

Recycling Christianity

Scripture Text: Matthew 7:1-6, 13-20 (Common English Bible)

“Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. ²You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. ³Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? ⁵You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye. ⁶Don’t give holy things to dogs, and don’t throw your pearls in front of pigs. They will stomp on the pearls, then turn around and attack you.

¹³“Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. ¹⁴But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.

¹⁵“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you dressed like sheep, but inside they are vicious wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruit. Do people get bunches of grapes from thorny weeds, or do they get figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, and every rotten tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree can’t produce bad fruit. And a rotten tree can’t produce good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Therefore, you will know them by their fruit.

Transcript

Previously On...

For those who weren’t here last week, this is essentially part two of last week’s sermon.

A quick recap of the key points:

In the Mark text, Jesus teaches against wielding power over and against others, instead celebrating those who centre and liberate the marginalized. It was specifically children in that text, but I feel confident to make it a general statement because of everything else Jesus did and taught. He criticizes the disciples for seeking that kind of dominating power.

The cult of innocence is a term from Brian McLaren about the attitude that often supports that quest for power. That’s when we believe that we are superior to others and thus justified – maybe even required – to rule over them.

The James text gave some tips on avoiding that trap as a community: confession, singing, and praying. These help us avoid defining ourselves primarily by how we are better than somebody else and in a more positive way instead.

Defining Christianity

It's on that question of definition that I am going to pick up. We are a Christian church. We just read from the Christian Scriptures, about the teachings of the one we call the Christ. Not everybody here would individually call themselves a Christian. No judgement from me. There's a lot of good reasons why that might be. But "here" is a church in the Christian tradition, so I am speaking communally and assuming that at the very least, you aren't that uncomfortable by others using the label.

What does that mean, to define ourselves as Christian? In *Do I Stay Christian's* introduction, Brian McLaren names several different categories under which "Christian" can be defined. He includes historically or culturally, institutionally, doctrinally, liturgically or programmatically, spiritually or experientially, moralistically, missionally, demographically, politically, socially, and linguistically. That's a lot of options. There's a lot of room in there to be able to fit in one definitional category while being completely opposite in another category.

Here's where the conflict really comes in for me: it's undeniable that when many people in our culture hear the word "Christian," they picture a violent white patriarchal nationalist.

I could get into a long rant about the many things I disagree with the current Christian nationalist movement about. Some of those rants have been in previous drafts of this message. But to sum up the heart of Christian nationalism, I'm going to quote one Donald Trump who said, "there should be no more important voice than the voice of Christians." As usual for Donald Trump, that was amid some rambling that wasn't entirely coherent, but that line was clear. It was also clear in the context that he meant white conservative Christians. They believe that they have the right to enforce a hierarchy with them at the top ruling over the rest of us, because our voices don't matter as much. It's running headfirst into the cult of innocence quest for power. That's where I start to have a hard time talking about it as a truly Christian movement. It is in some of the definitional categories that McLaren names, mostly the socio-political ones. But I see no way around that it is blatantly contradictory to the way of Jesus. It is quite literally anti-Christ.

"True" Christianity

Some of you might be tensing up right now at that kind of language. Most of us can probably think of some time in our life that we've heard that real Christians always do x, or don't believe y. Maybe that was an attack on you personally, maybe it was a more generalized statement. You might have also heard that with more specific labels like Mennonite. Me questioning whether this is truly a Christian movement might hit a sore spot. I understand that impulse.

Many years ago, there was a huge story that took over Christian social media. World Vision USA decided to allow LGBTQ people on staff. There's not a lot of practical reasons why they wouldn't have been allowed in the first place. It's not like being in World Vision's IT or letter translation or accounting has some great spiritual authority to "spread their sinful lifestyle" or whatever.

