

Do I Stay Christian? Then How Shall We Live?

Matthew 5:1-16

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Over the last few weeks, we've been tackling a tough subject through exploring Brian McLaren's new book, *Do I Stay Christian?* We started by talking about some of the challenges to Christianity today - particularly the growing movement of Christian Nationalism which is grounded in beliefs very different from the teachings of Jesus. Then, we looked at why people are leaving the church including its history of hypocrisy, violence, and harm. Fortunately, last week, Jenaba moved us into more positive territory by discussing reasons a person would choose to stay Christian. And now, as we wrap up our journey through this book, we come to the matter of how. How do we do Christianity at this juncture in history? And the answer to that question, McLaren says, is another question. What kind of humans do we want to become?

So, that is my question for you this week. As you look to the future, what kind of human do you want to be? What characteristics do you hope to foster in the next generation? Or, more broadly, what characteristics do you hope humanity will have as we evolve?

As Christ-followers, we look to scripture to help us understand the kind of people God asks us to be. McLaren uses Micah 6:8 as a way of framing what he says on the matter. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" Be just, be kind, be humble.

Or we can turn to the Sermon on the Mount, the most extensive teaching Jesus gives about how to live faithfully. Among the beatitudes, Jesus includes that we are blessed when we are merciful, when we are humble and caring, when we seek righteousness, when we make peace.

Despite how often the church has behaved in opposite ways, these are the teachings of our faith. These are the ingredients in creating the Kingdom of God. And while they may seem simple enough, we all know how challenging they can be. So, how do we foster these characteristics in ourselves and connect with others who are doing the same?

McLaren starts his reflections on this by looking at different models of human development and faith development. He describes Richard Rohr's model of the first half of life and the second half of life. The first half is characterized by dualistic thinking that puts the world into categories in order to create order: good/bad, us/them, safe/dangerous, friend/foe, winner/loser. Then in the second half of life, we begin to see the relationships and connections between these opposites - how good and evil can be closely connected, how good intentions can have unintended negative consequences. Eventually, we come to recognize how inter-related, interdependent, and interwoven each thing is with everything else in a larger reality where God is present. McLaren has his own model for stages of development that breaks down Rohr's two categories into four - simplicity, complexity, perplexity, and harmony. Again, the first two stages are characterized by dualism, while perplexity is the stage of questioning and doubting, and harmony is the point at which we look at the world holistically and are able to look at ourselves and others with empathy.

It is at this stage, of course, at which we are the best versions of ourselves. We get there in part by paying attention to our desires. Do we desire recognition and wealth? Or do we desire the good of the planet and the good of all people? Can we put our desire for our own well-being in the context of the other two? Writes McLaren, “In this light, to say ‘I love you’ is to say that I give my heart to the divine love that loves in and through all creation...I am joining God in God’s desire to relate to all creation as beloved...If we desire a thriving world for all as our deepest and most all-encompassing desire, not only will we have everything we need: we will become the kinds of people who help create that kind of world”.

McLaren then goes on to write about what he calls “re-wilding”. In essence, he believes that by spending time in the wild - hiking in forests, canoeing down rivers, and such - we are able to set aside the limitations that come with trying to put everything into language and human constructs. We are open to feel our connection with creation and the rest of humanity. This may also help us to move out of our heads and into our hearts and bodies. If we come to value our own bodies, we more easily value the bodies of others. How might we re-wild our theology and other aspects of our faith to celebrate the contributions and gifts of others?

Similarly, how can we take some of the destructive ways in which scripture has been interpreted and theology misused and redeem them? Already there has been a shift in moderate and progressive churches away from theology that says you must be saved or you will burn in hell to an understanding of salvation as liberation from whatever holds you back from a life of abundant love and joy. What other scripture passages or doctrine have been used to exclude, judge, or limit others that we need to wrestle with in order to make them holy and valuable to us today?

McLaren believes that not only Christians have this work of redeeming and re-consecrating. Other religions and secular organizations will need to do this, too. It is the work of naming the beliefs which are harmful to humanity or to the earth and reinterpreting them in the light of the humans we want to become. In a similar way, McLaren says we must renounce doctrine and policies which are harmful within our institutions and announce that we are doing something different. An example of this is our own congregation’s renouncement of the stance of the United Methodist church on LGBTQ+ full inclusion. We educated ourselves and, as a community, we decided that we would be inclusive and welcoming even if our denomination was not. In what other areas of our community life do we have this work to do?

In the midst of all of this work, we have to watch out for all of the biases that creep into our thinking. McLaren calls this staying loyal to reality. The culture we live in and the beliefs seated deep within us pull us toward seeing the world as we want to see it rather than as it really is. This not only impacts the integrity with which we live out our faith but also how we see the future. As Richard Rohr puts it, “Saying yes to what is ironically sets us up for what if?” Writes McLaren, “To see possibility is what faith is about: not merely seeing the seeds in the apple but seeing the million apple orchards waiting to spring from those seeds.” Therefore, if our bias is against anything that is new, we will never see what could be. If our bias is against inclusion, we will never benefit from the gifts of a diverse community.

Which leads to the last of McLaren’s ideas that I will highlight here. McLaren sees civilization at the end of an era and the beginning of something new. In his eyes, the old, imperialistic values which drew the church away from the original teachings of Christ are dying

off and humanity is entering into something new. If that's true, I doubt any of us will be alive to see what is coming. Yet, I do believe that we, as Christ followers right here today, have the opportunity to reclaim the church and the Christian faith and shape a future that reflects who we want to be and become. Who God created us to be. Who we are when we embody the kingdom of God.

Over and over in scripture we read that God is creating something new. In Isaiah, God says, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert". In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come." And in Revelation, John tells us, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."

When we are faithful to who God asks us to be - humble, kind, just, merciful - we are part of the big picture of the work God is doing in the world. But, we cannot do it alone. We need others who share the same values and we need the church.

And so next week, I am going to do one more sermon as an addendum to this series. We're hearing a lot about the troubles in the United Methodist Church right now as our denomination slowly and painfully divides. Ultra-conservatives are painting the United Methodist Church in a very bad light while our time to finally, officially separate won't come until 2024. And so next week, I will preach on what is happening with a sermon entitled "Do I Stay United Methodist?" and I will ask you this question, "What kind of church do you want to be?"

May it be so. Amen.