

Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian: The Theological Migration Rev. Janice Reynolds, August 13, 2017

CALL TO WORSHIP

In Christ, God is supreme, but not in the old discredited paradigm of supremacy: God is the supreme healer, the supreme friend, the supreme lover, the supreme life-giver who self-empties in gracious love for all.

The king of kings and lord of lords is the servant of all, the friend of sinners. The so-called weakness and foolishness of God are greater than the so-called power and wisdom of human regimes.

-- Brian D. McLaren;

The Great Spiritual Migration:

How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian

AFFIRMATION

This moment calls for Social Poets:

sincere and creative people who will rise on the wings of faith
to catch the wind of the Spirit,
the wind of justice, joy, and peace.

The season is changing and it is time for us to rise.

-- Pope Francis

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 2:1-11

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

Therefore, God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

SERMON
Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian: The Theological Migration
Rev. Janice Reynolds, August 13, 2017

For a series of three sermons this month, I'm sharing liberally from Brian McLaren's book, *The Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*.¹

Last week, I shared McLaren's challenge to migrate to a new understanding of Christian faith, moving from a set of beliefs to a way of life... McLaren suggests that churches should focus on being schools of love.

I wondered if this sounded like an obvious platitude... that churches should be schools of love. However, In the aftermath of the clash between white supremacists and counter demonstrators that ensued at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville yesterday, this sounds essential.

The New York Times carried the story this morning, "White nationalists, neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan planned a large rally to "take America back." A violent clash resulted in three deaths. The city manager looked haunted with grief as he spoke, "Hate came to our town today in a way that we had feared but we had never really let ourselves imagine."

If the white supremacists of yesterday's violent demonstrations were to claim a religion, which religion would it be? I recently had a conversation with a young Rabbi from the East Bay. I was distressed to hear that when he thinks of Christians today, what still comes to mind is the propagation of the Crusades, the conquering of indigenous people in lands throughout the world, and the Holocaust.

As Christians ourselves, we may see these as past events we've moved beyond. But Brian McLaren is "angry and brokenhearted about the violence that has already occurred" because our religion has too often not been rooted and grounded in love." He laments the toxins of supremacy, domination, and violence that still emanate from some sectors of Christianity.

He asks, "How could a counter-imperial spiritual movement centered on a man who was tortured and killed by the Roman Empire become the pro-imperial institution that would, in the name of its founder and the Roman emperors, torture and kill hundreds of thousands?"

Christian kids still learn "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

¹ I have quoted widely from this book throughout this sermon:

Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (Convergent: 2016). Please visit brianmclaren.net to learn more about his work.

But what we rarely learned is that the Papal Proclamation of 1455 empowered the Christian kings of Europe to enslave, plunder and slaughter in the name of Christ. And it mandated conversion of 'enemies' for Christ's use and profit".

This Papal Proclamation of 1455, known as The Doctrine of Discovery, taught that whatever Christians discover, they can take and use as they wish.² Killing, torture and sex slavery of young girls and other heinous crimes ensued by the explorers. All In the name of Christ. Under the Doctrine of Discovery, Muslims and all other non-Christians were reduced to enemies of Christ.

While some of the monarchs were compassionate (Queen Isabella is said to have fired Columbus in part for his cruel acts), we know that Spain, the British colonies and our own Declaration of Independence was based on the theology behind the Doctrine of Discovery. The US 1830 Indian Removal act followed in this way. As Professor Yolanda Pierce of Princeton Theological seminary wrote in 2015, "We often fail to deconstruct how proslavery theology still influences American Christianity. Simply put: Theological arguments upheld the institution of slavery long after every other argument failed."

This is painful truth. It is very difficult to recognize the heinous acts done in the name of Christianity. McLaren suggests that we still have glaring denial about how we've treated other people and the earth ... that the way Christians have interpreted the bible has given Christians permission to rape and pillage the earth and its people.