In response, thousands of evangelicals suddenly dropped support for sponsor children through World Vision. They even did that in Canada, even though World Vision Canada had never had a policy blocking LGBTQ staff in the first place. For these evangelicals, the life of the child they had spent years supporting and building a relationship with was easy to set aside. It was less important

than making a culture war statement to maintain their cult of innocence as superior to LGBTQ people. And they won, at least in the short term, as World Vision USA brought back the policy after about a week of watching all their work collapse.

So, I posted on Facebook how I thought this showed some very skewed priorities. By this point, I was publicly calling myself an Anabaptist. For those who don't know, that's the broader branch of Christianity that Mennonites are a part of.

In response to my post, I got a message from a former pastor. He had also moved to an Anabaptist community. He let me know that I really shouldn't be calling myself an Anabaptist if I supported any kind of LGBTQ equality. That wasn't even the point of the post I had made, but it was also true that I did support that, so probably not worth fighting over that distinction.

So how should I respond to that?

The Options

In thinking back on that experience, I found the options that he was giving me – one he said explicitly and others I thought were there implicitly - mapped well with what McLaren named for something completely different. He discusses the options that were presented by the Christian colonialism project.

I found this even more interesting because those options also largely map to the same options that Christian nationalists try to force on the rest of us today. There is a commonality in how this dominating power mindset works:

1. You can try to become one of them and share in the power. Maybe that's at the cost of your integrity. There have been stories of far right talking heads who don't really believe a lot of it, but they realized it was very profitable. Maybe in some cases it's at the cost of other aspects of your identity, especially if a more marginalized identity. But you can try to play their power game. What that pastor probably wanted most was for me to renounce my heresy and return to true Christianity, willing to sacrifice LGBTQ people for my own gain.
2. You can stick around but shut up and give them everything they want. Basically, be the subservient class that they need to exploit in order for any of their plans to actually work. For somebody to be at the top, there have to be people underneath them. Maybe I could keep using the Anabaptist label but shut up about equality. Stop rocking the boat.
3. You can leave, at least in theory. You sometimes hear that rhetoric from the nationalists: if you don't like the way I want my country to be, you should just leave. It's never as easy to migrate as they seem to think it is. It's not that easy to get into what they consider *their* country and not as easy to get out of *their* country into other countries. But maybe from that conversation I should have concluded it is best to forsake the Anabaptist label. That is what he explicitly recommended. I think he knew me enough to know I wasn't going to do the first two, even if they did feel implied.
4. Or the final option, when all else fails, especially if you tried to put up a fight, you can die. One of the leaders of Project 2025, writing policy for a Trump presidency, promised a revolution but that "it would be bloodless if the left wants it to be." Essentially, he was saying

he'd like everyone else to take option 2, but he's willing to do option 4. Fortunately, this one did not feel like it was relevant in that short discussion with my former pastor.

Discerning and Judging

I think the Matthew text helps point us toward having more than those four options, though. But it's true that it might look self-contradictory at first.

Jesus says to not judge others. We are supposed to focus on our own weaknesses first and then we can gently help others with theirs.

But then we also hear to not throw pearls to pigs. That requires that you can tell what the pearls are, and who the pigs are.

We also get that there is a narrow path of life and a wide path of destruction. The way of Jesus surrendering power out of love for others is hard, but it brings life. It's a lot easier to seek power over others. That is the default way our world operates, hence calling it the wide path, even though it leads to a lot of destruction.

And finally, it says that we should identify false prophets by their fruit. We should ask questions like: what are the consequences of people who say they represent God or absolute truth? Do their attitudes and actions result in better loving their neighbours, particularly the most marginalized, or does it spread fear and a desire to dominate others?

So... how are we supposed to identify the "pigs" and the false prophets and those on the wide path, if we aren't supposed to judge?

I believe there are two different types of judgement involved here. The judgement in the first section is about superiority, placing ourselves above others.

So, to that, Jesus says we need to make sure we're aware of our own weaknesses. That was last week's message. This is an ongoing project, not a one-time thing.

