

## Sermon Series: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Church

In the spring of 2010 Pastor John preached a sermon series based on Brian McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christianity*. He addressed the questions from the book in his sermon during worship and the adult education time.

Here are links to each of the sermons:

[Question #1: Have we imposed a framework on the biblical story, and is it the right one?](#)

[Question #2: Is the Bible more like a constitution, or a library? How do we interpret it?](#)

[Question #3: Is God violent?](#)

[Question #4: Who is Jesus, and why are there so many different "versions" of him?](#)

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Is there An Overarching Theme to the Bible, and if there is,  
Do We Have It Right?  
(Sermon Series: Ten Critical Questions for the Church)  
(Based on Brain McLaren's book,  
A New Kind of Christianity)  
April 11, 2010

Phyllis Tickle, in her book, *The Great Emergence*, says that every 500 years or so the church has a great "rummage sale." The Christian church sorts through all that it has collected over the previous centuries. Some of it feels like extra baggage, and gets sent to the recycling center. And some of it feels like essential gear, and it gets preserved for the future, and so a new chapter opens up for the church.

We had this happen around 500 AD with the collapse of the Roman empire; around the year 1000 with the Great Schism between the Western and the Eastern church; and around 1500 with the Great Reformation (obviously we stand here today as inheritors of that tradition). And now, we have many people saying that the Christian church stands in a place where some things seem to be ending, and a new chapter is being birthed.

Let's just talk about the American church for a moment. About 40% of Americans attend a church on any given Sunday, less than that in the Northwest. And about 60% don't. The first percentage is shrinking, and the second is growing. Many of those 60% say that they are spiritual, but not religious, meaning they feel some connection to God in some form, but they don't feel connected to Christianity, and they don't feel the need to link up with a Christian community.

And very often Christians move from one denomination to another or from a denominational church to a community church, but we're still "preaching to the choir." So why is it that many people are not attracted to the church as we have done church? Brain McLaren is a pastor and author who has written a number of books struggling with questions of faith and what a new Christianity might look like.

So this ten-week series that begins today looks at the questions he asks in his book, "A New Kind Of Christianity." The first question is this: Do we think that there is an overarching theme to the Bible, and if there is, do we have it right? And if we don't have it right, can we free up the Bible to speak in a different way?

Let me show you a storyline that has been put on the Bible since about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century. It's a six-line story that looks like this: Eden...The Fall...Condemnation/Fallen World...Salvation/Redemption/Atonement/Justification by Faith...Heaven or Hell. In this storyline, Eden is seen as perfection. Everything was perfect...and then man and woman made a choice, and we have something called The Fall. And something called "original sin" enters the world. By the way, "The Fall" and "original sin" are not phrases that are found in the Bible. They have been placed on the text by commentators.

Now when I show you this storyline, you are probably thinking, Well, right! That is the storyline, isn't it? And actually, this pastor and other pastors you've heard preach and teach have shared it in this way. But when we look at the Bible this way, as if this is the whole outline, we almost end up with kind of a manufacturing process, a sorting and shipping process. You start with perfection, something goes wrong, God provides a solution, people have a choice, and people sort themselves out for one of two destinations. We have tweaked the storyline (we've talked about different ways the cross might be understood, different ways that God might have mercy on people, what the nature of hell might be) but we've never really questioned the paradigm.

So one question to ask is, Did Abraham hold to this storyline? Did Moses, or Jeremiah, or Jesus, or Paul? Does it show us more of who God is? Does it give us a deeper connection to Christ? A more powerful experience of the Holy Spirit? But this is the storyline we've laid on the Bible.

And for the last 1500 years or so, this the way we've looked at the Bible. McLaren has a great illustration in his book. He says we have filtered Scripture with this lens all the way back to Jesus. So we don't directly see Jesus, we see Paul's view of Jesus, and then Augustine's view of Paul's view of Jesus, and then Aquinas' view of Augustine's view of Paul's view and so forth. We have this storyline in our minds that has come to us, and even when we try to read the story of Scripture on its own, and free it up, we have this paradigm in our heads.

But let's think about another way to see Jesus. Let's start from the other end: Adam to Abraham to Moses to David to Amos/Isaiah/Jeremiah to John the Baptist to Jesus. Instead of looking backwards and seeing this six line paradigm, can we move forwards to Jesus? And how would that change things?

Now here's one of the main problems with seeing everything through this six-line storyline: It's imported to the Bible from Greek philosophical thought. This is Plato's storyline! Remember that Greek thinking influenced the Romans. That's what Western Civilization is: it's Greek philosophy connected with Roman politics and economy and soldiering. We inherited the Greco-Roman culture. And remember the early church was birthed in the Roman Empire, with Greek philosophical thought all around it.

Now this is going to get a little technical, so hang on. And today's sermon is probably the most difficult to understand of the series. Plato believed that you couldn't see ultimate reality. Ultimate reality was eternal, unchanging, nonmaterial. All we see in this world are illusions; it's like we're living in a cave and all we see are the shadows on the wall made from the fire. The real world is what we can't see. What is real is what's behind things. So we might see a chair here, but what is real is the concept of "chairness" that is behind it. Or Joe over here is male, but behind Joe is this concept called "maleness" that is much more real than Joe. Plato said, All that we see is changing. The real is what's behind this world and it is unchanging. The reality of "chair" never changes, or of "maleness." And what is most important is the reality that is behind what we see.

Another Greek philosopher named Aristotle saw it differently. He said, No, it's the opposite. All we have is what we can see. All we have is this chair. All we have is Joe. There is no absolute beyond this. Everything is becoming and changing. Plato said, No, there is a real chair that is more real, more perfect, that is the ideal chair. We just can't see it. But it's the perfect chair. So they went back and forth with this argument. Here's how these philosophies took hold. The Greco-Roman world divided everything up into either the world of the spirit or the world of the material. And the world of the spirit was more valued: those things of the spirit were ideal and changeless and perfect. The material world was deficient, and fallen, and decaying.

So here's where this six-line storyline for the Bible came from. It came from Plato winning the argument. Here's Plato's six-line story line that got laid over the Bible: Platonic Ideal...Fall into the Cave.....Aristotelian Being/Becoming....Salvation....Platonic Ideal/Greek Hades. Notice what happens to the Garden of Eden when we read it this way. It's no longer a good Jewish garden, but a perfect one. And you say, What's wrong with that? It was perfect until Adam and Eve messed it up. Well, the Platonic view of perfection is different from the Jewish. In the Platonic view, if something is perfect, it can never change. Because if something changed, and it started out as perfect, then it would become less than perfect. The Platonic view of perfection was a state that could never change.

