

Do I Stay Christian? On The Other Hand

Luke 4:14-20

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I recently finished reading *The Lost Future of Pepperharrow* by Natasha Pulley, a sequel to *The Watchmaker of Filigree Street*. Both books center around a man named Keita Mori, one of the last of the Japanese samurai in the late 19th century. The books are historical fantasy because the events—the rise of electricity, the decline of the samurai order, the tension between Japan and Russia and England on the global stage—are real, but the central characters are decidedly not. Mori, you see, is a clairvoyant.

Pulley's character can see the future not in a sense of glass-ball-direct-viewing but in the sense of probability trees; he can see all the variations of what might happen to himself and the people around him and can therefore nudge the world in the directions he prefers. If he doesn't want you to post a letter next Tuesday, he can make you spill your coffee today to ruin your stamps so you can't use them later. If he does want you to become prime minister ten years from now, he can introduce you tomorrow to the person who will eventually know the head of the party and remember that you had talked about an interest in politics and a run for a local position.

They're brilliant books about the humanity of change and our fear of power and I highly recommend them, but I've been thinking about the books in a different context as I read through Brian McLaren's section of "Yes." We continue our series on his book *Do I Stay Christian?* this week and, as promised, the topic matter is rather more hopeful than last week. Pastor Nancy's overview of McLaren's "No" section summarized how we as a faith system have not only a closet but entire neighborhoods full of skeletons whose bony fingers catch at our collars when we step out into a world that is no longer willing to believe our statements of love and life. I am charged with the more cheerful section of "yes, there are reasons for staying Christian"—ten whole chapters of them, in fact. Before we get started on why McLaren says yes, let's talk about why *we* do.

For those of you who caught last week's sermon, you should be professionals; we're doing another Menti poll and here's how it's going to work. Experts, help your neighbors; newbies, listen in. There are three ways to do this: one, you can scan the QR code in the bulletin or on the screen to join in; two, you can go directly to the URL listed; three, for those who are here in the sanctuary and don't want to mess with smartphones, Carole will be at a table with a laptop ready and willing to take on your spoken suggestion.

Now, the question! In one word, what keeps you coming back to church?

In our Scriptural text today, Jesus has begun making a name for Himself and decides to go back home to Nazareth. Each of us has our own stories about homecoming and whether that has been a good, bad, or incredibly complicated thing. Last month, we of Ann Arbor First celebrated homecoming with the idea that here, this church in all its iterations, was home enough for us to return. That's not the case for everyone, that church feels home-like, and last week was a by-no-means-comprehensive list of why. This week, though, we go with Jesus to Nazareth on the wings of fame and compliments and read through pieces of the prophet Isaiah: the whole point of

ministry from now on is “to preach good news to the poor, / to proclaim release to the prisoners / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to liberate the oppressed, / and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

“I cannot and will not stay Christian if it means perpetuating Christianity’s past history and current trajectory,” writes Brian McLaren. “The only way I can stay Christian is to do so as part of a creative movement forging a new kind of Christianity”.¹ If we say “yes” to staying Christian, we do not have to say “yes” to the kind of Christianity that shows up in the worst parts of the nightly news. We do not have to say “yes” to the kind of Christianity that ignores this introduction of Jesus’ mission. We can say “yes” to a Christianity that brings hope, wholeness, home; the Christianity that recognizes that Jesus’ first sermon was about a world that did not reward some at the cost of others and that we are meant to continue that remaking.

Part of the “yes” is recognizing that we are neither the only nor the first ones to look at the list of “absolutely not” and struggle with whether this is a faith worth saving. McLaren goes all the way back to the legitimization of Christianity in the 4th century to highlight the monastic communities out in the wilderness that had no patience for empire. He points out, “These intrepid desert mothers and fathers simultaneously cherished the deepest beauty of Christian faith and withdrew their consent from the ugly turn it was taking.”² He goes on to list a veritable intro syllabus to reformers and VIPs of Christian history: Hildegard von Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Clare of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Nicolas of Cusa, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence—and that’s not even touching the post-Industrial Revolution era or leaving the confines of Europe. (If you want to talk about any of those folks in further detail, I and my two medieval studies degrees would be delighted to chat.)

