

1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Isaiah 58:1-9a
"By the Mark"

February 9, 2020
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Last month, I had the distinct privilege of taking part in one of the most time honored and revered traditions in the life of our church—I got to attend the Women’s Book Club meeting on a Wednesday night! The group meets once a month to discuss whatever their latest read has been, and last month it was *“Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others,”* by Barbara Brown Taylor.

In the book, Taylor, a retired Episcopal Priest who now teaches World Religion classes at Piedmont College in Georgia, sets out to answer the question: What does it mean to be a Christian in a multi-faith world, in a world where not everyone is Christian?

One answer to this question is that it means you’re on a crusade to convince the opposition that you’re right and they’re wrong. That being Christian means winning, or in some cases, forcing, manipulating, and shaming people over to your side. However, given that this approach has only ever ended in bloodshed and war, Taylor rejects it outright. As your pastor and preacher this morning, I do as well.

A more reasonable way to talk about what it means to be a Christian might be to speak of those who go to church. This would be an easy one for all of us to agree on here this morning, but wait until next week when I bring it up again and you’re not here! One of the problems with using this criteria for measuring the question, however, is that fewer and fewer people who still identify with being Christian actually go to church anymore. According to data collected by the Pew Research Center just last fall in a nationwide telephone poll, 65% of people when asked to describe their religious identity, responded, “Christian.” As a point of interest, 4% described themselves as atheists, 5% as agnostics, and 17% as “nothing in particular.”

Most interesting to me, however, is the number of Christians who attend church. Of the 65% who described themselves as being Christians, 54% said they attend religious services only a few times per year. 45% say they attend “regularly.” When asked to explain what they meant by “regularly,” they said, once-a-month.¹

I don’t want to make too much of these numbers. Even the Pew Research Center admits they are only generalizations about a broad-based change. The point, though, is still a solid one, when so many self-professing Christians really don’t attend church, using church attendance as a measurement for what it means to be Christian may not get us much.

I wish to say that this doesn’t mean you can just get up and walk out now, or that you shouldn’t bother to come back here next week. Rather, perhaps we should take this as our moment in time to ask ourselves what it is that keeps us coming back to a place that so many others have decided they only need a few times a year, or not at all.

At a poignant turning point in her book, Taylor considers this very question and talks about the anxiety she feels within herself over the fact that mainline Christian churches are drying up.

“It is hard to watch the wells from which you drew living water dry up. It is awful to watch people go away, so awful that it is natural to try and find something else to blame. Blame the culture for shallowing the human mind. Blame the megachurches for peddling prosperity. Blame the world for leaving the church behind. There is some truth to all these charges, which is why they generate so much energy. At the same time they obscure the last truth any of us wants to confront, which is that our Christian lives are not always very compelling. There is not always very much about us that makes people want to know where we are getting our water.”²

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

² Pg. 156-57.

In other words, maybe part of what has us coming back here each week is in fact that crusading attitude we spoke about a moment ago, that attitude which says, everyone else just has it wrong. We're like sticks in the mud who just don't want to admit we're losing more ground every week.

Maybe. Though I will say, you really are the thing that keeps me coming back week after week, because I do want to know where you're getting your water from. I feel like the guy at the bar who is very content just to have what you're having.

Still, this doesn't answer the question, what does it mean to be a Christian?

I have noticed something about churches whose numbers are shrinking but who just don't care, who hold the view that the fewer of us there are, the more righteous our cause must be. I have noticed that in those churches Christian faith is often defined in terms of belief and behavior, so the leading questions are things like: What do Christians believe happens at the Communion Table—does the bread really become the body of Christ? Do Christians believe in evolution? Do they support stem-cell research? What is the Christian position on carrying arms in church? Do Christians fly rainbow flags outside their houses of worship?

Of course, says Taylor, the only sensible answer to any of these questions is to ask another question: "Which Christians?" For there are as many different types of Christians as there are Christian churches. Unless of course you're the one asking the questions about the beliefs and behaviors of the people in your church; if you're the one asking the questions, there's a good chance you already know which Christians have the answers to your questions.