But Eden isn't a changeless state, it's a creation story! And God doesn't say Eden is perfect, God says, it is good! In fact, it is very good! But when we put this Greek philosophical view on the story, the Fall happens, and we go from a perfect state into a (remember Aristotle?) decaying, imperfect world, where everything is deplorable. Because now it's all just lesser material things, which the Greeks looked down upon.

And in the Greek world, god loved that perfection, that perfect state of being. And now, as McLaren says, the perfect world has fallen from "Ideal State High School" and is now hanging out smoking cigarettes on the street corner with Aristotle and his cronies, telling stories, unscripted stories, where things change and life happens. This is not a perfect state anymore.

And in the Greek framework, god is the one who finds a way to forgive the detestable world that is becoming and changing, and get it back into a state of perfection, so the Greek god can love it again. And at the other end of the six-line Greek paradigm, heaven will be perfection again- perfect peace, perfect rest, perfect unchanging being. The only way for this to happen is for the universe to be destroyed, so the Greek god can start over again and get back to perfection.

And what remains at the other end of the Greek six-line story is the Greek version of god plus the perfect souls of the redeemed in heaven. And everyone else is suffering in hell, getting what they deserve because they never changed back into that state of perfection.

And this is what we've called the good news:  
Creation...fall....condemnation...salvation....heaven....hell. We've tried to tweak it in

various places, moved the furniture around a little bit, but that essentially has been the story we've told. So maybe it's time to not simply lay that framework on the Bible, and read the Bible forwards, rather than backwards. Who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the god of Plato and Aristotle and the Roman emperors? Who is the One Jesus called "Father?"

What would it look like to read the Bible forwards? I wish we had time to go through the whole Bible (although we are doing that Wednesday evenings, come join us!) but I briefly want us to think about Genesis and Isaiah this morning. The story begins with something different from the perfect world of Plato: it's the *good* world of Genesis. It is not unchanging and sterile and stale; it is vibrating with life and change. If it were Plato's world, it would start as fully developed, fully populated. But instead, the world becomes as God speaks it. In Plato's ideal state of perfection, animals would already be named, but in the Jewish beginning, Adam gets to take part in naming them. Eve is formed out of Adam. She becomes. This is so different from Plato's ideal world. And God doesn't say it's perfect, God's says it's very good.

And when Adam and Eve make the wrong choice, God doesn't pronounce the perfect state of the world ruined. Look for it in the text. God doesn't use that language. God says there are consequences to what they've done, consequences for the man and the woman and the serpent. And God gets further involved in the story. God doesn't write off the first couple, God doesn't exact capital punishment; God gives them clothes, and sends them out of the garden. Plato's god wouldn't do that.

What we do notice is that people begin to make ever more rebellious choices, and there are ever more serious consequences. God gets frustrated with the violence that has spread all over the earth, but God provides a way out for Noah and his family. God calls Abraham and Sarah to begin a nation that will not rule all nations, like the Roman Empire, but that will be a blessing to all nations. And at the end of Genesis, after Joseph's brothers hated him and sold him into slavery, God takes that situation and turns it into good. Egypt is blessed through Joseph, and his brothers are blessed through Joseph. That's the Jewish God who keeps getting involved in this messy, Aristotelian world of becoming, God who is not far off in that Platonic world of perfection, and wanting to stay there.

God's unfolding drama is not as simple as perfection, fall, condemnation, salvation, heaven and hell. God's story is about human foolishness and God's faithfulness. God creates a good world, humans create evil, God overcomes evil.

And let's go to the other end of the six-line paradigm. When we read poems like the Isaiah passage you heard earlier, of the peaceable kingdom, we know what to do with these. That's an image of Plato's perfect heaven! No more weeping or distress; no more infants dying after only a few days, or older people not living out their lives; the wolf and the lamb feeding together; no more hurting and destroying. In our six-line framework, that's perfection, and that can't happen on earth! That must be an ideal heaven!

But what if that's not what Isaiah was saying. Isaiah in his context was speaking to people who were coming back to Jerusalem again after 70 years in captivity, and God was creating everything new again. And what if that poem meant that those changes were going to happen *within history*? What does Isaiah say? They shall build houses and inhabit them. I've dealt with several women this week whose families don't have a place to call home. What if Isaiah meant people here and now would have housing? What does Isaiah say? They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. What would it mean if here and now, we found a way for all people not to have to suffer from food insecurity? Is God talking about one in five Oregonians who struggle to get enough to eat, or is this just a view of a future heaven where everybody will be fed? That would be a reading according to the Platonic framework. What does Isaiah say? The wolf shall lie down with the lamb. What if that isn't talking about a perfect heaven in Plato's world? What if the wolf and the lamb lying down together meant Christians and Jews and Muslims having a picnic together, or people on the political left and the right finding a way to sing in harmony with each other? Yes, God's got a big vision.

What if these pictures that we've always said were a perfect heaven are a vision of what God wants to do here and now?

Now listen to me closely. I'm not saying that there isn't truth to creation, fall, condemnation, salvation, heaven and hell. But that framework has distorted our view of the Bible. And as we begin to see Scripture outside of that framework, we will discover a passionate, wild, creative, liberating God who is on the loose, and who says, You be partners with me in creating the future, not a perfect, Greek, ideal future in heaven, but a vision of God's peaceable kingdom taking place here and now. Amen.

Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith  
Question #2: How do We Interpret Scripture?  
April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010

A couple of weeks ago, members of a Christian militia group in Michigan were arrested and charged with plotting to kill a police officer. And then they were going to shoot officers who came to the funeral. This group calls itself the Hutaree, which apparently means Christian warrior. And on their website, they say this: "Jesus wanted us to be ready to defend ourselves using the sword and stay alive using equipment... We, the Hutaree, are prepared to defend all those who belong to Christ and save those who aren't. We will still spread the word, and fight to keep it, up to the time of the great coming."

Jesus does say in Luke 22: One who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one (v.36). And he says, I did not come to bring peace, but the sword (Matt.10:34) So are the Hutarees right? Did Jesus mean for his disciples to take up arms and fight people we disagree with?

