

“Why Do We Stay in the Church?”
– To Practice the Spirituality of Wide-Opened Eyes”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: John 9:1-23

John 9:24-39

*“He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner.
 One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’”*

~ John 9:25

Prayer

**God of reconciling love,
 May the words of my mouth,
 And this time of intentional listening to your Living Word
 Open our eyes to your Presence in our midst
 And empower us to link our hands in your service. Amen.**

Children are the future of the Church.

There is a surprisingly starry-eyed devotion across denominations to this hopeful and yet increasingly questionable conviction. The truth on the ground tells a very different story. For the last 50 years if not longer, kids have been steadily vanishing from church pews and Sunday school classrooms all over the country. One of my colleagues says half-jokingly, “***Children have become an endangered species in the Church.***” We see them rather infrequently, perhaps once or twice a month when a few faithful families attend the worship service, but, for most of us in the sanctuary, our interaction with children is brief and physically detached. There is absolutely no question that we love to watch the kids run down the aisle to gather for the children’s message. We adore their spontaneity, high energy, priceless one-liners and unexpected theological depth, but as soon as the children’s message is over, we send them to their age-appropriate activities, which are important to lay down a strong foundation for their faith, but where children remain mostly out of sight. And they continue to be in their own age-specific siloes through Confirmation and while in the youth group until they become young adults and walk away from the Church because the Church is not necessarily a relevant part of their lives.

Like Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett’s famous play “*Waiting for Godot*,” who stand by a leafless tree waiting for a mysterious person named Godot that never shows up, we sit tight in our sanctuaries and invite each other to participate in a conspiracy of pretending. In Beckett’s play, the two characters engage in a borderline absurd debate about whether they are in the right place or if it is the right day or whether they should keep waiting at all. A few times, the two men decide that it makes no sense to stay put and wait

for Godot, but they never move. In the Church, we keep assuring each other that kids are the future of our congregations. We convince each other that the same cultural paradigm that brought families back to the Church in the past will work again in the future. We encourage each other to believe that the young adults who went through Sunday school and Confirmation will come back when they get married and have their families. We root our church growth strategy and vitality in the hope that if our own adult children are not in the pews, other people's grownup children will come with babies in their arms to safeguard the church's future. We pretend not to know that the vast majority of the kids baptized and raised in our congregations are not staying in the Church and the ones who have already left are not very likely to come back to the institutional Church as it is.

Author Brian McLaren, a former Evangelical pastor who has embraced a call to be a public theologian and a Christian activist, says in his book *"Do I Stay Christian?"*, which a few of our members and I read together last year, that American Christianity has a demographic problem. Brian calls it "*shrinkling*" – a term he coined to frame the reality of the Church in America: it is an institution that is shrinking in size and wrinkling with age.¹ And without the fresh thinking, openness, creativity, passion, questions and dynamism of younger people, the Church is stuck in our own passive waiting for young adults to come back. We may not want to, we may even feel insulted to be asked to do it, but it is time that we face our addiction to a certain mode of thinking about the Church that makes kids who are growing up in a culture suspicious of institutions and, particularly, of the "shrinkled" leadership of the institutional Church choose to stay away from Christianity.

At the core of this morning's passage from John's Gospel is an eye-opening, teachable moment for the Christian community. Jesus heals a man blind from birth on the Sabbath and the Pharisees, the utterly faithful company of men who were deeply loyal to the Law of Moses, were aghast at Jesus' non-conformist practice. Keeping the Sabbath was of critical importance to the Pharisees. The Sabbath was an unmistakable sign of God's Covenant with God's chosen people and of each individual Jew's devotion to God. The commandment to keep the Sabbath was and, for the Jewish faith still is, a sacred duty and breaking any of the many rules that defined the observance of the holy day -- how many steps to take, how many words to write -- was in the eyes of the Pharisees a visible expression of an unbelieving heart. By healing the blind man on the Sabbath, it appeared as if Jesus were intentionally breaking not just one of the many Sabbath rules, but the Covenant itself. In the Torah, such a violation called for the ultimate punishment, death.² But Jesus is not killed, at least, not here, not yet. Instead, the same man from Nazareth who said to his followers, "***Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill;***"³ chooses to imagine his faith not as an exercise in belief management and rule keeping, but as a doorway to transformation and liberation. Jesus refuses to let even the most sacred rules, most precious traditions and most heartfelt beliefs of religion get in the way of God's love and compassion. Jesus wouldn't let the theological assumptions and religious practices of the past or the present influence his desire to give the young blind man sight and a new life.

Desire formation is one of the main roles that religion plays in our lives.⁴ Brian McLaren speaks of Christianity as a piece of downloaded software that is installed in our brains and silently monitors and influences our desires and behavior. The Church can be described as a network of brains under a shared influence.⁵ Here, our faith in God through Christ connects our lives, shapes our behavior and inspires us to desire the good of our planet, the good of all people and all non-human creatures, and our own good with a reverence for the divine love that loves everything and everyone. McLaren recognizes that giving access to our brains is a sacred trust⁶ and I understand why young people who are uninspired by, disillusioned with or indifferent to the institutional Church are opting to deny Christianity the power and any opportunity to shape their desire. But the truth is that if Christianity does not influence and shape our desire, someone or something else, other powers, messages and messengers will.