Even Jesus was drawing on the ones before Him by using Isaiah’s text. As Professor Karoline Lewis puts it, “The origin of these words is important and deserves the attention it gets. Jesus isn’t just making this stuff up. Jesus situates his ministry in the ongoing promise and commitment of God, to the lowliest of God’s servants, to those who fear God from generation to generation, to the hungry, to God’s people Israel, to Abraham and Sarah.”³ None of us can see the ills of Christianity alone and none of us can change them alone; we are all standing on the shoulders of those who have come before and said *I think there is something worthwhile here; the Spirit is upon me.*

We face four options, says McLaren: one, we can stay in Christianity with compliance to the way it’s going; we hear the sermons and nod that that’s nice but I’m quite tired so whatever. Two, we leave compliantly, quietly exiting so that we can hold ourselves together and never mess with this again. Three, we leave defiantly; we tear out chunks of the system on our way out so that maybe it will overbalance and fall. Four, we stay defiantly; we refuse to be silent about how we have gotten it wrong, we refuse to lose our integrity to those who so clearly want to strip us of it, we refuse to close ourselves off to the idea that the Spirit of the Lord is still at work and we are

¹ McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned* (New York: St. Martin’s Essentials, 2022), 84.

² McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?*, 87.

³ [Commentary on Luke 4:14-21 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2013

to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” as though we actually believe there is such a thing and we know what it looks like.⁴

Keita Mori, in the book I mentioned, can see all possible futures that affect him—which must be exhausting—and continually speaks of himself as a terrible person for the various deaths and injuries and horrors that he doesn’t prevent in order to be present for the ones he can. We can’t see all that will come of the various choices we make, but we can see things like this word cloud that encapsulates the reality of church being something worthwhile *right alongside* being something that causes pain. We can see the impact of being part of this faith in the long line of reformers who said there is beauty, there is wonder, there is hope, there is grace here; there are prisoners being released, there are the poor who are hearing good news. The probability tree of this thing called Christianity is vast enough to have whole, branching systems of resurrection as well as the ones of death, systems of healing and change. Those who say “yes” to this faith need to get loud about the fact that doing so means we are reaching toward *those* probabilities and closing down the branches that lead to further cruelty and exclusion. “Silence in leaving or remaining will only allow these patterns to persist,” writes Professor Kristin Kobes Du Mez.⁵

No matter how many reasons McLaren gives you to stay in this faith, or I give you, or even the lovely stories of the gospels give you, they may not be enough. No one should ever stay in a system that is killing them; after all, Christianity preaches wholeness. If you are constantly being unmade, leave. Please. There is no church that is made better if it’s made on the pieces of you.

And; as we consider what it means to be a Christian or refuse the title, one important piece is to ask ourselves thoroughly what we mean by it. Who is this God we say is at the helm of things? Is it the one who thrives on just the right amount of tithing each week with absolute rules about who is loved and who is tolerated? Or is it a God who comes home to Nazareth and says, “The Spirit...has sent me to preach good news”? McLaren notes that Jesus was continually calling us toward “*the kingdom of God*, the idea that God and creation are part of one integrated reality that unites all things in one beloved community.”⁶ If the kingdom we’re telling others about is only after we die, or only for those who preach the sermons that never ruffle feathers, or only for white people, or only for straight people, or only for the folks who have prayed a specific prayer, or only for those who can recite an entire chapter of Scripture from memory, or only for Republicans, or only for Democrats, or only for those who went to a progressive-enough church, or only for people who donated to the “right” causes, or only for those who have followed *this* branch of the probability tree of how the world is shaped—if the kingdom we present is something whose gates we hold closed just in case the “wrong sort” get in, no wonder people want to walk away from God. I don’t want to hang out with that god, either, because there are at least four reasons in my list alone that exclude me from that kingdom.

But. If the God we’re talking about is One who talks about liberation *for everyone*, good news *for everyone*, God’s favor *for everyone*—if the Christ whose name we claim is the One who sat down at a table with Peter who got everything wrong and Judas who killed himself after betraying his friend; if the Christ is the One who washed feet and loved with bread and wine and

⁴ The four options are outlined in McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?*, 95.

⁵ McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?*, 96.

⁶ McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?*, 147.

prayer and blessing, the One who is so much more than the paltry boxes we try to contain God in with our understandings of what Christianity is—then I want in. If we’re talking about *that* God, I’m willing to bet a lot of people want in. If we’re talking about following a God Who loves, then we’re talking about a Christianity that is worth the time, a Christianity to which we can say “yes” over and over.

“[W]hen someone announces that you’ve been healed, it presupposes you had something you needed to be healed from,” writes Director David Schnasa Jacobsen. “If someone says, ‘you’re forgiven,’ it doesn’t make sense unless you needed something to be forgiven for.” Christianity has quite a lot of healing to do, and quite a lot to be forgiven for, and our humanity guarantees that there are more mistakes we will make as we wind through the future that we cannot see. But it might just be worth it, this beautiful and terrible world, because there are so many in the world—including me—who need to hear good news about a God who anoints.

Care to stay on the journey with me? I’m going to need the help, and I’m willing to offer my own. May God use it in the re-creation of this world, mending us all one breath at a time.

Amen.