

Why Would Anyone, Then or Now, Follow Jesus?

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Texts: Acts 16: 9-15

I'm not much of a talker on airplanes. Of course, other people are great, right? I like talking with people – I will have coffee and have a chocolate chunk cookie at Tatte with any one just about any time. Send me a text - let's set it up.

But if you end up next to me on a flight, I'm probably not gonna talk. I will have a book with me, and even as terrible as economy class is these days, I will be looking forward to getting in two or three hours of uninterrupted reading. A couple of years ago I had a fourteen-hour flight to Addis Ababa, and read the entire time. Never fell asleep. It was glorious.

For me, the problem with talking to people on airplanes is that I am, well, a pastor. And Lord Almighty somehow every conversation on an airplane goes south when people know you are a pastor. Without me asking, mind you, people will start telling me all the reasons they don't go to church, how their cousin's landlord's sister went to a church where the pastor had an affair and that just wasn't right they don't go to church. Or their sister told them about a preacher on t.v. who just asked for money all the time while flying around in a jet and wearing Rolexes, and that just wasn't right, so they don't go to church. Uh huh. Okay. But even more irritatingly, sometimes people will just make the assumption that I think non-Christians are going to hell, or that I am against vaccines, or gay people, or abortion, or science, or whatever.

I can't stand being put in that box, so when this happens, I say, "Well, you know, Christians aren't all alike, and I'm sort of at the other end of the spectrum." And they always say, "Oh progressive Christianity, cool. Like you think God loves everyone, and Jesus was on the side of the poor, and Black Lives Matter, and war is bad?" Actually, no, no one's ever said that, but a guy can hope.

So, again, on a flight, I'm probably not going to talk.

For most of you, revealing what your job is doesn't reveal your Christianity, but you still know what I'm talking about. Someone told me this past week that she mentioned my Antisemitism sermon to an extended family member and the person said, "So you're going to church?" The tone was not really accusatory, but she still felt defensive. In the midst of our conversations about finding a new pastor, someone said, "Yeah, what does it mean that I feel kind of defensive that no one else in my social circle is committed to church?"

Some of you might be tempted to think that Cambridge is different from most places in this regard, but I assure you it's the same elsewhere. In some places people might feel less defensive about being Christian, but that's only when you fit in with the dominant form of "Christianity." My UCC colleagues across the country, from Chicago, to Kansas City, to Dallas, to Gainesville, to Seattle, and all the small towns in-between, will tell you that their people feel defensive about, not so much being Christian, but about being associated with what Christianity is thought to be by most people.

To make matters worse, what Christianity is thought to be by most people is what Christianity has all too often been. Narrow minded, bigoted, exclusive – check, check, check. On the side of the rich and the white, protectors of inequality, violent – check, check, check. Hypocritical, cowardly, smug – check, check, check. None of us want to be associated with any of that.

The question is, how, in the world today, can we call ourselves Christian, and maybe God help us, even be kind of open about it, and want to share it with others, and yet not be associated with all the garbage that has historically gone along with being Christian, and that is associated with being “Christian” today?

Well, this is a time when it is good to be an Interim Pastor, because I get to tell you the unpleasant truth. It ain’t gonna be easy, and it will require some changes in how Christians like us do things. This is not going to be a sprint, or even a 10K. It’s a marathon. And you know the easy way to run a marathon, right? Yeah, there isn’t one. You gotta put in the work.

This is a cheap preacher’s tactic, but for the sake of time, let me just say I am drawing my remaining comments from the passage I read earlier from Acts, about Lydia. I’m not making the connections for you, but I will just say, Lydia, Lydia! Like Tabitha, whom I preached about a few weeks ago, Lydia is da boss. She runs her own business, and her own household, she makes her own decisions, and she bucks the status quo. While being a woman in a patriarchal culture, and a Roman expected to follow the way of the Empire, she bucks all that, and well, let’s just say, “nevertheless, she persisted.”

But back to the main question: how, in the world today, can we call ourselves Christian, and maybe, God help us, even be kind of open about it, and want to share it with others, and yet not be associated with all the garbage that is associated with being “Christian” historically and today?

