

Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian: From Belief to a Way of Life Rev. Janice Reynolds, August 6, 2017

CALL TO WORSHIP

"The future of the church will not simply be a replication of the past, and it is time for vital, new expression of a just and generous Christian faith to emerge.

We are restless, and we speak of...

a deep thirst for a more authentic, honest and sustaining spiritual life

a compelling hunger to do justice, to show compassion, to walk humbly with God

a powerful desire to understand and engage with the critical problems of our world

a profound need for space to grapple honestly with our questions of theology and practice

an impatient readiness to move beyond narratives of decline to narratives of hope and empowerment

a growing longing for a sense of shared identity and belonging that transcend institutional affiliation.

-- 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

Matthew 7:21, 24-27

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

Ephesians 3:16-17

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love

SERMON: Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian: From Belief to a Way of Life
Rev. Janice Reynolds, August 6, 2017

“Does Christianity in its present form have to die?”¹

For three sermons this month, I thought I'd share with you some of the provocative ideas in Brian McLaren's newest book. It's called *The Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*.

McLaren is one of the most sought-after speakers in progressive Christianity. He was an evangelical pastor who grew away from the church he once loved. At one point he had to ask himself, “Why would I pretend to believe things I don't actually believe?”

No doubt the pastors we've listened to for much of our lives have used the Bible to teach us precepts and beliefs. Some of these beliefs have fed and sustained us. Others may have caused us to suffer.

As McLaren says, over centuries, Christianity has been presented as a system of beliefs that has supported a wide range of unintended consequences, from colonialism to environmental destruction, subordination of women to stigmatization of LGBT people, anti-Semitism to Islamophobia, clergy pedophilia to white privilege.

Harvey Cox, Harvard theologian, associates the importance of beliefs with Constantine in the 4th century. Beliefs became a primary marker for belonging. Belief-based systems centralize power – they make it clear who is IN and who is OUT. McLaren challenges us to sort out and shift our belief structure.

Do you know what you believe? Do you know how your beliefs dictate the way you live your life today?

As McLaren suggests, if you believe that every single human being matters and bears the holy image of God, then your belief is significant. It will lead you to actions out of love.

As I was reading this book, I thought... these ideas are not that new to our congregation. And when we think beyond our church, to the web of 9500 Presbyterian churches in the US and the 350,000 Christian congregations in the US, we realize we have work to do.

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (Convergent: 2016), 41-42. Please visit brianmclaren.net to learn more about his work.

Christianity isn't going away anytime soon. Pew Research says that Christianity is by far the world's largest religion, with an estimated 2.2 billion people, nearly a third of the 6.9 billion people on Earth.² We wonder and may critique: is our religion enacting love in definitive, unrestrained ways?

Brian McLaren invites those of us still in the church into hope. He gives us a fresh enlarged vision of where the church and our culture can be led.

In response to McLaren's book, Franciscan Richard Rohr wondered... "What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, that makes amends for its mistakes, and is dedicated to beloved community for all? What would it mean for Christians to understand, experience, and embody God as the loving, healing, reconciling Spirit in whom all creatures live, move, and have their being?"

For centuries, Christianity has presented itself as an "organized religion"— a change-averse institution . . . Yet Christianity's actual history is a story of change and adaptation! What might happen if we understood the core Christian character as creative, constructive, and forward-leaning—?

What if Christianity migrates as an "organizing religion that challenges all institutions (including its own) to learn, grow, and mature. To mature toward a deepening vision of reconciliation with God, self, neighbor, enemy, and all of creation?"³

McLaren calls the wide Christian community to see ourselves as "people in motion." The Bible is filled with stories of migration! Jesus was "perpetually in motion" as he took his mission and message on the road.

And yet, even in the change there is that which we hold onto: We hold onto Jesus' unflinching emphasis on Love. For Jesus, Love decentered everything else, reinterpreted all the other laws. This supremacy of love that Jesus teaches again and again is the foundation of the Kingdom of God on earth.

From the book of Matthew: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

² <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

³ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*

What counts ultimately is a life of compassion for others, not being solely devoted to Jesus as Lord, nor as the one that does compassionate acts out of obedience to Jesus, but as people who simply live compassion for the sake of the people who need it."

The first spiritual migration, writes McLaren, is moving "From a System of Beliefs to a Way of Life." Instead of hunkering down in unchanging beliefs, our every act is to focus on how we practice Jesus' way of love.

And you thought we were done with the summer of love! Can't escape it. Love must always be our focus.

The Christian Church as an institution must change so that our action of love remains our rock.

Today, we heard David Monterey sing Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah. Many are drawn to this song, but may puzzle over its meaning. The verses focus sensuously on female biblical characters. The ecstasy of life, "every breath we drew was hallelujah." Cohen explained, "Hallelujah is a Hebrew word which means 'Glory to the Lord.' The song explains that many kinds of Hallelujahs do exist. I say: all the perfect and broken Hallelujahs have an equal value. [The song] is a desire to affirm my faith in life, not in some formal religious way but with enthusiasm, with emotion."

Cohen also said, as he reviewed his life, "I have looked for deep love. You need this love to be grounded, until there is no difference between you and your love, or what you love or what you are. It's just the one thing."

And that is what Brian McLaren is saying... Make Love the ONE THING... affirm our faith in life, affirm our faith in Love.

And when we act on Love, for Love's sake (not just to please Jesus as Lord, or to get into heaven) Christian hypocrisy evaporates.

We acknowledge the broken Hallelujahs, and we sing *Glory to God* at each turn. We praise Love in each decision, in every interaction, in every political action. We affirm our faith in Love.

Two billion Christians face this critical question: must we stay where we are, forever defining ourselves as a system of beliefs, or may we migrate to a new understanding of Christian faith as a way of life? If we are to BE Christian, we must be willing to continue to migrate our institutions while standing on the rock of Love.

How will we do that? How do we advocate for this migration?

We begin by looking to Jesus and to apostle Paul: There were nearly nine hundred rules identified for them to follow as practicing Jews, but you could trade them all up for this one: as Paul wrote in Galatians 5:6: "The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself in love."

Love was already part of the tradition (Deuteronomy 6:5); they were saying it was the most important part of the tradition.” The One Thing.

McLaren challenges us to make the Christian Church a school of love. If we were to reimagine our church to be a school of Love, what would we look like? Are we interested?

If we make the way of Love our highest aim, we and our communities will experience what Paul prayed for in his letter to the Ephesians... “I pray that God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in Love.

References: I have quoted widely from these sources for 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.

Richard Rohr’s teaching on McLaren’s book: https://cac.org/system-beliefs-way-life-2017-07-16/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2017-07-22%20DM&utm_content=2017-07-22%20DM+CID_f84a38c13466c8bc78cb0e4f6125e620&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor%20Google%20Analytics&utm_term=Sunday

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/28203/the-great-spiritual-migration>