

“Tired of Apologizing”

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Texts: John 15: 1-10 and Acts 2:43-47

Jesus, Muhammad and Buddha all walked into a bar. Sounds like the start of a joke, but for me, it is a reminder that there is no reason not to believe that all three spiritual giants would hang out together. Their followers have had a harder time with that, as humans tend to group themselves and often identify by what they are not, rather than by what they are. Further, every world religion has its fringe, or radical, element. No one is immune. And while I have some knowledge of the other religions, I know Christianity – the religion that states that it follows Jesus – the best. We have a history (and a present) that has not been in tune with our founder. Even though John tells us in this morning’s readings that we are the branches and Jesus the vine, we often detach ourselves from him, and sometimes we look and act like a totally different “plant”.

Brian McLaren wrote a challenging book he called, *“Do I Stay Christian: A Guide for Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned”*. In some ways, it is a very difficult read as McLaren begins by telling us why we should not stay

Christian. He goes through our history as a church, and well, it hasn't been a pretty picture. Whether it's the inquisition, the Crusades, the Salem Witch trials, present-day clergy sexual scandals, or host of other events, the church has been not only on the wrong side of history many times, but it also has been starkly in contrast with Jesus himself. We have a history in the church that we must deal with that includes violence, often simply based on faith of another. Racism, anti-Semitism, papal indulgences, and the list goes on. Some of those events are ancient history. Some events we can say aren't on us because we're not members of the denomination or sect that carried out the evil deeds. The bad news is that our own forefathers and mothers have been participants in atrocities whether we believe it or not. Our beloved Congregational Church, the forerunner of our present United Church of Christ does have a history that isn't all roses.

Concurrently, the United Church of Christ, of which we are a member congregation, has been in a decades-long pursuit of greater faithfulness to Jesus (to the best of our ability), by naming, recognizing and apologizing for our own historical atrocities. Meanwhile, we are the first to ordain a woman, a gay man, and an African American in the mainline church. Many things we can be proud of in our history and in our present.

In today's world, the church has lost its place in many people's lives. If you look at television, sitcoms often make fun of the church and its clergy. Sometimes perceived as mean, but even more often out of touch, many people who have never stepped anywhere near a church have an erroneous notion of who we are. Or do they? Is there some basis in fact that the church is out of touch, navel-gazing, power and money-hungry? Are we in this church different?

Dr. Lillian Daniel, our new Michigan Conference United Church of Christ conference minister would have us believe so – at least to some degree. I don't know Lillian well, but she knows the history of the church and our shortcomings, but in her book *"Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To"* Lillian takes issue with her own need to constantly apologize for actions of a present-day church she doesn't belong to. I resonate with her argument. I do find myself often apologizing for a church I don't belong to. A church that is closed-minded, mean, judgmental, and sometimes even violent. There are many churches today that I want nothing to do with. Further, I don't agree with their actions and I'm tired of trying to explain them to my unchurched friends.

Speaking of the unchurched, most of my extended family has no church home. An increasing number of my friends are the same way. While I know some

of their reasons, I think this study we're going to do over the next several weeks might help me and by extension help others around me, see something that the church has to offer. Not all churches are judgmental, mean, racist, money-hungry, downright mean people – but some are. Honest acknowledgement of reality is a good thing. But I think Lillian is onto something more. I wonder if people like me actually talk others out of going to the church (except for the one I attend) by apologizing for other Christians? Or, perhaps worse, I don't talk about church at all for fear of offending someone just because I say I'm a Christian and attend church.

Am I embarrassed of Jesus? Nope. Am I embarrassed by the actions of some of his followers? Yep. Do I find that some expressions of the church are, dare I say, unchristian? Yes. Is my church perfect? Nope. But neither is any organization or collection of people. That doesn't mean we don't have responsibility for where we've messed up, but we are not responsible for the hurtful actions of others who also happen to claim that they follow Jesus Christ.

Look at Jesus himself! He was a middle eastern Jew. And yet, he challenged the temple, and its clergy on a regular basis. He wasn't welcome in many of the temples and synagogues of his day. He also challenged his

permission to say, “Everything’s going to be fine. I can return to my previously scheduled apathy and complacency.”

There’s another way of answering the question that says, “The future of Christianity is [bleak] and terrible and hopeless.” And we could succumb to a kind of despair or a cynicism that would allow us to say, “Nothing I can do about it. It will be what it will be. It’s out of my hands.” And that would allow us to return to previously scheduled apathy and complacency.”

But there’s another way of asking this question and engaging it with an open heart, an open imagination, an open mind. And that’s a way that leads to a sense of empowerment for us to be open to the ways that the future of Christianity could be influenced by what we know our story begins with: One person impacting twelve people who impacted several hundred more [and so on].

For centuries, Christianity has presented itself as an “organized religion” -- a change-averse institution...that protects and promotes a timeless system of beliefs that were handed down fully formed in the past. Yet Christianity’s actual history is a story of change and adaptation. We Christians have repeatedly adapted our message, methods, and mission to the contours of our time. What might happen if we understand the core Christian ethos as creative, constructive, and forward-leaning – as an “organizing religion” that challenges all institutions (including its own) to learn, grow, and mature toward a deepening, enduring vision of reconciliation with God, self, neighbor, enemy, and creation?

That’s a lot to say, and this sermon is longer than most, but here’s the point. While I’m tired of apologizing for a church I don’t belong to, I’m also well aware that the church I do belong to needs to become more adaptive, and willing to change. We need to engage the world in a whole new way. Over the next several weeks, I hope to engage with you on where our place might be in this need for change. What kind of church will we be? How will we change? Stay the same? With the help of McLaren and Daniel we will focus on a church that we

government – the Romans – and those who simply played along with whatever Rome had in mind. Meanwhile, he hung with those he was forbidden to hang out with. He cured on the sabbath. He partnered with women and ate dinner with tax collectors. He turned the tables, literally, in the temple in protest of unfaithful actions. But never did he deny he was Jewish, nor did he take it upon himself to apologize for the actions of others who were also Jewish. There are many things we can learn from Jesus, but maybe this is chief among them. It's not our job to fix the others without them having asked us to fix them. At the same time, we don't need to take responsibility for their actions.

We do, however, need to look at ourselves. Brian McLaren in a *Daily Meditation* I receive questions the future of Christianity. He says it is a question that he has lived with his whole adult life. In fact, he says it is part of his calling to live with and wrestle with this question. McLaren writes:

I think we should realize that there are some people who would find it dangerous to even ask this question, because to raise the question of the future of Christianity suggests that the future might be different than the past or the present. And there are lots of people who are very, very invested in making sure the future is exactly the same as the past or the present. And I think the question is also dangerous within each of us, depending on how we answer it. If we were to look at some positive trends and say, "Oh, the future of Christianity is bright! The future of Christianity is wonderful," there's a certain way that that kind of positive and even wishful thinking could then give us, inside the privacy of our own minds,

won't need to apologize for (well, at least not that often...we are human).

Instead, a church that we want to tell our friends about. A place of inclusion, of challenge, of grace, of mercy, and most of all, a church whose participants see themselves as an extension of the one in whose name we gather – Jesus, our Christ. He is the vine, we are the branches.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