We've come to week two of this ten week series based on Brian McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christianity*. Today's question is, How do we understand the Bible? How do we view it? We've gotten ourselves into a mess for several reasons. We've gotten ourselves into a scientific mess. Some people say the Bible should be seen as a scientific textbook. And so we've had Christians throughout the centuries claiming that science is wrong because it counters the Bible: Christians who claimed during Galileo's time that the sun revolved around the earth, because that's the way the bible described it; Christians who can't accept any kind of evolution, because of the way they interpret Genesis chapter 1.

We've gotten into an ethical mess with the way we use the Bible. If the Bible is an ethical rulebook, then we have a problem, because so many of the issues we deal with today aren't dealt with directly in the Bible: climate change, genetic engineering, affirmative action, racism, just war theory, how big should government be?

And we have gotten into messes in the past in the ways we have used the Bible to support values that now we wonder how we supported for so long, like slavery and segregation. There are churches that still don't allow women to be pastors based on Scripture.

So the question before us is, How do we understand Scripture? We claim that God speaks to us through God's written Word, the Bible, but obviously many different people are hearing God say many different things.

One of the things that might help us is to see how we've used, or misused the Bible, in the past to support things that now we don't advocate. In 1864, a Protestant pastor published a novel about slavery, called *Nellie Norton: A Vindication of Southern Slavery from the Old and New Testaments*. In the novel, a young woman from New England, who is an abolitionist, she wants to get rid of slavery, travels to the South, and she discovers the virtues of slavery first hand.

And there are arguments for slavery that are woven in the fabric of this novel. I won't mention them all here, but one of them is the argument from tradition: the world has always had slavery; it will always be a part of creation and society. Another argument in the novel is that the lives of slaves are so much better in America than they were in Africa, and in fact, slaves seem happy and contented. A third argument is that the Negro race is inferior, and the Negro was meant to serve the white race. But the last argument is the one that has to do with how we interpret Scripture. Here's the argument: The Bible is a pro-slavery Bible, and God is a pro-slavery God.

And if you simply read the Bible and take it at face value, it's true! The Bible is a pro-slavery Bible, and God is a pro-slavery God. Look at our first lesson for today from Leviticus 25. God tells the Israelites that they can have slaves, and where they can obtain their slaves. If a Hebrew owes you money, you can't make him a slave; you can make him a hired servant or a bound laborer. But you can take slaves from the nations around you, and also from the aliens living among you. They can be your property, and your children can inherit them as property. God tells that to the people.

Now if we say, Well, that was the Old Testament, we don't hold with many things in the Old Testament anymore. OK, but slavery is endorsed in the New Testament. The writer of Ephesians (6: 5) says: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling." Colossians says something very similar (22-24). Titus 2:9-10 says that slaves are to be submissive in every respect; they are not to talk back, and they are not to steal.

Jesus and his disciples never say anything against slavery. The early church admitted slave owners and slaves into their fellowship, without saying that the slave needed to be set free (see Philemon). And yet nobody defends slavery anymore. Now we are fighting the sex slave trade. We believe that God doesn't want us to own and use and abuse other people.

How did we come to that conclusion, given that the Bible defends slavery? And yet we still hear people use Scripture in a similar way to say, Well, the Bible says this or that....

So it seems that one of the main ways that the Bible has been seen by some Christians is as a "constitution." This is a constitutional age; we have debates over what the U.S. Constitution means, that's what our Supreme Court justices do for us, they interpret the Constitution. So if we read the Bible like a constitution, then we argue that way. We quote chapter and verse to defend our position. We assume the Bible has internal consistency, meaning, there can be no contradictions, the view of God should be consistent, we should get the same answers to the big questions everywhere in the Bible. If the Bible is like a constitution, then it should all hang together in a seamless way.

So if we treat it as a constitution, meaning, I'll look up what the Bible has to say about a certain subject, and follow what it says, we run into trouble. What if we looked through the Bible like a constitution, and asked the question, How should we treat our enemy? Would we get a consistent answer?

Jesus says in Matthew 5:44 that we should love them. Paul says in Romans 12 (17-21): Do good to your enemies and never seek revenge. 1 Peter says if we suffer at our enemy's hands for doing right, we will be blessed. (1 Peter 3:13-14). Psalm 137:9 says we should joyfully dash our enemy's infants against a rock. Psalm 139: 19 says we should hate them. Deuteronomy 7 (1-6) says we should destroy them utterly. If the Bible is a constitution that tells us what to do, what we do with these different instructions?

Well, we come up with different ways to interpret it. Some say the Old Testament is valid unless the New Testament says something different. Some say interpret Scripture with Scripture: but which Scripture is more important than the other? Some say go back to the Reformers or St. Thomas or St. Augustine, to use the methods they used. And actually as Lutherans we do use some of those tools. We talk about the distinction between law and Gospel. Law is what God requires of us. Law, like the Ten Commandments, provides order and structure. But the law can't save us, because we realize that we can't do what God requires of us. We constantly fail. So the gospel is the good news that God has given us a Savior in Jesus. The Gospel says, God has done it for you Jesus Christ. By grace you have been saved. That's one of the tools we use as Lutherans. And I believe that is very different from using the Bible as a constitution.

Here's a possibility: What if we agreed that God speaks to us through the Bible, but that the Bible is not a constitution, it is a portable library of poems and prophecies, histories and fables, parables and letters, wise sayings and quarrels. What if we kept in mind that the writers of the Bible weren't writing as if people would read what they wrote thousands of years later and thousands of miles away? They were addressing the specific problems and struggles of their day.

So what if the Bible were seen as a library of a culture, of a community of people who trace their roots back to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. Somebody has said that a culture is a group of people who argue about the same things over many generations. A culture is a group of people who struggle over the same important questions over many generations.

In our American culture we debate over the role of government, what it should or shouldn't do, how big or small it should be. What are the rights of the nation as opposed to the states as opposed to individuals? We debate over those things. Those have always been important questions for this country. That debate holds us together.

So what if the Bible was a library of materials that holds together the important questions for the Jewish people and early Christians. What if we saw the Bible as a library that keeps the debate alive about who God is, and how God wants us to live, and how God is involved in the world? So we wouldn't expect internal consistency, then, like a constitution would have. We would expect some disagreements over how to treat our enemies; we would expect some differences over how we think God is active in the world. Those disagreements would be seen not as flaws that we have to smooth out, but as a part of the vigorous debate with God about about important questions. And in that debate, God is revealed.

