

## RELUCTANT CHRISTIANS

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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The gospel lesson for today<sup>i</sup> describes a conversation between the post-resurrection Jesus and one of his original twelve disciples, Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him, likely because earlier in John's gospel account<sup>ii</sup> (and in those of Matthew<sup>iii</sup>, Mark<sup>iv</sup> and Luke<sup>v</sup> too) Peter three times denies knowing Jesus after he's been arrested.<sup>vi</sup> Peter has proven himself a reluctant follower of Christ when the chips are down – when he risks being arrested and executed along with Jesus. The immediately prior chapter of John portrays another disciple, Thomas, refusing to believe that the rest of the twelve have seen Jesus again after he's died and been buried: “Unless I...put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Doubting Thomas is another reluctant follower of Christ. Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles<sup>vii</sup> describes one who has actually been hunting down followers of Christ to arrest and execute them. He's named Saul – later renamed Paul after he's struck to the ground by a flashing light and hears the voice of Jesus telling him what to do henceforth. Paul is yet another reluctant Christian, later sent out to bring Jesus' name to Gentiles far beyond Israel.<sup>viii</sup>

So if these great original disciples and apostles of Jesus were such reluctant Christians, is it any wonder that many of us are reluctant Christians today? And what if we haven't had a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus asking if we love him? What if we haven't put our fingers in the nail holes in his hands? What if we haven't been blinded by a flashing light, thrown to the ground and heard a voice saying, "I am Jesus...Get up and...you will be told what you are to do"?<sup>ix</sup> What if we're modern people committed to the use of logic, reason and the scientific method? What if we think that the Bible is to be read largely metaphorically and allegorically, rather than literally? What if we think that Christianity isn't the only road to the top of the spiritual mountain and that understanding and tolerance of other traditions are critical?

I wrote a book several years ago about how to reclaim Christianity for ourselves under these circumstances called *Jesus Was a Liberal*.<sup>x</sup> I'd like to rehearse some of my suggestions here this morning about how to move beyond reluctance.

First of all, it's helpful to redefine "faith" from the realm of "blind faith" or "taking a leap of faith" to that which integrates all that we know to be true – rationally as well as poetically, practically as well as mythically.<sup>xi</sup> One of my divinity school professors defined faith as a universal quality of human life like love – something that most human beings have experienced at some time in their life. Faith is the ability to live at more than a mundane level: to see, to feel, and to act in terms of a transcendent

dimension that brings together all that we know and ultimately all that is. Faith is an orientation of the individual personality, but it's been nurtured and shaped by various religious and secular traditions from the likes of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to secular humanism, science, Marxism, romantic poetry, Greek philosophy, Enlightenment thought, and much more.

Although faith is a human universal, it comes in many different forms, just as love is a human universal, but comes in many different forms too. Faith is feeling at home in the universe, rather than thinking that it's all absurd. The opposite of faith is nihilism. Faith is the process of finding meaning and purpose in the universe, in myriad ways. Faith is about finding a sense of centeredness deep within us and experiencing a stability regardless of what happens to us personally in the buffeting of life events. That isn't to say we don't and shouldn't have plenty of doubts, which can de-stabilize us. But faith at its best constantly grows and reconstitutes itself on firmer footing through the refining power of doubt. A great value of faith is how it allows us, as meaning-making or meaning-discovering creatures, to look beyond ourselves and beyond material realities to ideals and to a larger picture of what it's all about.<sup>xii</sup>

Secondly, reluctant Christians do well to re-discover some compelling sense of God in their lives. For me, that's meant connecting with the idea of the infinite, starting from mathematical notions that there are sets of things like the cardinal numbers or integers that never stop; there's always one more we can name. God can

be thought of as the set of all infinite sets. Infinity exists, as least in our minds, and becomes useful as an explanatory way to look at reality.<sup>xiii</sup> Then there's God as order and law in the universe.<sup>xiv</sup> Einstein referred to as God as being revealed "in the orderly harmony of what exists,"<sup>xv</sup> or in "the lofty structure of all that there is."<sup>xvi</sup> He called himself religious in sensing "that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection."<sup>xvii</sup>

Another way to think of God is as life force or as spirit that infuses all of life. The poet William Wordsworth spoke of it as "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man. A motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things." We often experience God best in this way through meditation and contemplation – and frequently out in nature.<sup>xviii</sup>