Then once we have some clarity, we can move into the different type of judging, which we could also call discernment. Discernment is one of those Christianese terms. We have a gifts discernment committee, which basically means volunteer recruitment.

I decided to see how much consensus there was on the meaning of the word discernment, so I entered it into a Bing search. Yes, I use Bing. I will not be defending myself on that. But it gave me two definitions at the top of the results:

1. The ability to judge well.
2. (in Christian contexts) perception in the absence of judgement with a view to obtaining spiritual guidance and understanding.

And I thought, wow, good job Bing. That second one really nailed what I was trying to say. Discernment in this sense requires the absence of judgement. If you are too caught up in a superiority complex, you can't perceive the spiritual guidance you're looking for. So not only do we have two different ideas of judgement here, they're fundamentally contradictory to each other.

That discernment includes when societal forces are pushing in the complete opposite direction of what we see as the values of Jesus. That's particularly true in the big central things Jesus talked about a lot, like our relationship with power over and against the marginalized.

It's always going to be tempting to take that discernment right back into judgement. The people participating in those societal forces may be our "enemies" in that they have contrary goals. We can be honest about that. But that doesn't mean we hate the people or that we spread fear about them. Back to the James text from last week, we restore people where we can. We get them out of their participation in the systems of oppression. We do not restore or defend the systems of oppression.

I think this distinction helps set up another option for us.

Recycling Christianity

This is where I come back to that conversation with the former pastor. I did abandon the label of evangelical about that time, so why not also Anabaptist or Christian?

The big difference was that by that point, I knew a lot of Anabaptists and other Christians who clearly did not have a problem with me. Many were explicitly and publicly affirming of LGBTQ equality in the church as well as legally. Even the ones who were not fully affirming still universally agreed with me that it is bad to abandon a sponsor child just because World Vision might employ a gay person. The former pastor was the anomaly in my life.

That's the most important part to me. It's essentially a different angle to how last week's message ended: we do often have to name the bad thing, but we can't stop there. We have to be prepared to do the hard part of offering something better. Loudly. Publicly. Without any shame attached.

McLaren talks about recycling Christianity. He acknowledges that there are some harmful things that need to be thrown out; maybe there's nothing left to be redeemed about them. But he also cautions that ideas or labels don't simply go away. If we stop using certain language because others are using it in a harmful way, all that leaves us with is their harmful definition. So instead of abandoning Christian identity, we could seek to recycle or re-consecrate, make it holy again.

This also applies to more specific ideas in how we understand the world. The whole concept of how Christians relate to LGBTQ people had been recycled for me in time. I knew that there were options other than trying to deny them every legal right and every community participation. It made it so much easier to say "no" to that pastor because I had already said "yes" to something better.

I'm going to end with a bit of a rapid fire of some of those big ideas that maybe need to be recycled. These need to be taken back from what a lot of people think is "the Christian meaning." I don't think it is a coincidence that a lot of these conflicts in definition go back to questions of power and the cult of innocence. Many things within the biblical and early Christian context were radically upending power structures, standing up to Roman authority. But they have since been redefined away, into justifications for why some should dominate everyone else. That's to the point that most people – including a lot of people in churches - don't even realize how they once meant the opposite.

Justice and peace: we often hear justice talked about as punishing those we think have broken the rules. It's justice to put somebody in jail when they've done something wrong. Peace is often

treated as not currently having large-scale violence, mainly because you've enacted justice on the bad guys. That's a very Roman Empire and European perspective. What if instead, it meant something closer to the Hebraic worldview, where justice is about making the world whole and equitable for everyone?

Tied into that is salvation: this is often used to mean fire insurance to avoid Hell when we die. What if instead it means what it meant in the Exodus story, and many other places in the Bible? There it's an oppressed people escaping their oppressors, and sometimes it's the oppressors escaping being involved in the systems of oppression. The Bible talks a lot about judgement but has little concern with an afterlife.