The second lesson I chose for today is from the book of Job. And if we look at Job as a constitution, we would expect God's official position on why there is suffering in the world. Here's another way to look at Job: Job is God-inspired portrayal of human beings who are struggling over the question of evil. Job has three parts to it. There is a prose section at beginning that is a conversation between the adversary, called Satan (that's what adversary means) and God. Satan and God strike a deal. God says to Satan, Have you seen my servant Job? Isn't he terrific? And Satan says, Oh, if he had to suffer, he'd stop blessing you and would curse you. And God says, OK, let's try it out. I will put Job in your hands. And one at a time, all kinds of horrible things begin to happen to Job and his family and his possessions. That's where we get the phrase, "the trials of Job."

The middle of the book has a series of long speeches in poetry. Job basically says, Why are all these bad things happening to me? I've been a good man. God is supposed to be fair, and this isn't fair. Then three of Job's friends, later joined by another young man, make a lot of pious sounding speeches. And they basically say, Job, you're an idiot. You must have done something wrong. Good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. So stop whining and admit that you're getting what you deserve. God is causing you to suffer because you did something wrong.

And when we hear their speeches, we think, That's right. Isn't that the way the world works? Something bad happens to me, and I wonder, What did I do to deserve this? Then comes the end of the book, when God finally intervenes and makes a long speech, but it's a series of questions. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who shut in the sea with doors? Have you entered the storehouses of the snow? Do you know all about the heavens? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

And at the end of the book, Job says, I don't understand, but it's OK. Before, I'd only heard about you, but now you've come to me personally. And it's enough. God doesn't say, Job, you should have listened to your friends. They were right. No, he says, You've got it right, Job. Your friends have it wrong. I'm here with you, and there are mysteries in life that you just don't understand.

Now here's an interesting question. God just said that a lot of what is said in that book, all those pious speeches in the middle by Job's friends, was foolishness. And yet we say that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. So is the beginning and the end inspired, but not the middle?

Maybe what we can say is that God doesn't speak to us in any one particular verse, like a cereal box that is just waiting to be opened to be poured into a bowl. God speaks to us *in this conversation* between God and Job and his friends. God speaks to us in the entire story, in the interaction between Job and the friends. By the way, the friends of Job were quoting arguments that are found in the book of Deuteronomy: do good, and you'll be rewarded. Do evil and you'll suffer. God says at the end of Job that that is foolishness. What does that do to Deuteronomy? Do we just reject it then? It's part of the conversation, just like Job and Luke and Romans are part of the conversation that happens within faith communities, and God uses that conversation to speak to us. What if

the Bible is about many voices, and God uses the interaction of all those voices-prophets and priests and gospel writers and sages and storytellers- to keep us listening for God's voice. In the interaction of all those voices, God speaks to us.

And here's the amazing thing: God asks us to be a part of the conversation! When Job hears his friends tell him what Deuteronomy says, he doesn't say: Thanks. That's what I needed to hear. Deuteronomy says it. I believe it. That settles it. No, he says, I can't believe that theology, that if something bad happens to you, you did something wrong. Job enters the conversation with Scripture! And God rewards his skepticism. Job didn't give up his faith. He said I can't believe that interpretation of it. And God rewarded him for that. That says to me that we can ask questions, we can be skeptical, we can become a part of this biblical conversation.

I am chaplain at Willamette Falls Hospital this week. I got a call that a patient wanted to see me on Thursday. When I came into the room, an 81 year old man named Bill wanted to tell me his story. He said when he was in his twenties, his brother died of an aneurism, and shortly after his mother died of cancer. Bill this week was diagnosed with a lung disease, and the doctor has given him about a year left of life. And Bill said to me, When I lost my brother and my mother, I gave up on God. I got angry with God, and resentful, and I'm wondering if part of the reason I got ill is because I've carried this resentment of God all these years. And I want to come back. I want to tell God I'm sorry.

So I went to this library that we call the Bible, and I pulled out the story of the Waiting Father in Luke 15, and I retold him the story of a father who waited on the porch until his long-lost son came home. And I said, Bill, God loves you, and I believe God was saddened too when you lost your family members. God has been waiting for you, and I want you to picture God running out to greet you, and wrapping you in a father's loving arms. Bill's life has been a debate about God. I tried to have him step back and see a bigger picture, and used some of the library we have from the Gospels to give Bill a different part of the story. This God-inspired library that we have brings us into the story.

Next week, well look at the question, Is God a violent God? What do we do with all those stories in the Old Testament about God telling the Israelites to kill whole populations of people, including women, children, animals? Bring a friend who struggles with that question.

Is God Violent?  
Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith  
April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010

I was a sophomore in high school and was taking German. And after class ended one day, I mentioned to a girl in the class that I was attending a church youth activity that weekend. She didn't know I was a Christian up until that point, and she said to me, So, you're a Christian. Aren't there a lot of contradictions in the Bible? And I said, No, of course not. I had been raised to believe that the Bible was like a constitution, that there was internal consistency. In fact, there had to be, because the Holy Spirit wrote the Bible, and God's Spirit wouldn't say one thing in one place and something that contradicted that in another.

This girl was a senior, and I was a sophomore, and I don't think we talked again about Christianity, but if we had, she might have said, Isn't there a contradiction between what God in the Old Testament says about killing enemies, and what Jesus says about how to treat enemies? What do you do about that? Isn't that a contradiction?

Today's question in our ten week series is, Is God violent? Some of us have been reading through the Bible together this year. We read three or four chapters a day from the Hebrew Bible, and a chapter from the New Testament every day. And we have read the stories of God telling the people of Israel to kill all the people in a town, or all the people of a particular tribe as they conquer the land of Canaan, and that often includes the women, the children, all the animals.

We heard this morning a reading from Deuteronomy, when Moses shares the message from God that he heard on the mountain. Moses says, God will help us to defeat the seven powerful tribes that are living in the land of Canaan, the land that God says will be given to us- when they are defeated, we are under orders to utterly

destroy them. God says, “Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.” (Deut. 7:2b)

The explanation was that if they allowed the Canaanites to live among them, and perhaps to intermarry, that eventually their children would be serving other gods. This passage and many others might lead us to conclude that God condones violence, or at least God certainly did in those years in Israel’s history.