And then there's a human sense of God as love – as that which can align people in our relations with each other and which is denied or defied at our peril. Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Dalai Lama and other nonviolence practitioners have spoken of it as a universal law of love or compassion. When we feel it and act upon it we are happiest individually and as a species. Christians have a central focus for personifying the law of love – in the person of Jesus, whom we have

come to call the Christ or the anointed one. In Jesus we're made concretely aware of what the fullness of love looks like here on earth.<sup>xix</sup> As my college chaplain, William Sloane Coffin, put it, "When we see Jesus...empowering the weak, healing the hurt, always returning good for evil, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work."<sup>xx</sup> Jesus also suffered so much pain and suffering in his torture and crucifixion that it's possible to feel an empathy and companionship with him that's virtually impossible with the more abstract infinite God of the natural order.<sup>xxi</sup>

So, Christians can begin moving beyond reluctance by clarifying their understanding of faith, of God, and of Jesus. Perhaps the next step is to appreciate more deeply the potential power of coming together in spiritual and moral community – what Christians call the Church. There's a central master story of a community that formed around this particular historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, and has tried to be true to his life and teachings, as well as to his continuing presence in our lives. No matter how badly the Church as community has done in reality throughout history, its actions continue to be influenced both by Jesus' words and deeds, and by our ideas of who Jesus was and in what ways he wants us to act. At its best, the Church as community creates a joyful sense of belonging, support, and strength for each of its members, all hopefully in the service of the highest and the best of which we're capable.<sup>xxii</sup> Again, as my college chaplain used to explain, "It's often

said that the Church is a crutch. Of course it's a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp?"<sup>xxiii</sup>

As Jesus instructed on the day before he died, the central ritual for Christians in community has been coming together at the same table in what we've variously called the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. There's good evidence that Jesus saw communion not just for his immediate disciples – certainly not just the twelve you see in the mosaic above the altar in the front of this church – but as an open table for anyone who would like to come, actually whether a follower of Jesus or not. According to the gospel of John, when he fed 5,000 people by the Sea of Galilee, he used words of institution that sound very much like the ones we'll use in our holy communion ritual here in Memorial Church this morning: “Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Or, as the same story is reported in Matthew, “He looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.” Jesus didn't ask if all those people were his followers, or were merely curious about him, or in fact were doubtful, or didn't care about him at all but were just hungry.<sup>xxv</sup> Here in our communion, which is open to everyone regardless of belief or tradition, we say, “Come, whether your faith is strong or weak, whether your hope shines brightly or is dimmed. Come, ready to receive; for all are welcome at this feast of love.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

So, in summary, there have been reluctant Christians from the very beginning, including the apostles Peter, Thomas, and Paul. To help Christians move beyond reluctance, it's useful to redefine faith from something that's blind to something that we experience with our eyes wide open. It's helpful to rediscover God in our world – perhaps as the infinite, the law and order in the universe, the life force or spirit that infuses all of life, or simply as love. It's empowering to see Jesus as exemplar of how to live in a fully loving way. It's encouraging to come together in spiritual and moral community as the Church, with all trying to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. And we can both symbolize that and feel all of it sacramentally by coming forward to a common table to break bread and drink wine together in remembrance of Jesus the Christ.

Christ calls us now, as long ago, to follow him and to be sent out as disciples in our own time. “Christ walks with us, Christ dwells with us, in resurrection power, as near as thought, as deep as breath, to bring our faith to flower.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

## BENEDICTION

May the courage of the early morning's dawning,

And the strength of the eternal hills,

And the peace of the evening's ending,

And the love of God, be in our hearts, now and forevermore.

AMEN.



## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> John 21: 15-19.
- <sup>ii</sup> John 18: 15-18; 25-27.
- <sup>iii</sup> Matthew 26:69-75.
- <sup>iv</sup> Mark 14:66-72.
- <sup>v</sup> Luke 22:54-62.
- <sup>vi</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 860.
- <sup>vii</sup> Acts 9:1-9.
- <sup>viii</sup> Acts 9:15.
- <sup>ix</sup> Acts 9:5-6.
- <sup>x</sup> Scotty McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. x-xi.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-50.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52.
- <sup>xv</sup> Albert Einstein, letter to a New York rabbi as cited in Max Jammer, *Einstein and Religion: Physics and Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 48.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Albert Einstein, "My Credo" (speech to the German League of Human Rights, Berlin, 1932), reproduced in Michael White and John Gribbin, *Einstein: A Life in Science* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 262-63.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xviii</sup> McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal*, pp. 52-57.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-62.
- <sup>xx</sup> William Sloane Coffin, Jr., *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), p. p. 42.
- <sup>xxi</sup> McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal*, p. 62.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> William Sloane Coffin, Jr., *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), p. 137.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> John 6:11.
- <sup>xxv</sup> McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal*, p. 184.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> "The Holy Communion", Order of Service for University Public Worship at the Stanford Memorial Church on April 14, 2013 (Adapted from a communion liturgy from Iona Abbey, Scotland).
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Jane Parker Huber, "Christ Calls Us Now, as Long Ago" (Hymn written in 1984).