

“Becoming Christian Again”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 3/8/20

I want to thank you! As my wife and I come up to our 24th wedding anniversary tomorrow, and for us both it feels like yesterday that God smiled on us and our energies connected together—unavoidably—while students on Howard Payne University’s El Paso campus—as we celebrate 24 years together, I am also mindful of our last 32 months together here in this community. And for this budding, blossoming love affair I truly say “thank you”—from both Ruth and myself. You have been loving, and kind, compassionate, and thoughtful. You have given us the freedom to journey with you, alongside you, free from prejudice or expectation, anchored in faith and hope. I started this job in Charlottesville’s Emancipation Square, which led to our marching into DC seeking equality and equity. You have been with me as we have examined immigration and the pain of our refugee friends; you have stood with me as we have confronted racism and its ugly vestiges; you have stayed with me as we begin to unpack the deep spiritual nuggets found within the ancient languages and traditions like Sanskrit and Choctaw, worshipping alongside me as we channel the traditional religions of our ancestors who cried out to God too; you have stuck with me as we sought genuine fellowship with our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters, finding much to learn from their leaders—my mentors and friends; you have been willing to listen to the stories of our LGBTQ+ friends, our trans friends; you have grappled with me over the injustices of our society, even those within our judicial system, as we listened to Lawrence Stephens share his story from prison last week (and on that note, we have set up a table for Lawrence in the Lodge where I ask some of you to write notes of encouragement to him during our fellowship time, and we will send the letters (you can put your home address on the return envelopes if you want to correspond with him directly and more regularly). On top of all that, when I decided to grow out my hair, not a single one of you have said anything derogatory or questioned it. I have come to appreciate that you accept me, just the way I am. I feel loved. I really do. And in that same vein of honesty, let us plunge into the very core of our faith together. Let us not shrink back from the hard questions.

As many of you know, Ruth has recently re-immersed herself in religious studies through Phillips Seminary, a Disciples of Christ seminary in Tulsa, OK. She has just completed a Bible course where she wrestled with the very essence of Scripture itself. I applaud her at her openness and incredible diligence toward the task, allowing herself to be malleable and attuned. One particular part of the story of Abraham and Sarah that really made her pause and call out grave sin, may not be the “sin” you would first think of. No. Much to the chagrin of some of her classmates, Ruth was mortified when she realized that in the story, Hagar wasn’t just a “maid-servant” who was “given” to Abraham by Sarah to try to have a child—she was enslaved by them (their property). Abraham is the “father” of our faith, and even in this genesis story, he had committed a great evil. Many Christians are often quick to point that the real sin was his and Sarah’s lack of faith for feeling the need to try and have a baby with Hagar rather than believing God would provide him an heir through Sarah—that the child he and Hagar would then have, would only complicate God’s plan for him—in essence rendering Ishmael a quazi-bastard in light of the impending later birth of what they see as the “true son,” Isaac. But no, Ruth saw something much worse and much more abhorrent. She saw slavery being glossed over by our traditionally spiritual “father Abraham.”

Many of you may have seen the commercial either on TV or the internet, a very recent, powerful, yet subtle vignette that opens with a younger woman of color dressed in a white, flowing dress on a Virginia beach at sunset where she says in 1619 right here, a ship full of enslaved people were first brought for the American colonists to purchase. The picturesque view is breathtaking, the words she says are piercing. Especially since these were Christian colonists. One of the most famous and influential, formerly enslaved leaders of the 19th Century was activist Fredrick Douglas. Many Whites at the time viewed him an enemy to Christianity. In response to this accusation, Douglas said, "I find...that I have, in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as many possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion...the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ...to be a friend of one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land."

What is Christianity, at its very core? What does the word mean for those who say it, and also for those who hear it? Are you a "christian," and if so, in what sense?

This past week we became good friends with Larycia Hawkins, a UVA professor who was our guest lecture here at the University of Lynchburg and also at First Christian (there goes that word again). She gave a wonderful lecture for the Senior Symposium I'm teaching, and my students were definitely challenged. She spoke briefly of her experience that occurred just over four years ago when as a Christian professor at Wheaton College (a Christian school) she donned a hijab (or head scarf) during the season of Advent in solidarity with her Muslim sisters who were being targeted and harassed in various parts of the country, at the time. This led to a great theological debate on her Christian campus, whether the God of the Muslims was the same God as the God of Christians. They, unfortunately, concluded that it was not, and asked Dr. Hawkins to separate employment, though she was the first African-American woman ever tenured there, a Christian college ironically founded by abolitionists in the 19th Century. But what does it mean to be "Christian"? Would Jesus had told Muslims that their God was different, even though Muslims consider Jesus to be the Messiah as well? We, here, of course would not dare say such a thing. For most of us here, we believe God is fluid, in all and with all, and has always, as our Creator, considered ALL of us (of all faiths and traditions) to be "children of God." But, have we wrestled with what it really means to be Christian?

Mahatma Gandhi is famous for saying, "I would be a Christian if it wasn't for Christians." He loved Jesus and his teachings but the "Christianity" he saw in South Africa and its apartheid, racist policies that landed him in out of jail over and over during his time there which was too blatant and hateful to ignore. However, he implemented specific Jesus principles of nonviolence that led to the eventual overthrow of British rule in India. Apart from the principles of peacemaking and compassionate living, which Jesus undoubtedly modeled in both life and teachings, Jesus also talked about something deeply transformative. When Rabbi Nicodemus came to Jesus in John 3, he wanted clarification. He knew that Jesus was connected to God and Nicodemus wanted more of what Jesus had, so Jesus told him he needed a transformation of heart and mind. He told him he needed to "born anew." This is where we get the "born again" metaphor. Jesus talks about a "reset" that must take place in regards to how we see the world, concluding that if you want to see God you need to be transformed. While our translation uses the word "saved" quite a bit here, it could have been easily replaced with "rescued." If you want to truly be in God's presence too, Jesus is saying clearly, then "be born of your spirit." And we know that this bit of truth stems from the idea that God is spirit, and so are we, and our greatest and best

connection is through a spiritual connection. However, this does not mean that we are to simply transcend our physical and forget about this earth, in fact, I would argue the opposite. The more spiritually attuned you are, the more sensitive you are to the people and creatures of the earth you become. Like Ruth, my wife, has always known the story of Abraham and Sarah, and Hagar. She has read it many times in various languages, taught it to children dozens of times in at least two languages, and seemingly for the first time she read it and saw something glaringly wrong in the story. I'd say she saw with spiritual eyes or "kingdom of God" style. Because she is plugged into the spirit of God, the spirit that truly seeks justice and reconciliation and loves all people, with this spirit Ruth saw an injustice that must not be ignored. Our faith cannot absolve nor condone the subjugation, ownership, enslavement, and oppression of others. This is not our faith! This is not our Christianity! This also boils down to our own relationships; we must not manipulate, appropriate, co-opt, corrupt, or oppress one another either. We have to find paths of peace and love, harmony, and mutual understanding. And we must suffer with those whose story paths may be different than ours. Like with Lawrence, our dear friend in the Sussex State Prison, who needs our love and care—we must not forget him. "What you have done for the least of these, you have done unto me."

Shalom