Last month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released the initial results of its bi-annual Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which shows that 57% of teen girls and 69% of gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers feel persistent sadness or hopelessness. Also 37% of girls said that they have seriously considered suicide. And 14% of girls and 20% of gay, lesbian and bisexual high school students reported to have been forced to have sex at some point in their lives. Almost double the number of teenage girls has been cyber-bullied when compared to boys. Heterosexual boys are also experiencing higher rates of depression and anxiety, but, more alarmingly, boys, especially White teenage boys, have been the perpetrators of more sexual violence. Data collection for this survey took place in the fall of 2021 and gathered information provided by 17,000 adolescents from high schools across the country.⁷ The message from the survey is clear, not everything is well with young people in America.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt noted that the CDC's survey reveals that COVID had only a marginal effect on teen mental health. He stated, "***Gen Z's in-person social lives were decimated by technology in the 2010s. They were already socially distanced when Covid arrived.***" The mental health problem began in 2012 and then spiraled to epidemic proportions between 2017 and 2019. And Haidt claims that there is a great deal of evidence that social media and the number of hours per day teens spend on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube among other social media platforms, are a substantial cause of emotional distress, cyber-violence, depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and, especially among boys, the failure to develop positive social skills. However, after analyzing several social experiments Haidt concluded that exposure to social media has a much more harmful impact on girls and young women and are the major cause of the mental illness epidemic among teenage girls in America.⁸

A Presbyterian Youth Minister said in an article I read last week that she loves Gen Z, all those 10-to-25-year-olds that are missing from the pews. As a generation, she wrote, these young people are well-behaved statistically, with lower rates of driving accidents and drinking and drug use. Gen Z cares deeply about social justice, climate change, gun violence, and racism. This is a very racially and ethnically diverse generation that sees the

world as a broken place and they are impatient! They want to see rapid and real changes that can make the world better for everyone. This is a generation that prioritizes education, integrity and authenticity. They have a strong ethics and a vast openness to different expressions of human sexuality, and they want to escape the dualistic mentality that divides humankind into them and us, enemy and friend, male and female. But Gen Z also struggles more than any other generation with mental health. They are anxious and they need a safe place where social media will not be the major influence on their desires. They need relationships among their peers and with other generations. They need a place of hope, a place where they can express themselves freely, see themselves more positively and experience healing love.⁹

Last week, I said that we stay in the Church to exercise our hearts, so they break open not only to God and our Sacred Scriptures but also to other people. And I hope your heart this morning is breaking open to these young people whose lives are being so profoundly affected by social media. Instead of worrying about whether Gen Z will save the future of the Church, we have to ask ourselves how our church can be today, right now, the place of peace, love, hope, faith, community and social activism that can release, reshape and redirect the desires of these young people toward greater self-love and well-being. Of course, to be a church that feels safe for young people that are reluctant to trust shrinking and aging religious institutions, we have to be willing to change and change quickly. We have to be prepared to practice the Christian faith rather than reduce Christianity to beliefs. We have to let the Gospel take us through a deprogramming process so rather than waiting for another generation to come in and make the Church look, feel, and sound alive, we begin to desire being a church that is fully alive now.

Jesus was neither addicted nor constricted by any religious way of thinking and believing that kept him from giving God's love full access to his brain. His desire was formed by a non-conformist faith in God's power to nurture new desires in humankind for life to flourish. And to act out his God-influenced desire for a thriving world, Jesus practiced a spirituality of wide-opened eyes. He saw the needs of people around him and Jesus chose each time to participate in their healing, in their transformation, in their liberation, and in their desire to live a full life.

I don't think Gen Z would be excited about joining a religion of immutable dogmas, doctrines, and traditions where we sit in pews to reflect on religious ideas, but I bet they would embrace the opportunity to be part of a living, vibrant, evolving way of life that opens our eyes to the world around us and inspires us to be the kind of religious people that desire the well-being of teen girls, LGBT youth, young men, society and creation.

The story goes that when the Buddha started traveling around India, people were amazed at his teachings and they asked him, "**Are you human or divine?**" The Buddha simply replied, "**I am awake.**"

Friends, we stay in the Church to practice a spirituality that keeps us awake, with our eyes wide-open to the world around us. And while we are in the world, may the light of our faith keep shining and inviting young people to let God's love create in them a desire not only for the good of the planet and humanity, but a desire for their own well-being. So, don't wait for the kids to be the future of the Church! Be now the Church that is awake, with the eyes wide open to the world. Be now the kind of Christian community people want to give access to their children's brains and shape their desire.

May it be so. Amen

¹ Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 75 [Kindle edition].

² Exodus 31:12-17.

³ Matthew 5:17.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 170 [Kindle edition].

⁵ Ibid., p. 38.

⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁷ h Risk Behavior Survey – [chrome-extension://oemmndcbldboiebfnladdacbfmadadm/https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email].

⁸ By Jonathan Haidt in Social Media is a Major Cause of the Mental Illness Epidemic in Teen Girls. Here's the Evidence, After Babel, 22 February 2023 [https://jonathanhaidt.substack.com/p/social-media-mental-illness-epidemic?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=1221094&post_id=104255435&isFreemail=true&utm_medium=email].

⁹ By Brittany Porch in Let Me Introduce to You Gen Z, published in the Journal for Preachers, vol. XLVI, No. 2, Lent 2023, pp. 51-52.