What does it mean to be a Christian in a world where not everyone is a Christian, and where not even every Christian is the same Christian?

There are two answers I will leave us with this morning. Neither of these answers are my own. The first comes from the 58th chapter of the prophet Isaiah. In this passage, Isaiah is speaking to a group of people whose name literally means, “Those who have wrestled with God and overcome.” In this passage, Isaiah is speaking to Israel. To Israel goes the promise, to Israel goes the favor, Israel I have chosen, said God. Yet on this day, God has sent Isaiah to preach a stern warning, to remind Israel of the great responsibility that comes with being chosen. That being chosen doesn’t mean you’re on the winning side, the strong side. It means you show up on the losing side, the weak side. Let us hear God’s word from Isaiah:

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and God will say, here I am.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Preaching some 700 years after the time of Isaiah, the Apostle Paul told the church at Corinth it means, quite simply, to tell the truth about Jesus, and that he was crucified. “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

What Paul means for us to know, of course, in telling us that Jesus was crucified, is that he was sentenced to death, he was executed by the Roman government in order to keep the peace. He was only 35 years old, but already he seemed to be a threat, a public nuisance, and it was expedient that he die. And that was that. This kind, caring, gentle man was hung up on a piece of wood, stabbed through at the feet and hands with nails, and left to die. For some, that kind of death could take days. For Jesus, it mercifully took only a few hours, and when they took him down from the cross there was no one really there to claim his body. All his friends had fled the scene. So they buried his crucified body in a borrowed grave.

Paul says it like this because then, like now, there were some who preferred to say, “Can’t we just leave out the part about him being crucified? That part is so upsetting to us.” Preachers even sometimes want to leave this part out. “Who wants to join a church that builds itself on the example of a man who gave his life for what he believed in? No one wants to be called to sacrifice. If we have to mention the crucifixion, let’s just say he died to save us. That sounds much nicer—he did it for us.” But that’s not how the story goes. It says Jesus was crucified. It says he was innocent, but still he was killed and strung up between two thieves. And Paul says, I have to preach that.

What is it, though, about Jesus crucified that is so necessary to Paul that he must preach it? I don’t know but that when Paul is describing Jesus to us, he is describing his view of God, and when he is describing his view of God, he is describing his view of what it means to be a

Christian. For Paul, Jesus crucified is a terrible but necessary reminder of the levels of hatred and evil we are capable of bending towards. When I think of Jesus, I think of the victims of mass shootings on American streets and in American schools. I think of the people of Syria whose daily existence has been upended by the brutality of war. I think of the 4 children who die of hunger every minute of every day. I try to think of everyone and anyone who has been killed by an evil they had nothing to do with. I think of Jesus and of a God who gives himself to stand in the middle of that kind of world with us, where he too might hear the guns, know our fear, touch our pain, and assure us—as he did that thief who hung there on the cross crucified beside him, he told him, “Today, a new world comes.” Paul said, I have to preach that.

What does it mean to be a Christian? By what mark shall we who call ourselves Christian be known? Will it be by our behaviors and beliefs? Or by the causes we choose to support and give our money to? Will it be by the candidate we choose to support in the next election? Will it be by our refusal to keep showing up here on Sunday, or by our refusal to stop showing up here on Sunday?

Maya Angelou once said that she was always amazed when people came up to her and told her they were Christian. “I think, ‘Already?’” she said. “You already got it? Me? I’m working at it,” she would say, “which means that I try to be as kind and fair and generous and respectful and courteous to every human being.”³ She was in her eighties when she said that. How you treat every stranger, neighbor, and human being alike.

The older I get, almost 40 now, the more I’m convinced that perhaps the point is never to say that I am a Christian, but rather to say, “I’m becoming one. I’m working on it.” But I’m good with that, because you’re here, and I’m here, and maybe that means you’ll help me, and I’ll help you, and we’ll become it together. Amen.

³ “2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom Recipient—Maya Angelou,” video, The White House: Residence Barack Obama, February 16, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/2011/02/16/2010-presidential-medal-freedom-recipient-maya-angelou/>.