Apocalypse: that's always a fun one. We often hear that spoken of as the end of the world. And usually that's pictured as God will violently destroy the bad guys and put the good guys in charge – that's us. Maybe that's through a war in the Middle East, which is even more timely this week than usual. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a thing. But what if apocalypse meant what it originally meant, an unveiling? There's a reason why the last book of English Bibles is called Revelation. It's a poetic look behind the curtain at the forces of domination in the world and how God overcomes them.

Gospel: it's supposed to mean good news but often it is phrased as very bad news. We are evil sinners who will burn in Hell if we don't submit to the right religion. Isn't that great news? What if it was the Gospel of Jesus instead, that God's Kingdom of love and justice is among us right now? What if it's the Gospel of texts like Mary's Magnificat, that God overcomes evil including removing tyrants from their throne? Now that sounds like some good news.

I have no interest in the violent white patriarchal nationalist Christianity that openly mocks the words of Jesus as "too woke". But that recycled liberatory Christianity, the one that takes Jesus' challenges to power seriously? That's a Christianity I can get behind.

Resources

Books

Do I Stay Christian: A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned by Brian McLaren. This is a very pastoral book taking an honest look at the concept of a Christian identity. It acknowledges a lot of very serious harms both past and present that would justifiably cause us to abandon the label. It also includes practical reasons why you may choose to keep the label despite those things, and then offers some suggestions on how to proceed either way. In part one, I borrowed the concept of the cult of innocence. In this part I borrowed some more ideas: the colonial options and recycling Christian language.

How To Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace by Melissa Florer-Bixler, a Mennonite USA pastor. This is a great examination of how Jesus responded to very real enemies and taught us to do the same.

God and Empire by John Dominic Crossan. This is a good overview of the Bible's conflict between an imperial worldview and a bottom-up peace worldview. At risk of disagreeing with one of the greatest living New Testament scholars, I do think he puts Revelation in the wrong category, though, missing out on what other scholars will point out are the nonviolent themes.

Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation by Kristen K Du Mez. This covers decades of the history of white evangelicalism in the United States and how it got to be where it is today, especially in terms of the priority on a macho violent masculinity.

The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism. This is written by a journalist who is himself a white evangelical, son of a white evangelical pastor, about the descent of US white evangelicalism particularly since 2016. He is focused less on the major influencers and more on the impact on church congregations, where it is now not unusual for people to simultaneously declare they are the only real Christians and anything Jesus said must be dismissed because it is "woke."

Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart by Christena Cleveland. This is a look at divisions within the Christian Church through the lens of social psychology. I read this book many years ago, before the current wave of Christian nationalism really took off, and it would be interesting to revisit now or to ask Christena what she would say differently.

YouTube and Podcasts

[Reclaiming My Theology](#) is a podcast hosted by Brandi Miller that is "taking our theology back from ideas and systems that oppress." Season 1 focused on white supremacy, season 2 on patriarchy and purity culture, and she has now started a new season on empire. The current season is the most directly related, but the others do tie in as well. It is perhaps my most recommended Christian podcast.

[For Our Daughters](#) is a short documentary from Kristen K Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne* (listed above under Books). It is focused on how authoritarian theologies lead to abuse.

Homebrewed Christianity has had a lot of episodes relevant here:

- [Do I Stay Christian? a conversation with Brian McLaren about his new book \(youtube.com\)](#)
This is the intro to a series with Brian about the book cited above.
- Several conversations on a regular basis with Diana Butler Bass which often touch on intersections of religion and politics.
- [Adam Clark: From Contemplation to Liberation](#). From the episode description, it includes “the struggles of those trying to stay Christian when the church testifies against it.”

[Project 2025: A Hellish Legal Vision for America](#), by Legal Eagle. This is a pretty good summary of major points of Project 2025, the policy manifesto of the US right. Also available ad-free with a [Nebula](#) subscription. It isn't a Christian refutation of it, but a US legal one.

