

**Why Do We Stay in the Church?**  
**To Meet Christ and Become People of the Way.”**

Texts: Matthew 20:20-28  
 Acts 9:1-12, 17-19

*“He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus...”*

~ Acts 9:4-5a

**Prayer**  
**Holy God,**  
**May the words of my mouth**  
**And this sacred time of intentional listening to your Word**  
**Open our hearts to the Living Christ –**  
**Our Lord and Savior,**  
**The Alpha and the Omega,**  
**The One who is, was and is to come. Amen.**

In his book *“Do I Stay Christian?”* Brian McLaren invites his mostly Christian readers to embrace the concept of **“coming out,”** which he describes as a gift the LGBTQ community shared with the world. McLaren wrote, **“we need to have our own kind of coming out... we have to be courageous enough to come out of our closets and go public, not minimizing the change, not feeling embarrassed about who we are becoming, not hiding our light under a bushel of polite ambiguity... better to be rejected for who you are than accepted for who you’re not... Our announcement must include a renouncement... By renouncing the failures of our past and announcing that we are changing, we commit ourselves to live humbly, justly, and kindly in the present and future.”<sup>i</sup>**

This Christian coming out McLaren is proposing is much more than an apology for the past mistakes of the institutional Church or a declaration about our refreshed religious identity and affiliation. The Church’s coming out is above all a daring proclamation of our commitment to follow Christ, to live by his teachings, and to enflesh Jesus’ incarnational love in the community that gathers in his name. Our coming out in essence means that we are willing to tell the whole world that we are faithful stand-ins for Jesus, the young charismatic man from Nazareth who gave a human face to God’s dream for a new humanity by **“boldly moving toward the other, boldly drawing a bigger circle, boldly tearing down dividing walls, boldly building bridges of connection and tables of reunion... boldly telling a new and bigger story of bold love that he called the good news of the kingdom of God.”<sup>ii</sup>**

To be a Christian is to be a fully out, Gospel-following, church-participating, world-loving, Kingdom-building, God-worshipping, Spirit-filled, effervescent, unapologetic friend of Jesus.

This is how the Church got started. One single human being, who knew beyond doubt that he was the Beloved Child of God, invited 12 friends to build a new network of people of faith that would become part of God's strategic plan to bring a message of new life to humankind. Jesus' teachings challenged just about everything his first followers knew about the world. He was a peacemaker who believed that compassion, forgiveness, solidarity and humility are the most powerful catalysts for life-saving changes in history. Jesus rejected the "*infantile grandiosity*"<sup>iii</sup> that makes people live most of their lives with a self-centered obsession with turning life into a win-lose game where the winner takes it all. Instead, Jesus talked about greatness as a way of life where human beings stop over-focusing on themselves and turn toward each other to create life-sustaining relationships. Rather than being first, standing tall, having privilege, and seeking to save their own skin, Jesus instructed his friends to be last, find purpose in self-giving, hang out not with the well-connected but with the poor and serve the overlooked and those without worldly power or prestige. When the mother of James and John, the two sons of Zebedee,<sup>iv</sup> approached Jesus with a request for special treatment for her family that created a big drama among the disciples, Jesus told his followers with piercing clarity that his way of life will never be about favoring the insiders or making some rise to the top while others struggle at the bottom. Among his friends, Jesus said, there will be no occasion for some to feel better than others. In an unequal and unjust world that builds crosses and digs graves to silence anyone who dares to speak up for peace and equity, Jesus brought a group of close friends together hoping that they would unlearn the vocabulary, grammar and workings of this world to live for the Kingdom of God. The dream of the Church began with Jesus and with his invitation to 12 disciples, to Paul, and to millions of people to learn to love this world as God loves the world so rather than seeing humanity as a lost cause and our planet as a sinking ship destined to destruction and Christianity as an escape hatch to heaven, friends of Jesus might create communities of human beings who are seeking to live in deep harmony with themselves, with one another, with the Earth and with our Maker.