So let’s think about what it might mean again for the Bible to be a library of thoughts and arguments about God, and how God acts in the world, and that God speaks to us through our engagement with this library. One of the things we will notice in this library is that the view of who God is shifts in the Bible. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew God as El Shaddai, God Almighty, but to Moses God becomes Yahweh, I am who I am, or I will be who I will be. That’s a fuller revelation of who God is. It’s what Moses could understand. (Exodus 6:3)

The prophet Hosea says that sometime in the future, all of Israel will call God, “my husband,” rather than “my master.” (2:16) There is a movement towards a more personal relationship with God in the prophets. Jesus says to his followers in John’s gospel, I have made known to you everything I have heard from the Father, so I’m no longer going to call you servants; I’m going to call you friends (John 15:15) And in the next chapter, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is going to come, and declare things that Jesus hadn’t been able to share with them, because they hadn’t been ready.

As we read the Bible, we begin to see some shifts in perspective, and maybe it is growth in *our understanding* of who God is. God hasn’t changed; God hasn’t evolved. But our understanding of who God is has progressed.

Brian McLaren shares some ways that the understanding of God seems to shift in the Bible, and I’ll give you four of them. There is

a shift in *ethics*. It seems that in the beginning God is concerned with ceremonies and rituals and priestly functions, about what makes you ritually clean and unclean. And then along come the prophets, who give us another understanding: that God is concerned with social justice; God is concerned with the poor and the forgotten.

Another shift is towards *God's universality*. It seems at first that God only favors the Israelites, and disfavors everybody else. But as time goes on, it becomes clear that God has created and loves all people. Another shift is in *how God is involved in the world*. And in a book like Ecclesiastes, God seems removed, and the world is a mysterious place. In Matthew's Gospel, God seems to direct everything. And then we have Paul in Romans 8:28, giving a more nuanced view: that things happen in this life, but that God is at work in all things bringing good.

There is a shift in the view of God as a vengeful, violent God towards a God who loves justice and kindness, reconciliation and peace. Now, let me make this clear: this is not an evolution of God's character, like God was an adolescent who needed to grow up and mature, and God has turned out rather nicely in the last several centuries! This is about our changing perspective, not God's! We human beings can't do any better than we can at any particular time in conveying who we think God is. And Scripture is like the fossils that geologists find in sedimentary layers that show us the ways that we have thought about God through the centuries.

McLaren uses the example of the Bible as a series of math books. In second grade, when the students are learning subtraction, the math book says, "A larger number cannot be subtracted from a smaller number." But then you get to sixth grade, and students have a chapter called, "Negative Numbers" in their book. And the text reads: This chapter will show you how to subtract larger

numbers from smaller numbers, and to get something called a negative number.

And we could say, Wait a minute! Was that second grade math book lying to these students? Because apparently you *can* subtract a larger number from a smaller number! People who write math books have discovered that they need to share the truth that is appropriate for any particular age level. A negative number is an abstract concept, and the human brain doesn't start thinking abstractly until about age ten. A second grader's brain isn't ready for negative numbers.

What if humans can only understand so much at any particular point in history? So what if people had an understanding of God as the God who gave them rituals and ceremonies and instructions on what to eat and not eat, before they could understand social ethics. What if they needed to build up to that? They needed a simple idea to understand that God might be either pleased or not pleased by what they ate or didn't eat, by what they sacrificed or didn't sacrifice. And it wasn't until later that they could begin to understand that God was concerned about how the poor were treated. Social justice is advanced math! They weren't ready for it, and their view of God was simpler. (e.g. Isaiah 1:11-17)

What if it were easier for them at the beginning to think of God as the one who favored *their* tribe, because in the progression of things they had to learn to see God in the face of their brother before they could see God in the face of their enemy?

What if it made more sense to think in terms of God being somewhat removed from the universe (like Ecclesiastes) or directing everything in the universe, good and bad, before we could get to a more nuanced view of God's activity, shared by Paul in Romans 8:28- We know that all things work together for good for those who love God...That's advanced math! It's a more

complicated view of God's activity, because it's a view that life happens, that God isn't controlling who gets into accidents and who gets cancer. God is the one who says, *Whatever* happens, I will make good come out of it!

And as far as today's question goes, what if when people first started telling these stories of God's activity, they were a violent people, and so they understood God as a God willing to use violence to accomplish God's will in the world? And what if God were later understood, especially in the teaching of Jesus, to be committed to justice and peace in non-violent ways. That's a shift in perspective of who God is.

Now not everybody agrees with this interpretation. If we have a more constitutional view of the Bible, then we need to defend all of these stories where God endorses violence. We need to say how they all fit together. And maybe our explanation would be that God used to do those things, but God isn't like that anymore, or God doesn't work that way anymore. But again, if the Bible is more of a library of thoughts and arguments and stories and poems about people's beliefs about God, then we could say, God hasn't changed, but our view of who God is changes and grows within the Bible.

And it would be tempting to say, Isn't it great that we are the lucky group that finally has figured it all out! We have arrived at a final understanding of who God is and what God wants us to accomplish in this world! No, I'd like to think it means that we are in a faith community that is working on this together. We let the stories in Scripture talk to each other. We engage Scripture with our questions and our concerns and our issues, and some of those are different from the ones the biblical writers knew about.

And why would it be important that we can say we have outgrown some views of God? What if we just took the example of the flood

story? (Genesis 6-9) In that story, God gets angry with the people God has created, and decides to destroy all of life, except for the eight humans and the animals that are saved through the ark. We have tended to emphasize how God saved people on that ark, that God was merciful.

But people who have never heard that story before could say, You have a God who would kill almost the entire population of the world, because God was tired of the violence and wickedness that was going on, and God was sorry that God had created humanity? That's your God? And it doesn't even work very well. Noah, the good character in the story, gets drunk after the ark lands, and his sons start getting into trouble. God killing most of the people on the planet doesn't seem to work very well. But according to the people who told the story, that is what God was like.

One of the problems with holding up those stories and saying, That's who God is, is that people might look at those stories and say, Well, God used genocide to take care of people he thought were a problem. And God doesn't do any evil. Maybe that might be appropriate for us to do as well. Certainly some of the Christians who settled this country believed that this was the new Promised Land, and that God was on our side, and that we had a right to do whatever we wanted with the people who were already here.