Other Possible Texts

Unlike the first week, this week wasn't based on the lectionary, and the idea really came from extending last week's text, so I needed to select at least one more Scripture text that tied in for this week. I ultimately selected the Matthew text, but these are others I considered.

1 John 4: this shares some similarities with the Matthew text from the Sermon on the Mount. It similarly names that there are false prophets. Matthew says they are known by their fruit; this says they are known by denying that Jesus is from God. I think this is saying a similar thing. If you believe Jesus is from God, you believe he has some authority in his wisdom teaching about surrendering power out of love for others. I didn't feel like I could get to the point as quickly as with the Matthew text.

There were a couple more in the same category of identifying false teachers:

- 2 Peter 2: this one is the most angry about false teachers but didn't have as clear of a dichotomy for the alternative, which I wanted.
- 2 Timothy 4:1-5: a shorter segment acknowledging how false teachers will lure people in with attractive myths – like the superiority of your group over others – but is mostly focused on doing the hard work of building an alternative.

Acts 5:33-42: the argument of Gamaliel here is interesting, and at least partly coherent with how I am approaching Christian nationalism. Distance ourselves from them. Make it clear that there is a distinction. But it's not actively seeking to kill them, instead trusting that if it is not truly from God it will not work out well for them in the end.

Ephesians 6:10-17. This is a lot of spiritual warfare language which often makes those of us in the peace tradition uncomfortable, but the key part to me is verse 12, that “we aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens” (CEB). I think this is helpful to remember that while we cannot divide the world between us good guys and those bad guys, we also can't deny that evil systems exist, and the way of Jesus stands in opposition to them. I am tempted to do a “recycling” sermon on the concept of spiritual warfare at some point.

Acts 8:9-23: see the deleted scene “Simon the Great” below.

Deleted Scenes

These are some pieces that got cut for time, but are a direction I went down at some point during the process.

More Examples of Christian Nationalism

[I ultimately cut this down because I think the core of Christian nationalism was clear enough that I didn't need multiple quotes about it, which would have taken time away from what we do about it. Some of this did get included in a shorter form.]

You might have heard news recently of Project 2025, the policy document associated with but not directly a part of the Trump campaign. It started gaining a lot of attention after one of its leaders made a comment that sounded very similar to the options for subjects of colonial Christianity. He promised that they would bring about a new American Revolution, but it would be bloodless "if the Left wants it to be." He wants the Left to take option 2, to shut up and not fight back, but he's willing to go to option 4.

Recently, a post came across my social media feed from a man who wrote a book in defence of Christian nationalism. His tweet, or whatever they're called now, says, "Christianity – as the true religion affirming what is true, good and beautiful – commands you to love all but to prefer your people over other people." If you don't know anything about Christianity except what the nationalists say, you might think, oh, ok. But if you've heard anything from the Sermon on the Mount, or the Good Samaritan, or any of Paul's many writings about breaking down divisions in the church, or lots of other biblical texts as well as historical teaching, you're just left saying "what are you talking about?" It's not even logically possible when you think about it. What exactly does love even mean if you are saying to somebody that you "love" that in all practical ways you prefer them less?

Another recent quote that stood out to me was from Donald Trump himself. In a call with the National Faith Advisory Board, he said:

Every day, she's [Kamala Harris] flooding our country with millions and millions of criminal illegal aliens. And wants, to make them citizens, she wants to have them vote, which will destroy the voting powers of Christian conservatives forever. And once that starts happening, and once you get those numbers involved, you lose everything that you've had. You've had more than you had now, but we're going to get it higher than ever before. There's no more, and there should be no more important voice than the voice of Christians.

A lot of that is his trademark incoherence and I don't really know what he meant. There's also obviously a lot that is just factually incorrect. But he did get across a couple of his key points.