In its earliest days, Christianity was a Way of life that liberated people from their distorted desires so followers of Christ might desire to have their hearts break open to God, have their eyes wide-open to their neighbors and their bodies energized by the Holy Spirit and their lives changed by the Good News of the Gospel. It was not until Jesus' Way became the official religion of the empire that crucified the Church's founder that Christianity went into the closet of must-have-beliefs to determine who is inside and who is outside, who is saved and who is condemned to the burning fires of hell. But our faith does not do well in theological closets that reduce Jesus' life and teachings to an inflexible set of rules for living or to a mere list of dos and don'ts. Friendship with Christ is not the result of a personal decision to assent to intellectual propositions and philosophical arguments about Christ that we decide are true. The Christian faith that enlivens the spiritual life of the

Church Universal is birthed at the moment we encounter Jesus and our lives are given a new direction and a new purpose. Our faith tradition calls this life-changing encounter with the Living Christ a “conversion.”

Of course, “conversion” is not a word that sophisticated, well-educated, enlightened, and smart people like us are comfortable using. The idea of a spiritual rebirth, a total change of heart and mind, holds in it a mystery that sounds too mystical for rational people who want to be in full control of their decisions and emotions. As Flannery O’Connor put it so aptly, “**mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind.**”<sup>v</sup>

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor speaks about the West as a civilization that has been “**emptied of God**”<sup>vi</sup> and, therefore, is deeply suspicious of mystery. Taylor uses a term he borrowed from the renowned German sociologist Max Weber to describe our days as an age of disenchantment<sup>vii</sup> where, for the first time in human history, human beings believe that everything we need to live a life of purpose is right within ourselves. Inside this frame of self-sufficient humanism, there is no allegiance to anything else beyond the autonomous, individual self. There is no need for faith in a higher power or the transcendent God of Christianity. What matters is how the individual finds meaningful fulfillment between the natural span of human life, between birth and death. In this age of disenchantment where faith has become extremely fragile, religion becomes nothing more than the province of foolish irrationality and magical thinking or it is reduced to a very private meditative practice devoid of any possibility for a great beyond and is used as one among many paths for self-growth and personal enlightenment. Liberated from religion, the West, Taylor claims, has realized that as God fades from the public square, people can be ethical without Christ, they can have an existentially fulfilling life without biblical instructions and fill the God gap with something they believe has more immediate and concrete relevance to human life on earth. And, in this world without mystery, without God, and without faith in anything bigger than humanity, there is no place for conversion, for a mystical encounter with the Risen Christ like Saul had on the road to Damascus.

In a letter he wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge in 1944, Bonhoeffer said that what was bothering him incessantly in prison was one lingering question: what Christianity really was for the Christians in Europe.<sup>viii</sup> Bonhoeffer wondered what might happen to the Church if humankind became “**radically religionless**” without any sense of transcendence, mystery, metaphysics, and inwardness. Then he asked, “**What do we really believe? I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it?**”<sup>ix</sup>

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr echoed Bonhoeffer’s and Taylor’s uneasiness with this religionless age of disenchantment. In his book “*Falling Upward*,” Rohr wrote, “**For postmodern people, the universe is not inherently enchanted, as it was for the ancients. We have to do all the ‘enchanting’ ourselves. This leaves us alone, confused, and doubtful. There is no meaning already in place for our discovery and enjoyment. We have to create all meaning by ourselves in such an inert and empty**

---

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

***world, and most of us do not seem to succeed very well. This is the burden of living in our heady and lonely time, when we think it is all up to us.”<sup>x</sup>***

The story of Paul’s conversion is not meant to convey mere information about how Saul, the man who persecuted the first friends of Jesus, had a mystical encounter with Christ, gained new sight, opened his heart to the Gospel and became Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, the most influential voice of the Christian religion. This story like most stories in the Bible has a broader and deeper purpose. It invites us to open our hearts and minds to have our own encounter with Christ. To experience the same powerful and mysterious transformation that Paul experienced. To rediscover the deep meaning of life. To fall into the mystery of God’s love and grace revealed in Jesus Christ. To let the Holy Spirit re-enchance our lives that we may be fully awake to the ***“task within the task”*** of living in a universe where there is a holy You, a Presence, a God whose *“still small voice”* whispers into the ears of those who open their hearts to the mystery of faith that we are not alone. Paul’s conversion story invites us to meet the Living Christ who still offers humankind a more full and whole life and can save us from the burden of living in the confused, anxious, doubtful, heady, lonely, religionless and disenchanting world we are making for ourselves.