What if we agreed that *Jesus* shows us what God truly is like. In fact, that's what several writers in Scripture say. Paul says in Colossians 1: "(Jesus) is the image of the invisible God...For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (Col. 1:15, 19). The writer of Hebrews says: "(Jesus) is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." (Hebrews 1:3)

Jesus says in John's gospel, Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:8) Jesus shows us the character of God, who God

really is! And Jesus is constantly turning the old stories and the old teachings on their heads. You heard the story in the Gospel this morning (Matt.15: 21-28) about the Gentile woman, the Canaanite woman (from one of the tribes that the Hebrew people were supposed to destroy, right?). She comes to Jesus and begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter.

And Jesus doesn't answer her. His disciples say, Send her away; she keeps shouting after us. He answers, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But this Gentile woman, who loves her daughter as much as any Jewish mother loves hers, says, Lord, help me. It's probably the simplest prayer you can pray, isn't it? Lord, help me. And Jesus responds in a way we don't expect: It's not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

There are at least two understandings on why Jesus says something that sounds so harsh. One is that he was testing her, to see how deep her faith was. And the Greek word for dog here meant a household pet, not the dogs that run in packs. Maybe he said it with a wink and a smile. And she responded in a back-and-forth way, Well, right, Lord, but even the pets under the table get to eat some crumbs. And he says, Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matt.15:21f)

So one interpretation is that he was verbally playing with her, to see how far her faith stretched. The other explanation is that Jesus needed to grow in his understanding of the mission God had for him. In the finiteness of his humanity, God was still revealing to him the length and breadth of his mission. But whatever our interpretation here, notice that Jesus helps this Gentile woman! He comes to an understanding that God loves the Gentiles that all Jews had hated, and that God's mission was to love and save the whole world. Remember she was a Canaanite woman, and

according to the original understanding of God in Deuteronomy 7, they were to be utterly destroyed.

Shortly after this, Jesus (still in Gentile territory, according to Mark) feeds 4,000 Gentile men and their families. Remember there are seven tribes to be destroyed in Canaan when the people take over the land. Now there are *seven* loaves that feed these former enemies, and after everybody has their fill, there are *seven* baskets left over. We've changed from the early Hebrews who understood God wanting these Gentiles to be destroyed, to Jesus who says, They need to be healed too. They need to be fed. They need the good gifts of God that I have to offer.

Is God a violent God? Well, some of the fossils we have in the sedimentary layers of the Bible have interpreted God that way. But what if *Jesus* shows us the true picture of God? Amen.

Ten Questions Series  
Who Is Jesus? May 2, 2010

We come to our fourth question in this sermon series, “Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith,” based on Brian McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christianity*. And the question today is: Who is Jesus? If I just have you picture Jesus, what is the image that comes to mind? Some of us grew up with the Warner Sallman picture of Jesus. He doesn’t look very Jewish, in fact he looks quite European, but that is the image some of us have in our heads when we think of Jesus. Several years ago an artist came up with this rendition of Jesus, thinking this might be a more accurate Jewish rendition of what Jesus might have looked like.

But what’s more important than what he looked like is who he was, what was he about, what was his mission. One of Brian McLaren’s critics was talking about him several years ago, and he described McLaren and people like him as wanting to “recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie in a dress with a lot of product in his hair, who drank decaf and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes.”

And then the speaker went on to describe the Jesus he could believe in: “In Revelation, Jesus is a prize-fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in His hand, and a commitment to make someone bleed. That is the guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.” (quoted from *A New Kind of Christianity*, p. 120)

Christians has been tempted throughout the centuries to remake Jesus into anything we like- Annie Lamott once said that we want Jesus to hate the people we hate and like the things we like. We want to be comfortable with Jesus. So throughout the years we’ve had the Republican or Democrat Jesus, the white supremacist Jesus, the capitalist or communist Jesus, the slave-owning Jesus, the nuclear-bomb dropping Jesus, the organ music stained glass window sentimental Jesus, the prosperity gospel get rich quick Jesus, the Joe Six-Pack Jesus, the anti-Muslim crusader Jesus, to name a few.

We heard from the Revelation of John this morning, and it describes the warrior-

Jesus. Here it is again: “Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges

and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords." (Rev. 19:11-16) Seems like a rather war- like image, doesn't it?

You know I always invite you to look at the context of a biblical passage, and what kind of material it is. Is it a letter? A gospel? And in this case, we have something called apocalyptic literature. It was very common two or three centuries before and after Jesus. It was a kind of science fiction material for its day. Apocalyptic literature used code language and numbers as symbols. And it was often used by writers when their people were undergoing persecution. It was used to say that God is the one ultimately in control, not whatever government was persecuting you at the time.

The book of Revelation worked like some of our science fiction works today. A Star Trek episode, or one of the Matrix movies, isn't necessarily saying this is what the future will look like. It more often takes issues that we are concerned about today, and helps us work through them so we can reshape the future. Good science fiction helps us look at racism and environmental concerns and warfare so that we can, with God's help, change the future. It's not saying, This is what the future will necessarily look like, but it's a window into the future, helping us to choose wisely.

That's what I believe Revelation does. It helped the early Christians deal with the present. The Christians John is writing to are under the control of one of the Roman emperors, either Nero or Domitian, both of whom persecuting the early Christians for calling Jesus Lord, for not bowing down to the emperor. So they need a message of hope. And do they need a message that says they can forget all that peace and forgiveness stuff Jesus taught, because soon Jesus will come back and they'll be able to pull out their swords and destroy their enemies? Or do they need the message that Jesus' way of peacemaking will prevail, it is the right way, and they shouldn't give up on it?

That passage from Revelation can be interpreted either way. So who is Jesus in Revelation? Is he a prize-fighter with a commitment to making somebody bleed? Will he come back again like an emperor, using the violent means of the empire to accomplish God's will?

Let me give you another interpretation. This image can also be a reassuring one for these Christians, that the Jesus they remembered coming into Jerusalem peacefully on a donkey wasn't showing that he was weak and defeated, but that his way is even more powerful than a Caesar on a warhorse. Notice in the passage that the sword comes out of his *mouth*: it isn't being held in his hand. The word coming out of his mouth is a message of peace and reconciliation, that will ultimately be more powerful than the sword.