1. Conservative Christians should be operating out of fear that they are going to lose what power they had. And I think one of the incoherent bits is supposed to be him walking the line that they should be afraid of losing what they have while also feeding the martyr complex which says they already have no power. That's kind of part of a particular cult of innocence, that they simultaneously believe they should have all the power while denying any power they already have.

2. Conservative Christians should have the most important voice. And that means white conservative Christians. A lot of the immigrants to the US that he is so scared of are conservative Christians, just not white ones.

Our political rhetoric in Canada does not usually get as direct as these three quotes, which is why I'm leaned heavily on US examples. We have a lot of the same mindset, but usually our politicians won't go as far as to directly say that conservative white Christians should have more power over and against everyone else. At most we usually get some vague references to Christian heritage, while letting the more extreme churches or other groups go ahead with the direct language. But as is often true, we are not that far behind the US on this. Even five years ago American politicians also didn't explicitly declare themselves Christian nationalists the way they do now, so all signs are still suggesting that there are significant forces pushing us in that direction as well.

Simon the Great

Using Acts 8:9-23 as a second Scripture reading:

⁹ Before Philip's arrival, a certain man named Simon had practiced sorcery in that city and baffled the people of Samaria. He claimed to be a great person. ¹⁰ Everyone, from the least to the greatest, gave him their undivided attention and referred to him as "the power of God called Great." ¹¹ He had their attention because he had baffled them with sorcery for a long time. ¹² After they came to believe Philip, who preached the good news about God's kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. ¹³ Even Simon himself came to believe and was baptized. Afterward, he became one of Philip's supporters. As he saw firsthand the signs and great miracles that were happening, he was astonished.

¹⁴ When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem that Samaria had accepted God's word, they commissioned Peter and John to go to Samaria. ¹⁵ Peter and John went down to Samaria where they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. (¹⁶ This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) ¹⁷ So Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ When Simon perceived that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money. ¹⁹ He said, "Give me this authority too so that anyone on whom I lay my hands will receive the Holy Spirit."

²⁰ Peter responded, "May your money be condemned to hell along with you because you believed you could buy God's gift with money! ²¹ You can have no part or share in God's word because your heart isn't right with God. ²² Therefore, change your heart and life! Turn from your wickedness! Plead with the Lord in the hope that your wicked intent can be forgiven, ²³ for I see that your bitterness has poisoned you and evil has you in chains."

It was hard to come up with a Scripture text for the category of those using the Jesus name for selfish power-seeking reasons. There's a practical reason for that. The Scriptural canon only includes text up to about the end of the first century, which was a couple of centuries before Christians had much cultural or political power.

But I did think of the story of Simon the Great in Acts 8. He is first established as being a powerful magician, earning the name the Great. He comes to believe in and preach the message of Jesus. But like the disciples in the Mark text last week, it seems like he hasn't quite understood some of Jesus' counter-cultural messages about power. When he sees Peter and John doing miraculous things, he wants to buy the Holy Spirit's power. Peter's response is harsh. He rebukes him for his belief that God's gifts can be bought with money. God is not concerned with helping the powerful become even more powerful, and Peter calls out Simon's "wicked intent" to make the Holy Spirit a tool for his power.

Simon is a bit like the modern Christian nationalists. He has the language of Christianity, maybe even sincerely believes a lot of it, but primarily because he thinks he can use it to amass more power. He's still missing a huge part of the Jesus message that upends his whole concept of power.

Rockway Constitution

[This was meant to help remind more of the themes from the previous week, that we are not immune to nationalist and cult of innocent attitudes.]

And, as I talked about last week, we are also wrong if we have that cult of innocence attitude, even if it is to accomplish completely different policy goals.

