
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And he had to tell the story
to all the communities of believers he knew.

What it does for me is get me thinking about listening a little better
in my own life – to the presence – the call –
the promptings of the risen Christ.

And maybe to spend a little more time
trying to understand Paul's experience.

Maybe it can do that for you too.
That is why I have shared it with you today.
Amen.

¹ Adapted from Leonard Sweet, the website QuackAflac.com, and Wikipedia.