

Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith Series
(Based on Brian McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christianity*)
Question 10: How Do We Live with the Questions?
June 20, 2010

I said in the first sermon of this series that the church seems to go through a huge shift every five hundred years. In 500AD or so, the Roman Empire fell, and the church had to reformulate itself in the period we know as the Dark Ages. In 1000AD, the Eastern Church, centered in Constantinople, and the Western Church, centered in Rome, officially split from each other. Around 1500, Martin Luther tacked his 95 theses to the Wittenburg Castle Church door, and the Reformation was under way, splitting the church into Roman Catholic and Protestant followers of Jesus.

And now at this turn of a new millennium, people are talking about a Great Emergence. The Christian church is leaving an era that we called Christendom, when the state and the culture supported the church. It used to be that Wednesday night was reserved as "church night" in some communities. Stores wouldn't be open on Sundays, or at least not till after 12:00 noon. Youth sports events wouldn't be played on Sunday morning. The culture supported the church.

There are still some vestiges of that support from the culture, but much of that has changed. And we have neighbors now from many religions, or from no religion. We have lots of neighbors in the Northwest who are spiritual but not religious. They don't really see a need to link up with an institution like the church.

People who might think about the Christian church think that we are judgmental or hypocritical. And some of our children whom we raised in the church are saying, The church as an institution doesn't work for me. So when I saw Brian McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, I thought this might be a way to address some

of these questions as we struggle with what it means to be the church in a new millennium.

So I want to use my time this morning to share again briefly what we've talked about in these ten weeks, and to suggest some ways that we can live out the questions in community. You remember that Brian McLaren suggests that we have borrowed Plato and Aristotle's world view, and laid it on the Bible. We've turned the Bible into a six-line flat lined narrative that everything has to fit into- Creation...Fall....Condemnation...Salvation....Heaven...and Hell. In some forms of Christianity, the Gospel has been turned into a simple message about believing certain doctrines so that you can get your ticket to heaven.

And you remember I expanded our understanding of the Gospel as we looked at how Jesus fulfilled the three great themes in the Hebrew Bible. Remember that at the start of Genesis, the writer begins, In the beginning God... And at the start of John's Gospel, John writes, In the beginning was the Word. Jesus is a new beginning. He will bring about a new creation. Jesus is the Word of God in the flesh, bringing new life to the people he ministers to. That's the first great theme in the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus fulfills.

And then Jesus brought about a new exodus. He set people free from their demons; he set people free from the sin that had them bound. He was and is the liberator. And the third theme that Jesus fulfilled from the Hebrew Bible was that of the peace-making kingdom. He taught the power of reconciling love, where people who formerly hated each other could be his disciples together. He preached the power of forgiveness, where he could even forgive his enemies from the cross. He welcomed the outsiders into the circle.

He lived out the peace-making kingdom.

So the Gospel is not only the good news that we can't do enough to earn God's favor, it comes to us as a gift in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel is also the reign of God among us now. The Gospel is how we live out the life of Jesus in our relationships, in our families, in our neighborhoods, with our enemies. It is not simply a ticket to heaven for when we die! The Gospel is a way to live now!

The Gospel is the reconciliation I just had with a neighbor of mine about a month ago. We had a fence issue, and I wrote him a note apologizing where I could, and he responded with a gesture of good will. The Gospel is about reconciliation when we have written off a relationship.

The Gospel is the liberating power that comes to the person addicted to drugs or alcohol, who every moment of every day makes that decision, with God's help, to be all that he or she can be, and not be bound to the temporary relief that comes from a bottle or a pillbox. That's the Gospel of liberation that Jesus lived.

The Gospel is when two people of different political stripes can build bunk beds together, or fill plastic bags with food for hungry kids, or kneel at the same communion rail together to receive the body of Christ. That's the gospel of the peace-making kingdom. And we discovered that when Paul addresses Gentile and Jewish Christians in the church at Rome, he tells them that they will disagree about some things. They will see the world differently. They will live out their faith in Jesus differently. And some will feel comfortable eating meat sacrificed to idols, and some won't. Some will observe certain Jewish holy days, and some will not. But both Paul and Jesus say, Don't judge each other. And Paul says, Don't let your freedom be a stumbling block for somebody else in the family of Christ. The assumption in the church is that we will have disagreements. The question is, How do we live

together in faith, living with our disagreements, and still working together to be Christ in this world?

So we discovered that the Gospel is more than just a ticket to heaven someday when we die; the Gospel is also God's plan for making the kingdom of heaven happen here on earth while we live.

We thought about how the Bible is often treated like a constitution, where everything needs to "fit" and there can't be any discrepancies. And we considered how it might be a library of materials, a conversation about who God is and how God works. And there can be some tension and even disagreement in the Scriptures, and that's OK. We discover who God is and what God wants for us as we add our experience to the stories of God in Scripture. You remember when the righteous man Job was suffering, that his friends came to him and gave him reasons for why he was suffering, and they are reasons found in the book of Deuteronomy and 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. And Job says, No, I don't think that's why I'm suffering. And finally he is confronted with the mystery of it all, and God doesn't give him an answer, but God appears, and that's enough for Job. Because what we really need is a relationship with a loving God, not a water-tight answer for every question. I may not understand why something happens, but I understand that God will not let me go when it happens, and that God will make something good out of it (Romans 8:28).