Friends, we stay in the Church to meet Christ again and again. We come here to immerse ourselves in the mystery of faith and, like Ananias, have the courage to say, ***“Here I am, Lord”*** and then be sent into the streets of the world as friends of Christ so we may bless humanity with new sight and a life filled with the Spirit of God. We gather every Sunday to remember our own encounter with Christ, our moment of conversion, how Jesus called us to be his friends, to be compassionate, to love fiercely, to work for justice, to stand up for peace, to stake our lives on the Gospel that teaches the Church to find greatness in solidarity, forgiveness, generosity, humility, equity, and in the giving of ourselves to one another.

I don’t know if these words were ever said from this pulpit, but in case you are wondering, this morning I am inviting you to a come-to-Jesus-moment here at Acton Congregational Church. As Brian McLaren says so wisely, ***“Only Jesus provides a way for Christians to stay Christian.”<sup>xi</sup>*** So let’s nurture our friendship with Christ and come out as people of the Way without any postmodern ambiguity.

And if you are wondering what being out as a Christian means, the late Henri Nouwen explained our coming out in this way:

***“How does the Church witness to Christ in the world? First and foremost by giving visibility to Jesus’ love for the poor and the weak. In a world so hungry for healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and most of all unconditional love, the Church must alleviate that hunger through its ministry. Wherever we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the lonely, listen to those who are rejected, and bring unity and peace to those who are divided, we proclaim the living Christ, whether we speak about him or not. It is important that whatever we do and wherever we go, we remain***

***in the Name of Jesus, who sent us. Outside his Name our ministry will lose its divine energy.”<sup>xii</sup>***

Last week, I asked ChatGPT, the artificial intelligent chatbot that everyone has been talking about for the last three months, to answer a question about Jesus in one paragraph. My question was: Why is Jesus “cool?” This is what ChatGPT said: ***“As an AI language model, I cannot have personal beliefs or opinions, but I can provide factual information. Jesus Christ is considered a historical and religious figure who is revered by Christians around the world. He is known for his teachings on love, compassion, forgiveness, and social justice. His life and message have inspired millions of people for centuries and his teachings have had a profound impact on the world's culture, ethics, and values. Whether one considers Jesus Christ ‘cool’ or not is a matter of personal perspective, but his influence on history and society cannot be denied.”***

I wonder if you and I can say with as much clarity and conviction, not only within the walls of this building, but out there in the streets that Jesus’ influence on our lives cannot be denied.

Friends, without a conversion, without Jesus’ divine energy, without Jesus, this building and this gathering have no reason to exist and happen. ChatGPT cannot have personal beliefs or opinions, but you and I can. We can come out to the world as people of the Jesus Way. And if you are here today in person or online, I hope that you will stake your life on Christ’s teachings and be known as a friend and follower of Jesus Christ always and without any postmodern ambiguity.

May it be so. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Brain D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, pp. 201, 203-205 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted by Richard Rohr in Falling Upward, p. 70 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>iv</sup> See Mark 10:35.

<sup>v</sup> Flannery O’Connor in Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, location 1129 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>vi</sup> Charles Taylor in A Secular Age, p. 2 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>viii</sup> Edited by Eberhard Bethge in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 279 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid., p. 381.

<sup>x</sup> Richard Rohr in Falling Upward, p. 92 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>xi</sup> Brain D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 113 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>xii</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen in Bread for the Journey, p. 6.