



**Sermon:** April 18, 2021

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew 13.31-32, 19.13-14

**The Message:**  
An Unorthodox Believer

[Video Version](#)



**The Rev. Dr.  
Morar Murray-Hayes**

---

Called a fundamentalist and an atheist, Charles Schulz, Sparky, was a devoted if somewhat unorthodox Christian. Most of us grew up with Charlie Brown, Snoopy and the rest of the Peanuts Gang. Children of all ages still watch The Great Pumpkin and the Charlie Brown Christmas special.

For every significant occasion, my father scoured every gift card shop looking for just the right Peanuts card for his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, a task that became mine on his behalf at the end of his life.

Charles Schulz spent his early years in a fundamentalist church, but he was no fundamentalist and certainly not an evangelist.

He was so reluctant to talk about his faith directly that he refused to discuss it even with his children, something his daughter regretted. She recalls having a crèche on the table at Christmas. "But," she says, "no one ever told us what it was for."

Schulz began to reject evangelical Christianity as an adult, saying, "I now shy away from anyone who claims to possess all of the truth."

And  
"I am fearful of an overly organized church and I am very fearful of a church which equates itself with Americanism."

Instead he just let who he was and what he believed leak into his strips.

Subtly Schulz raised religious questions about the Bible, prayer, the nature of God, and the end of the world.

He made his readers laugh while inviting them into a conversation about faith.

Only 61 strips featured Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown, but more than 560 contain a religious, spiritual, or theological reference. As one journalist wrote, "unshell *Peanuts* and you'll find the fingerprints of his faith."

As he grew up, his became an open, thoughtful faith that made room for the possibility that God worked through other faiths than his own.

The margins of his personal Bible were full of notes from his reading of theology.

He led a bible study in a Methodist church he never attended for many years -- teaching his way through the Bible four times. But he didn't say much in those sessions; he simply got the conversation started and listened.

This may be why many of the religious references in the *Peanuts* were drawn directly from scripture. Sometimes the Bible references were clearly cited. When he catches Snoopy taking food out of the refrigerator, Charlie Brown pulls out a Bible and quotes from the Ten Commandments: "Look, it says here in Exodus, 'Thou shall not steal.'" Snoopy borrows his book, flips the page and hands it back. "Deuteronomy 25:4 ..." Charlie Brown reads, "Thou shall not muzzle the ox while he treads out the grain." He was VERY familiar with scripture -- even the obscure passages.

When Linus asks Snoopy,  
"Does it bother you that the Bible doesn't speak very highly of dogs?"  
the beagle replies,  
"Sure it bothers me, but I just turn the other muzzle."

In another, Linus built a sandcastle that the rain washed away. Linus concludes, "There's a lesson to be learned here, but I don't know what it is ..." Christian readers recognized the allusion to Jesus's parable about a man who built his house on sand in Matthew 7, and Schulz later said that this was exactly what he intended.

Schulz's willingness to include his faith in his work cut against the grain of his era. Almost no other mainstream cartoonist dared to include religious references in their strips at the time.

As Schulz said,  
"Just the mere fact of quoting from the Bible, for a long while was forbidden in comic strips because somehow they just didn't want you to go near these areas."

But inspired by Schulz's bravery other cartoonists soon began to share spiritual thoughts as well. Lynn Johnson of *For Better or Worse* was among those to benefit,

Schulz was criticized for making religious references in "such a lowly thing as a comic strip." "I preach in these cartoons, and I reserve the same rights to say what I want to say as the minister in the pulpit," Schulz once said.

Schulz's 'sermons' started conversations.

When, in one of 40 strips on prayer, he had Linus ask,  
"Do you ever pray, Lucy?"  
we were sparked to think about our own prayer habits.

When Charlie Brown confessed to Lucy,

“Sometimes I wonder if God is pleased with me,”  
we were asking the question of ourselves.

Occasionally he gave a tentative answer to his questions of faith. When Sally asked Charlie Brown,  
“When we die, will we go to Heaven?”  
Charlie responded,  
“I like to think so.”  
And wouldn’t we all?!

The scriptures I chose today leapt out at me as I read Schulz’s biography by David Michaelis. Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience were virtues that Charlie Brown seemed to strive for in a world where footballs were often pulled out from under him.

While Schulz reached millions of people over the decades of his life, I think he thought of himself as small, an outsider, a thoughtful, if not always effectual little boy. Charlie Brown, in fact, with a childlike faith searching for the blessing of God.

“Little things we say and do in Christ’s name are like pebbles thrown into water,”

he once said.

“The ripples spread out in circles, and influence people we may know only slightly and sometimes not at all.”

His was a mustard seed kind of faith which he shared for half a century, urging people to consider life’s deep questions, challenging our minds and touching our souls, and making our world a little bit better.

I think that’s why my father, also taciturn about his faith, sought out those Peanuts cards. And perhaps that’s why we read the Peanuts strip so faithfully.

I like to think that Charles Schulz would have been comfortable in the United Church of Canada.

Schulz helped us to react to the negative with the positive, to resist despair with love - to place our trust in a God who knows us, loves us, forgives us. Paul puts it this way: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

In the clip that ends this reflection, we see the result of the faith of an unorthodox Christian. Schulz fought CBS to include this in Charlie Brown’s Christmas. It is perhaps the only Christmas special of its time or since to actually include the nativity story. He was right when he said, “If we don’t do it, who will?”