And the blood on his robe is not the blood of his enemies. It's his own blood, because Revelation shows Jesus as the lamb who has been slain. That's what we sing in our hymn of praise: *Worthy is the lamb who was slain; his blood set us free to be people of God*. So Revelation isn't a book showing that Jesus has changed his mind. He tells Pilate at his trial that if his kingdom were of this world, then his disciples would be fighting to keep him from being handed over. He hasn't changed his mind in Revelation. He hasn't abandoned the way of peace and concluded that the way of Pilate is better. He hasn't given up on loving his enemies. He hasn't sold the donkey to purchase warhorses, chariots, tanks, and B-1s. He hasn't decided that a tattoo down his leg is better than scars on his hands and feet and side. He isn't the one who will exact revenge at the end of time: he is the one who whispers from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing." So who is Jesus? I would say along with McLaren, that the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the Acts of the Apostles and the letters, does not change into a violent conquering hero in the book of Revelation. Again, in this library of materials that is the Bible, we need to lay that image of Jesus in the Gospels over against the view that he would turn into violent king that the Caesars would be proud of. We need to lay the Jesus of the Gospels over against the Jesus of the Revelation of John.

Let's ask one more question about Jesus today. Brian McLaren had another critic who said this about Jesus: "The only reason Jesus came was to save people from hell...Jesus had no social agenda...He didn't come to eliminate poverty or slavery or fix something in somebody's life for the little moment they live on this earth." (McLaren, p. 127)

Going back to the first sermon in this series, you remember the six-line narrative that we often lay on the Bible: creation...fall...condemnation...salvation...heaven....and hell. Sometimes Jesus is explained simply as the Savior who dies for us, and what is of utmost importance is that we believe that and receive him so that we can go to heaven. This life doesn't really matter all that much, because we're going to live forever afterwards.

But that's not the Jesus of the Gospels! Look again at the mission statement that Jesus gives when he shows up in his hometown at the beginning of his ministry in Luke's Gospel. He quotes from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-19, 21)

McLaren has a really helpful way to see three themes that are in the Hebrew Bible that get played out in Jesus' life: Genesis emphasizes creation and reconciliation; the Exodus story is about liberation and formation; and the Isaiah story is about a new creation and the peace-making kingdom. So how do we read and interpret the life of Jesus through those three lenses?

Who is Jesus in terms of those three emphases? What about creation and reconciliation? Genesis starts, In the beginning God created.... (Gen.1:1). And how does John's Gospel start? In the beginning was the Word.... (John 1:1). John is reminding us of creation, how God got everything started, and John is saying, In the beginning this Word that is Jesus was there. And now God is doing a new creation in Jesus! Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17: In Christ you are a new creation! God is doing something new in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus! And remember that in the first chapter of John, John says the true light was coming into the world. Remember that in Genesis, the first thing that God creates is light: Let there be light! (Gen.1:3) Jesus is now the light of the world. Look at the way the Genesis story of creation is fulfilled in Jesus!

The creative God of Genesis is the creative, life-giving God that we know in Jesus! John's Gospel ends at daybreak, in the garden where the tomb is. It's a sign of a new beginning, a new creation, back to the garden. In fact, Mary

misidentifies Jesus as the gardener. Creation gets a new start in the resurrection of Jesus!

The other theme in Genesis is reconciliation. You remember at the end of Genesis, Joseph is reconciled to his brothers, who had sold him into slavery. Joseph says, You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. And at the end of John's Gospel, there is reconciliation. The disciples wondered when they met Jesus after the resurrection, Will he be angry with us? But no, Jesus offers them breakfast by the lakeside. And Jesus says to Peter, Do you love me? I still love you, and I have a job for you. Feed my sheep! God is reconciling a family at the end of Genesis, and God is reconciling a family of followers at the end of John's Gospel. That's who Jesus is: he's the one who brings new life and restored relationships and a vision for a new creation

Who is Jesus in terms of the Exodus themes of liberation and formation? Moses led the people of God out of slavery in Egypt in their day. Jesus led people out of slavery to sickness and demonic oppression in his day. Moses gave the law...Jesus is the new Moses who is the Word made flesh. In Exodus, God's presence was associated with the tabernacle, the moving tent where God met Moses. John's Gospel says that the Word "tabernacled" with us in the presence of Jesus. We discover who God is in him!

When Moses asked for God's name, God said, I am who I am (Ex. 3:14). Jesus says in John's Gospel: Before Abraham was, I am (John 8:58). In John's Gospel he says, I am...the door...I am...the vine...I am... the good shepherd...I am...the light of the world. And every time we hear, I am, we think back to God saying to Moses, I am who I am. Who is Jesus? He reveals to us most fully the "I am", the God who was revealed to Moses. A Passover lamb is slain to save the people from the angel of death, and they are given their freedom. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the Lamb of God is killed and his death sets us free to live a new way. Jesus' life shows parallel after parallel with the theme of liberation in Exodus.

Who is Jesus according to the Isaiah story of the peacemaking kingdom? The Old Testament story starts with people longing for a new homeland: Abraham leaves Babylonia and heads for Canaan; Moses leads the people out of Egypt towards the Promised Land...the people in Babylon come back home...But then the prophets, especially Isaiah, speak of the Promised Land less in terms of geography and more in terms of a social reality: the land of

milk and honey becomes a society where justice flows like water, where there is harmony, and enough for all and safety for all. And that peaceable image is not just meant to be a picture of heaven. That is an image that we can hold up as a vision for this world. Remember Jesus' mission statement: he was concerned about the poor, the captives, the oppressed. And that's part of our mission as followers of Jesus. So who is Jesus? Is he simply the One who saves us from hell? I'll talk about heaven and hell a little later in this series, but even if he does that, he obviously is so much more than that: he's the one creating new life in us now; he's the one showing us how to reconcile with our enemies; he's the one giving us a vision of life in community. Next week we'll ask the question: What is the Gospel?

Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith  
What Is The Gospel? May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Many of you know the story of how I became a Lutheran Christian. I had never stepped into a Lutheran church before college, but my first year at Stanford, I needed to make some money, so I applied for a youth director job at a nearby Lutheran church. I didn't know anything about Lutherans, but I could play the guitar and lead a Bible study, and I could throw a Frisbee.