We discovered that maybe what we have in Scripture is layers of what we have thought of God, like sedimentary layers. And that the way we have thought of God has changed over the course of the Scriptures. The names for God change over the course of Scripture, from El Shaddai (God Almighty) to Yahweh (I am who I am); from "Master" to "Husband". Jesus says to his disciples, I no longer call you servants, but friends.

And one explanation, you remember, was the math book example. In a 2nd grade math book, the students are told, You cannot subtract a larger number from a smaller number. In sixth grade the students are told, You *can* subtract a larger number from a smaller number, and you get a negative number. It's not that the 2nd grade math book is untrue, but that 2nd graders can't understand abstract concepts. And earlier people could only understand God as much as they could at the time.

What we do know is that by the time we get to Jesus, we get a full revelation of who God is, and what God's priorities are. Understanding who Jesus is demands that we look back on the earlier pictures of God and have a different understanding. An earlier people might have thought that God wanted them to annihilate all the people of an enemy tribe; and yet Jesus treats Gentiles differently. He casts the demons out of a Gentile mother's daughter, and feeds 4,000 Gentile men and their families. Jesus gives us a greater understanding of who God is.

So we can only understand so much of who God is at any given time. Rituals and ceremonies had to come before prophetic justice. Loving your brother had to come before loving your enemy. A belief in an all-directing God needed to come before a God who doesn't cause everything to happen, but God who takes all things and works them together for good. A view of a violent God comes before a view of a God committed to loving the enemy. God hasn't changed, but our *understanding* of who God is has changed, and we understand most fully who God is in the life of Jesus.

We looked the purpose of the church, and discovered that maybe the church exists to form Christ-like people, people who love and live and serve like Jesus. I used the illustration of the man whose car recently went into the river, and the Oregon State trooper's comment that it was tough as they pulled themselves out by a rope attached to his vehicle, but what really helped him was the crowd

of people shouting encouragement on the side of the river and helping to bring them to the shore.

And I suggested that we are the people whom God has rescued, and who God continues to rescue, and we are pulling others out of the river. What if the church exists to form Christ-like people to love and live and serve like Jesus? And I see us doing more and more of that at Prince of Life as we pray about the needs of this community and how to be the light of Christ in this place.

We looked at the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts chapter 8. Here was a man who wanted to go to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, but who was probably excluded because according to Leviticus (23:1) eunuchs were not allowed in the assembly of the Lord. He was a sexual minority who had been excluded, and yet he hears the story of Jesus, about a man who had been scarred and disfigured and who would not have descendants, just like him, and he says, I want to follow Jesus. Can I be baptized? And so a man from a sexual minority is baptized and becomes a follower of Jesus, and tradition says he started the church in Ethiopia. It's a story about God expanding the boundaries to include people previously on the outside.

We asked, Is there a new way to look at the future? And we discovered that maybe God isn't so much the One who is pulling all the levers and everything is going to get worse and worse until there is a collapse and God totally begins again. But that maybe God is more like the rider of a horse that is willful, and God has a direction in mind for us, but God allows us freedom, and God keeps nudging us towards God's future.

We even asked whether God will finally redeem all things, that maybe on the day of judgment, God will burn away from each of us those things that are less than godly, and God will let remain those things that are right and true and carry it all into God's

future. Judgment will be less about punishment and more about setting things right, about letting into God's future all that is true and honorable and just and pure and commendable. When Martin Luther King Jr. preached his Christmas Sermon on Peace, he said to his opponents, "Throw us in jail, we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you."

And then he said this: "But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that *we shall win you in the process* and our victory will be a double victory. Maybe all people will one day be won over by God's love, and what is not of God will be burned away. In some people, most of who they are will be burned away. And in some people, much of who they are will remain and will go on into God's future.

Last week we asked, How should followers of Jesus relate to people of other religions? And we talked about people in this world who are loving and serving their neighbor in need, and working for peace in their relationships and in the world. They are living out the life of Jesus, and yet they don't name Jesus. They don't confess the doctrine that we do, but they seem to live out the life of Jesus like we do. And Jesus will be the judge when God brings this portion of time to an end and begins a new chapter.

How do we relate to people of other religions or no religion? We share the Gospel in word and deed in humility and with respect; we try to understand and serve all people, and we let God be the judge, we let God be God.

When Paul talks to the Greeks in Athens, Greeks who are worshiping many gods, he says that God created us so that we

would search for God and perhaps find him, though indeed he is not far from each one of us. When I talk with someone from outside the church, I don't assume that I'm bringing God to that person. God is already at work in their life. My question is, Where is God already at work in you, and how can we as the faith community help you be the person God created you to be?

Paul gets three responses from his message. Some scoffed, they mocked him, and we will get that response. Some said, We'll hear you again about this. We're open, but we need to hear more. Those are the kind of people I want to listen to and have conversations with. Let's meet again. And some of the listeners became believers. Some of them joined the movement.

Our job is to hear the needs of our neighbors around us, to hear their questions, and some of them are the questions we've been dealing with these last ten weeks. And our job is to then share the love of God that we know in Jesus in as many creative and life-changing ways as we can. And we leave the results up to God. Next week, I'll be preaching again from our three-year lectionary. We have the story from Luke chapter 9, where Jesus gives instructions for how to follow. What does he mean by, Let the dead bury their own dead?