

Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson “Back to the Basics”
First Congregational Church Loveland UCC, September 15, 2024
Scripture: Psalm 19

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

God’s beloved, thank goodness for our summer season of rest, because this is a wearying time.... Without intentional pauses, without intentional rest for our bodies, minds, and spirits, weariness may cloud our vision.

In the midst of such weariness -- dare we call it soul exhaustion? -- it is critical for us to ground ourselves in the essential, to reflect on our most basic “whys” and “hows” and “how comes.” This autumn’s theme “Back to the Basics” begs the questions: “Why Church?” “Why faith?” “Why Christian?” As theologian, speaker and writer Rachel Held Evans asked: “Why—with all the atrocities past and present committed in God’s name, amidst all the hostile divisions ripping apart Christ’s Church, in spite of all our own doubts and frustrations and fears about faith—[why]are we still Christian? Why do we still have skin in the game?”

During her far-too-short life (Evans died at 37 in 2019), Rachel Held Evans and Episcopal Priest Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber asked this question “Why Christian?” in the context of a conference they organized. This morning’s sermon draws heavily from Evans’ answers as outlined in her article “On Giving Testimony.”

Why are we Christian? **Because of the Incarnation.** Episcopal priest Kerlin Richter explained: “I am a Christian because having a body wasn’t always good news for me, but then I met Good News that had a body. In Jesus, I met a God who spits and kisses, who yells and cries. I am a messy and embodied person, and this is a messy and embodied faith.”

Author and activist Austin Channing Brown, whose work focuses on racial justice in the church, declared: “I am a Christian because God knows my pain, not in an abstract way, but in a real, bloody, enfleshed way.”

Why are we Christian? **Because of sin, repentance and grace.** Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber likes to say: “self-righteousness feels good for a minute the way peeing your pants feels warm for a minute.” Kerlin Richter puts it this way: “...Christianity is not a good religion for self-improvement. Christ calls us to die to ourselves, not remodel ourselves... [Christ calls us] to learn to forgive, apologize, repent, and repair.”

Why are we Christian? **Because of our scriptures** -- because we get to be “caught up in a sweeping story in which [we are] not the central characters.”¹ Because our scriptures tell the truth [good, bad, beautiful, and ugly] about what it means to be human, what it means to relate to the divine, to each other, and to ourselves. Rev. [Winnie Varghese](#), a national leader in the Episcopal Church, explains “some of the texts that are the most terrifying turn into the ones that are most comforting and truthful, particularly to those [of us] on the margins.”

Why are we Christian? **Because the good news is good news for all.** “Christianity is a theology of the Other, the despised and outcast finding a home.”² Finding not just welcome but belonging -- this is an area where we as a congregation have committed ourselves to learning and growing. This week

¹ Kerlin Richter.

² Winnie Varghese

marks 3 years since we became an open and affirming congregation and adopted our welcome statement.

Why are we Christian? **Because our faith, our tradition, our scriptures and our liturgy give us the language to lament and to doubt**, “to confess the ugly realities”³ of the world -- from the violence we observe across the globe to the death-dealing messages we find in our own hearts and minds. We need look no further than Jesus weeping at his friend’s tomb to know that there is room for lament. We need look no further than Jesus on the cross quoting the psalms: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” to know that we, too, get to doubt.

Why are we Christian? **Because of the sacraments**, where we experience Christ present, Creator at work, Spirit renewing in bread, wine, water, words, touch, sound, and smell. In the sacraments, “Jesus comes to us again, and again, and again, and again.”⁴ Christ is present in and through rites and rituals and material substance.

And perhaps, most importantly, I am Christian because, try as I might, I cannot follow Jesus on my own. Because, as social worker and therapist Rachel Murr puts it, “I want to take part in bringing in God’s kingdom and I don’t know how to do that without the community of believers.”

“Our salvation is tied up in each other.”⁵ Christ’s way is a way of love, and love always and only happens in relationship: in relationship to the divine, in relationship to each other, in relationship to creation, in relationship to ourselves. I am Christian because the call to love is a communal one, it is a call to me personally and a call to us. Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort puts it beautifully: “For the church to be the hands and feet, the presence of God in the world, it will require a radical kind of curiosity about the neighbor and stranger, a brave willingness to live out God’s generosity, a passion for telling and listening to authentic stories, and the kind of compassion that involves heart, mind, spirit, and bodies.”⁶

In this season when so much is uncertain, where fear is the constant refrain on the news, the constant undercurrent of advertisements, and a regular companion in our lives, in this season let us ground ourselves in the basics of our faith -- the reasons that we are Christian. Let us remember the good news that we are not alone. Let us open our hearts to the testimony of creation:

Heaven is declaring God’s glory; the sky is proclaiming God’s handiwork.
One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known. Of course, there’s no speech, no words— their voices can’t be heard -- but their sound extends throughout the world; their words reach the ends of the earth.

And may the witness of our actions and our words echo that proclamation. Indeed, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

³ Austin Channing Brown.

⁴ [Jodi Hogue](#)

⁵ Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort <https://churchanew.org/blog/posts/2020/05/11/kimkort1>

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