

Do I Stay Christian: Why Are We Asking?

Matthew 16:13-18

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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One of the statements I hear most often from members of our congregation and others is “I raised my kids in church. They were really active. They loved the youth group and sang in the choir. I don’t understand why now that they are adults, they don’t go to church!” These people are certainly not alone. In fact, a 2021 Gallup poll showed that for the first time since they began polling, the number of people who say that they belong to a house of worship of any faith has dropped below 50%. The number who say they have no religious affiliation - sometimes called the “nones” - has gone from 8% in 2000 to 13% in 2010 to 21% in the last three years. And a new study from Pew Research predicts that number to be 50% by 2050.

So, what is going on? In his new book, *Do I Stay Christian?*, Christian author Brian McLaren examines reasons people are leaving the Christian church, reasons to stay, and how those of us with similar values, whether Christian or not, might move forward to be a positive force as the future unfolds. Over the next few weeks, we’ll be exploring McLaren’s book in our sermon series. Before we start, though, a couple of words of warning to anyone who decides to read the book as we go along. First of all, McLaren uses some pretty provocative language, particularly in his chapter titles. Don’t let that deter you. The whole book isn’t like that.

Secondly, McLaren doesn’t shy away from some of the very violent events in Christian history. Again, I hope you’ll stick with it even if it’s uncomfortable to read. Finally, the book has a whole section dedicated to reasons why you might not stay Christian and a whole section about reasons you would. Even if your feet are firmly planted in one camp or the other, read the whole book to help you understand why others might think differently.

Early on in the book, McLaren says that Christianity in the U.S. today is having a serious identity crisis. It’s not a new crisis by any means. There have always been those who closely follow the teachings of Jesus and those who use Christianity as a means of advancing their own interests and excusing decidedly un-Christian behavior.

We can see the beginnings of that identity crisis even in our scripture reading from Matthew today. In Matthew 16, we see Jesus and his disciples traveling from place to place as Jesus is teaching and healing. In the midst of these travels, Jesus asks the disciples who people say that he is. It’s kind of a strange question, yet it is one we ask ourselves all the time. What do people think about me? How well do they understand me? What assumptions do they make about me?

The disciples tell him that some people say that he is John the Baptist; others declare that he is Elijah; and still others claim that Jesus is Jeremiah or some other prophet. There are two interesting and relevant insights we get from this. First of all, points out commentator Mitzie Smith, the people don’t agree on who Jesus is. So, from the beginning, people were in conflict about Jesus’s identity. Secondly, while their answers vary, they all see Jesus as another prophet. Writes Smith, “People identify the Son of Man with dead prophets sent by God who did miraculous deeds, who stood toe-to-toe with kings and delivered to them words of doom,

opposition, and hope from Yahweh”. They do not yet see that Jesus is someone special there to teach them a new and different way.

Only Peter seems to recognize that Jesus is the Son of God and a living, breathing human expression of who God is and what God values. Jesus says Peter can only know this because God revealed it to him. Because Peter understands who he is, and because Peter has listened to God and not other humans, Jesus chooses Peter to be the rock on which he will build the church.

The disagreements about who Jesus is and who God is only continued from there and are still with us today. And that matters because what we believe about God, what we take from the teachings of Jesus, shape how we treat each other. If we believe in a vengeful God, we can call on God to support our own vengeful behavior. But, if we believe in God as revealed through the teachings of Jesus, then we seek to live out lives of compassion, love, and grace.

For many of us the understanding of Jesus as someone who was kind and compassionate and stood up for justice is what is familiar, though our following of Jesus has been somewhat passive. However, other forms of Christianity have developed over the last several decades. Evangelicalism with its emphasis on sin, theology which often excludes rather than welcoming others, and literal readings of the Bible has grown dramatically in my lifetime. And now, there is a rising movement of Christian nationalism.

On January 6, 2021, we sat in front of our televisions and computers shocked by what we saw unfolding in Washington D.C. An insurrection was happening. Followers of Donald Trump, who believed the 2020 election had been stolen from him, were storming the U.S. capitol building. They constructed a gallows and shouted “hang Mike Pence”. They violently rifled through senators’ offices and entered the chambers with guns and ammunition in hand.

But, perhaps most shocking for many of us was that a significant number of them claimed to be doing this as an expression of faith. They carried flags that read “Jesus is my savior, Trump is my president”, “Make America Godly Again”, “Born, raised, and protected by God, Guns, Guts and Glory”, and even one that read simply “I am with you, signed God”. They built 8-foot crosses, quoted scripture, and called on God and Jesus to help them in their fight. It was a painful, heartbreaking, gut wrenching display of Christian nationalism and left many of us wondering how Christianity had become this.

And therein lies the identity crisis. What is a Christian? What do Christians believe? Is our faith an acceptable excuse for behaviors like we saw that day, for dismantling democracy, for wielding guns and building gallows? Can I stay Christian if this is what Christianity is becoming? If we claim the name of Christian, what do we do to show the world a different form of Christianity?

As we enter into discussion of this book which reveals the best and the worst of what Christianity has been, is, and could be, I invite you to, as Peter did, ask God to reveal to you who Jesus is in some way that makes sense to you, that applies to your life, and will shape your behavior, choices, and purpose. Spend time in prayer and reading scripture. Talk with friends or family about your doubts and your hopes and dreams for the future.

McLaren contends that the only hope for our planet's survival, and the only hope for humanity's survival, is for people who put love, compassion, and integrity at the center of their lives to be more active, more outspoken, modeling acceptance of others and willingness to engage with those who are different from ourselves.

To that end, in the first appendix, Brian McLaren talks about how to read this book. He encourages having a pen or pencil in hand so you can mark what stands out to you as you read. He also encourages studying the book with a group. There is still time for you to join one of the small groups that is studying the book right now!

McLaren gives guidance to group leaders on how to facilitate a meaningful discussion. He offers some words that leaders might say as words of welcome to group participants. I offer you the same words of welcome as we begin reading and studying this book all together in worship.

“We are all friends around this table. All equals. All unique. All welcome. Who we are is who we are. There is no need to pretend. Some of us have a lot of beliefs and very few doubts. Some of us have a lot of doubts and very few beliefs. Some of us love God, but we're not sure about Jesus. Some of us love Jesus, but we're not so sure about God. Some of us aren't very sure about anything, and others feel very sure about almost everything. Some of us gladly call ourselves Christians. Some of us barely call ourselves Christians. Some of us once were Christians, but not anymore. Some of us aren't sure we ever were Christians, or aren't sure what that means, or whether it matters. But this we share: we welcome one another to this circle just as we are, for we all are part of one web of life on this precious planet in this amazing universe.”

May it be so. Amen.