For me, an important first step is to realize that all the garbage aside, Christianity actually is good news. It is not good news just in a pie in the sky, go to heaven when you die kind of way. It is good news in the deepest, human, humane way possible. It is the good news that at the heart of the universe is love. The fabric of the universe is love. The well-spring that pours life into us and all living things is love. This love at the core of it all is the one we all God – not a being within creation, but the source and sustenance of creation.

And you have to appreciate that that is an extraordinary and unusual claim. The founding myth of the ancient world in which our Jewish ancestors lived was based in conflict and violence – the world coming forth from the slain body of a goddess. Violence was at the heart of it all. The myths of Rome had petty gods pursuing their own interests and needing to be manipulated and placated to bother with helping out humans. I’d make an argument that founding myths of America depend on the belief that all of us are just isolated individuals, bound to pursue our own gain, lest we get crushed by others – and that very myth is now leading directly to the politics of America First.

To claim that the fabric of the universe is love is extraordinary. And we should never be ashamed of it, never be ashamed to make it known. We have good news to share.

Next, I think it is important to realize that the history of Christianity isn’t ALL bad. In fact, so much of what we take to be the humane and decent parts of the world today grew from the soil of the Christian faith. The very idea that compassion is a good thing was antithetical to the ethos of the Roman world.

While Christians have been responsible for brutality and racism and war and so much more, Christians have also worked against all those things. Hospitals, human rights, abolition, democracy, workers' rights, even modern western science that all too often today eschews religion, would not exist or at least would all look very different if the way of Jesus had not infiltrated the way of the world.

To assume, as so many do, that Christianity is responsible for all the garbage of our history is just wrong. Human sin and selfishness and fear and ignorance and all other human foibles are responsible, but the whole point of our faith is to lead people in a different direction. We are not responsible for all the tangled mess of the past, we are only responsible for the way we seek to unravel all of it now, and make this place reflect a bit more its true nature as a creation of Divine love.

More practically, I would say, friends, don't be afraid of the Bible, don't be afraid of the Christian tradition, and don't be afraid of going deeper into your faith. The Bible reflects a lot of the troublesome side of humanity, but you can't get to the truth without being honest about that. At the core is love. The Christian tradition is full of garbage, as well as beauty and compassion and joy and generosity and love. If you dig deeper into your faith, really dig, you need not fear finding narrowmindedness and all the rest, but you can look forward to finding expansive, beautiful, heartwarming, hope-making peace. You can look forward to finding love.

Why would anyone back in the days of the Bible or now want to follow Jesus? Because he is love in human form. Friends, we have that, and, I'm preaching to myself here too, there is no reason to be defensive or shy about it. You might want to get used to saying something like, "Well, you know, Christians aren't all alike, and I'm sort of at the other end of the spectrum." And then learn to say something like "You could come and check it out with me sometime." Or "I find a lot of depth and meaning in figuring out how to love the world better." Or, "Hey, I found some nourishment for a good life there, maybe you would too."

So, yes, it is true, I am talking about "evangelism." That can be awkward for Christians with our progressive faith, because the conservative part of Christianity now dominates that language. So, let's break it down: E (say it after me...) E. Van. Gel. Ism. Evangelism. It is actually a really wonderful word because it simply means "good news" ism. And the fact that we believe that Jesus-shaped love is at the heart of the universe, and that the church, often in spite of itself, has made compassion and human rights and science and generosity aspirational goals for our society is something to be grateful for, and that we are part of a community that seeks to embody those things in our common life...all that means we have something wonderful and beautiful to share with others.

This good news is not just a pie in the sky, go to heaven when you die, sort of thing. It is not an exclusive, my faith is better than yours sort of thing. It's a way to affirm that there is something beautiful at the heart of the universe and the heart of our faith and the heart of our lives, and we think other people might be blessed by it as well. Evangelism. It's not a bad word. It simply means being willing to be authentic with other people about the hope and love that is within you. It mostly happens through the priorities and actions of your life, but sometimes, you just might use words with others as well. And that's okay. Because what we have is good news, for all.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.