Thomas knew roughly what I was going to speak about these two weeks, and he sent me the 1982 constitution of Rockway because he saw a line in there that stood out to him. Under the heading of Evangelism / Social Concerns, it says the church "shall actively endeavour to bring spiritual healing and nourishment both to those within and outside its numbers" – ok - and that we "shall work toward the achievement of Christian standards of social conditions locally, nationally, and internationally." This church, at its founding, clearly believed that "Christian standards" was something worth sharing, that there was some way that Christianity was meant to be an influence in the world.

What that section doesn't answer is the important part to me: how? How do we go about spreading Christian "standards"? "Standards" is the specific wording that jumped out to me and probably to a lot of you. Something like wisdom teaching or even ethical principles I would be able to swallow a bit more. Standards maybe conveys a bit more uniformity and a bit more legalism, that these are the rules we all have to follow, and in this context, that might imply that we want to force others to follow. But that's reading a lot into one word written 40 years ago.

There is a little bit promising in another section, emphasizing that the church is a voluntary community. If you put the two together, that means that the spreading of those Christian standards can't be done by force or coercion, and that is traditionally the Mennonite position at least on paper. But I didn't see anywhere that described how it would be done instead.

Pearls and Pigs

[In my quick breakdown of the Matthew text, I briefly had a longer tangent on the pearls before swine part.]

"They will stomp on the pearls, then turn around and attack you" is an interesting aspect. Sometimes when you try to give a good thing to somebody, they don't appreciate it. They might even

get angry and take it out on you. I wonder if it is stretching the metaphor too much to ponder if the pearls thrown to the pigs are things like the terminology of “Christian”? When I hear Christian nationalists demanding that they are the real Christians, then also shutting down and threatening anybody who dares to point out how Jesus and the Bible seem to disagree with them a lot, that seems to line up to me with what Jesus says here. It sounds a lot like them stomping on the pearls of Jesus’ wisdom teaching, turning around, and attacking you for daring to invite them into it.

Staying Defiantly

[This was the hardest part to cut, as I wanted to lean in more on the importance of offering an alternative loudly. But ultimately I needed to cut some time and I did get to some of this more quickly.]

One phrase that McLaren used for this is “staying defiantly.” That phrase stuck with me: staying defiantly.

When we are wrestling with what to do with Christian identity, we often act like there are two choices:

1. We can leave defiantly, declaring that we just can’t be a part of this anymore. McLaren doesn’t blame you if you take this option, especially if you are one who is being attacked and marginalized.
2. We can stay compliantly, shutting up about any problems we see.

Those line up with a couple of the options from earlier.

McLaren quotes from Kristin K Du Mez – whose book *Jesus and John Wayne* I also recommend - that whether you stay or leave Christianity, you should do so loudly, especially if you have some privilege to lend:

Silence in leaving or remaining will only allow those patterns to persist. It is long past time for white Christians to call out injustice, bigotry, violent rhetoric, disparaging language, racism, misogyny, abuse of power, and the idolatry of Christian nationalism in their own communities, even if doing so comes at a cost. The cost of not doing so is undeniable, and it is a cost largely born by others.

We are not talking about being the quiet in the land here. We’re talking about being loud, being defiant.

US Politics Parallels

Something strange happened after I started formulating this pair of sermons: I started seeing a lot of my key points paralleled in US politics. After thinking a lot about how we need to be able to stay defiantly, keeping a Christian identity while challenging those abusing that label, Joe Biden announced he wouldn’t run again, and Kamala Harris took over as the Democratic candidate. Soon after, a particular strategy started among Democrats: calling the extreme right, who control most of the Republican party now, weird.

A lot of those politicians have spent a long time defining themselves as the real Americans (or the real Canadians) – which is mostly just code for white. At the same time, they have been embracing

more and more extreme positions that are actually very unpopular. It's weird to want to imprison women for medical care, it's weird to want to ban birth control, it's weird to want the President to be able to break any laws he wants as long as the Supreme Court is part of the same powerful inner circle, it's weird to think that the election was stolen simply because your side lost, it's weird to promise to be a dictator on day one, it's weird to pledge to fire any civil servant who is not sufficiently loyal to their dear leader, it's weird to spread lies about immigrants eating pets... Wait, sorry, I said earlier that I wasn't going to have time for all those details, so I'll just say, yeah, that's weird.