We need to view the truth of our legacy with open eyes so that we can make other choices. The following may seem unlikely questions, but let's ask them of ourselves... Are there any signs of supremacy or domination in your daily life? What attitudes do we unconsciously carry from this dark side of the Christian legacy? Do we carry subtle and not so subtle social philosophies based on gender, racial or economic supremacy?

To paraphrase Jesus, the only way for Christianity to save its life, is to lose it."

We learn from Paul's letter to the Philippians:

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,

² Information about the The Papal Proclamation of 1455, known as The Doctrine of Discovery, can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanus_Pontifex
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine
<https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/disastrous-doctrine-had-papal-roots>

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited.”

Rather than “seizing, hoarding, and exercising power in the domineering ways, in his humility Jesus consistently empowered others.” Jesus modeled the true nature of God. That is why we elevate Jesus above all other lords. King of King, Lord of Lords... because Jesus was not like human emperors who lord their power over others.

In the place of an imperial Christianity, McLaren envisions that eventually the entire Christian world must embrace a mature God who will "lead us away from the precipice of cataclysmic war, who will save us from polarization, and teach us to wisely revere and care for the earth."

As we follow in the model of self-giving Jesus, may we be aware of the language embedded in our liturgies and hymns... almighty, sovereign, kingdom, dominion, supreme, ... this way of identifying with God can be a “dangerous virus”. Even if we know that these words can be interpreted to mean that God’s “kingdom” has reversed the values of most human kingdoms, this language sets Christianity apart as the conquerors it has been in history, and this language is to be avoided.

We’ve migrated to refreshed theology in our worship over the years, and let’s continue to do that. Elaine Reichert e-mailed me this week, suggesting we change our wording in the 8:30 communion liturgy from God of Power and Might... I changed it to God of Power and Light.

Let’s help the world migrate to a Nonviolent God of Liberation. Jesus faithfully represented the nonviolent and loving heart of God. Non-violence and self-giving love, says McLaren, will win the heart of humanity over time.

To follow Jesus is to migrate our theology, our understanding of God over time. God is supreme, but not in the old paradigm. Instead, God is the supreme healer, supreme friend, supreme love, the supreme life-giver who self-empties in gracious love for all.

We become atheists of a violent god. We elevate God as pure light, with no shadow of violence, conquest, exclusion, hostility or hate.

Paul writes to the Philippians, “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

We must embrace this supreme God of Love who can unite us into an identity that is not limited to a tribe or nation, or religion, but encompasses all living things.

There is much to despair about in the world and our country right now. But we can take hope... there is a theological migration evident in this century, throughout the world.

There are thousands of retreat centers and teachers inviting Christians to a contemplative life, where we experience a mature and loving God.

Christian theologians and activists have educated us... people like Desmond Tutu, Anthony de Mello, Oscar Romero, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jürgen Moltmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer --- hundreds of others whose names we do not recognize but who have formed and mentored Christian leaders out of a limited image of God.

The theologians who moved us from literal biblical interpretations to a wise literary approach – C.S. Lewis, NT Wright, Marcus Borg, Walter Wink, John Dominic Crossan, and Herman Waetjen, our Presbyterian neighbor in Marin. Feminist theologians like Sallie McFague, Diana Butler Bass and Ilia Delio broaden our view further. Mass media voices like Oprah Winfrey, Bill Moyers and Krista Tippett have given platforms to fresh Christian thinkers like Richard Rohr, Barbara Brown Taylor and Rob Bell.

They didn't discredit, ridicule or expose the Bible as false, but rather found a broader and deeper meaning and truth within it. They reveal a succession of understandings of God as we mature. These wise people have acted without the permission of governments or the Pope... they have all the permission they need – the great theological migration has begun!

I will leave you with a McLaren quote:

“God’s vision emerges in a new freedom, to an ever-expanding universe of a more wonderful God. A long night of wrestling to a new dawn, revealing a luminous, life-giving healing and liberating presence of God... the generous, gracious holy Spirit who invites and beckons us to an ever-greater goodness, wholeness, beauty, harmony and aliveness.”³

³ *We Make the Road Walking* by Brian McLaren