And Democrats have done similar with trying to reclaim some other words like freedom, which has been largely defined by the right wing for years as the freedom for those with power to do whatever they want to those without power.

I think staying defiantly is also very similar to Jesus' wisdom teachings around turning the other cheek. Without going into the details of that, Jesus was not saying to roll over and give people what they want. It was a way to draw attention to an injustice without perpetuating a cycle of violence. This feels a lot like that, simply declaring in a plain easy to understand way that yeah, some of this is really weird and really unpopular and doing a lot of harm and we don't have to keep pretending otherwise.

World Communion Sunday

This week is normally World Communion Sunday. It's a day when most Christian churches around the world all participate in the communion ritual and there is often some emphasis on how despite all our differences, we are all a part of this Jesus tradition.

For some practical reasons we are celebrating it but in a couple of weeks, not actually lining up with everybody else. I preached on that last year. Part of what I said is that while there are lots of food traditions in other religions and cultures, our Communion celebration is a celebration of the particularity of the Jesus tradition.

That includes many that call themselves Christian nationalists or other behaviours that we would consider antithetical to the way of Jesus. That introduces some tension with what I've said today. How do we celebrate and remember our unity with these other movements, when we are also trying to detach ourselves from them, to paint an alternative? I don't think that's a tension we can simply ignore. If we lean entirely into the unity, we are staying quietly, failing to challenge the injustices that we absolutely must challenge. If we rush to cut them off, we risk minimizing the harms being done as well as digging ourselves deeper into a cult of innocence. So, we need to be able to maintain that yes, this Christian tradition that we are a part of has a lot of baggage both past and present, while doing what we can to embody other ways of being within that tradition.

Recycling Actions and Terms

[I initially had some more examples of some simple practical actions that embodied some "recycling" as well as some more ideas that might need recycling.]

A very simple example: back in the spring we did the blessing of the bicycles. I took a couple of pictures of our overloaded bike stands – we still need another bike stand – and of Thomas doing the

blessing. I shared some on my social media. I got some likes as expected from some progressive Christians. I also got a couple of replies along the lines of “I have no interest in religion but this is pretty cool.” It was a little drop in the bucket, but it was a counterpoint to what people often think “Christian” means.

Or another transit-related one from another local church. When I’m not biking home, I’m usually taking the bus, catching it at Bridgeport right beside Emmanuel United Church. There’s no bench or shelter at that stop. At some point this summer, a pair of lawn chairs appeared, chained to the tree, so those of us waiting for a bus could sit down. It’s also common to see unhoused people sheltering under the overhang there, and I have sheltered there myself when it is raining or really hot. I don’t believe they offer that because they wanted their church to look good. I believe they saw an opportunity to use their property to publicly love their neighbours. But like our bicycle blessing, it made me happy to be reminded that churches like that exist. And that only happens when those loving actions are happening in public.

A common one is putting up a rainbow flag on a church. This has happened enough, at least in cities in Ontario, that I think it has achieved some of the “recycling” I talked about. I think those churches are often still thought of as “not real Christianity”, but it is still a step in the right direction that a lot of people now know that there are a lot of churches who are fully affirming of LGBTQ people.

Resurrection: that might be used to sound like our bodies don’t matter, because once we die, we’ll ascend into Heaven. But that’s not what resurrection means! It’s not the same thing as ascension. A resurrection requires the redemption of physical bodies.

Ruling over the Earth, or dominion over the Earth: we might hear language like that to imply that we should pillage and destroy everything for short-term profit, because God put us in charge! It all exists for our pleasure! What if it meant that we should rule like Jesus did, willing to even sacrifice of ourselves for the good of others and the planet?