When the pastor and I met, I told him I didn't believe babies ought to be baptized because they couldn't make a decision for Christ by themselves. I disagreed with the idea that Christ could be truly present in the sacrament of Holy Communion. But they hired me anyway. And as I began to worship at this church, it felt like I heard the word "grace" for the first time in my life. The pastor kept preaching about this God who unconditionally loved me. I didn't have to do anything to earn that love.

And that was such good news for me, because up until then I'd had the sense that I had to do things to earn God's love and acceptance. If I did this, then God would love me more. If I read my Bible more, if I prayed more, if I served my neighbor more, then God would really approve of me. And that had felt like such a burden. And now I was hearing as if for the first time about the unconditional grace and love of God, and it changed my life. It was a little glimpse of Martin Luther's experience. He had tried so hard so win acceptance with God through his works, and he finally realized as he studied Scripture that our relationship with God is a gift, received by faith in what Christ did for us in the cross and resurrection.

Romans 1:16-17 especially clarified it for him: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" The other way to translate that is, "The one who is righteous through faith will live."

When we think of the Gospel, probably the clearest expression is found in Ephesians 2: 8-10- "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

When someone says to us, What is the Gospel, especially if they ask us Lutherans, we say something like, "The Gospel is the good news that Jesus took the punishment that should have been ours on the cross, forgiving us of the original sin that has been passed along to us, making us right with God. St. Paul used a legal term called "justification." We have been justified, made right in God's eyes, by grace through faith in what God for us in Christ.

Now what if I said to you, What is the Gospel according to Jesus? After all, we call the four books about Jesus Gospels, don't we? The Greek word *euangelion* literally means the good news. What was the good news for Jesus? Well, when Jesus first began his ministry in Mark's gospel, Mark says Jesus was proclaiming the good news (or the Gospel) and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14-15) Jesus' message is that *the kingdom of God has come near, or is at hand*. And because we have tended to interpret Jesus' words in the light of Paul (justification by grace through faith) we hear "the kingdom of God" and that means the "kingdom of heaven", and that probably means where I go after I die if I believe in Jesus.

And yet for Jesus, the kingdom of God wasn't the heavenly afterlife. Remember he said the kingdom of God is *near*. He taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven." Jesus said the kingdom of God is *at hand, it's near, it's among us*. And when he said "kingdom of God," that had a specific edge to it in his day, Remember in his day the kingdom that had the power was the kingdom of Caesar, the empire of Rome. Jesus was saying there is *another kingdom* among us that I am inaugurating, and it is in competition with the values of the kingdom of Caesar.

Remember that when Christians said, Jesus is Lord, that was a treasonous thing to say, because they were saying, Caesar is *not* Lord. Jesus' good news wasn't simply information about how to get to heaven after we die. It was good news that God's will was going to be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. You heard his mission statement last week from Luke's Gospel, when Jesus said he came to bring good news to the poor, and release to people who are captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4:16-21). That's incredibly good news for people who are suffering.

You remember I've spoken before in this series about the three great themes that are in the Hebrew Scriptures, and how Jesus fulfills those themes. Genesis has the themes of *creation and reconciliation*; Exodus of *liberation*, and Isaiah of a *new peacemaking kingdom*. And Jesus message is *good news* in all those areas! In John's Gospel, when he tells Nicodemus that he must be "born again," that's a new Genesis (John 3). Jesus' good news is that life can be abundant *now* (John 10:10).

Yes, there will be new life for us after this life; we don't have to be afraid of death. But that life begins now as new life in Christ! Let me give you an illustration from Scripture. Martha's brother Lazarus has died in John 11. Jesus says to Martha, Your brother Lazarus will rise again. She says, I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. And then Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:23-25) So yes, Jesus offers us life for the life after this. We don't need to be afraid of the future!

But Jesus also says in the chapter earlier: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10) Somebody has translated that "life of the ages." It's a new way to live that starts now in this life! So Jesus' Gospel fulfills that Genesis theme of new life

and creation. Luther used to say that every day when we remember our baptism, we are born again, born to new life. We're given a new start because of God's love and forgiveness. So what was the Gospel for Jesus? It certainly included new life in him. (John 1:4)

Then you remember that the second of the big themes in Hebrew Scriptures is the Exodus. The Exodus was the journey of the people of God out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. How does it happen in Jesus? In Jesus, we pass through the waters again, the waters of baptism; we eat the new Passover meal, which is communion. Jesus is the one who brings good news to people in bondage, people in slavery to their addictions, people enslaved to sin, like all of us.

And then the good news of Jesus has to do with a new kingdom that the prophets talked about, where enemies are loved, and debts are cancelled, and we share our bread with the hungry, and we welcome the stranger.

So here's the question: How does Jesus' Gospel of the kingdom of God relate to what we see as the Gospel that we find in Romans? Are they different? Are they reconcilable? Jesus talks about a new way to live in this world. Paul talks about a new relationship with God, made available to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul, remember, is writing a letter to the Christians in Rome. And let me suggest this to you: he's trying to explain to Jews and Gentiles how this good news that Jesus talks about works in their lives.

He's writing to a community in Rome that had both Jews and Gentiles in it. Remember that the Jews had always defined themselves in exclusive ways. You ate these foods, you behaved in these ways, you stayed away from these kinds of people. And then Jesus came along and questioned that whole system. He didn't wash his hands ceremonially, he ate with sinners, he said that some prostitutes and tax collectors were closer to the kingdom of God than religious people. So if you were Jewish and became a follower of Jesus, you wondered how much of your religion you needed to keep and what you could let go of. Paul was writing to a community of Jews and Gentiles who were gathered around the Lord Jesus, but they were bringing a lot of baggage with them that needed to be worked out.

For instance, what if a gentile follower of Jesus invited a Jewish follower over for dinner, and they offered their biggest, juiciest pig as the main course? Did the gentile followers need to obey all the religious holidays that the Jews did? How could they begin to see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ? So Paul writes Romans to help them see what the Gospel of Jesus would look like in their setting. What does being a new creation in Christ look like? What does freedom and liberation look like? What do peacemaking values look like in the community?

Let's do a quick tour of Romans this morning. Remember that he is writing this letter through Tertius, a scribe, so we can picture Paul sitting on a sunny Mediterranean rooftop, thinking through what he is dictating to his friend Tertius. The first move that he

makes is to reduce Jew and Gentile to the same level of need. Remember he's trying to help them form community, so it won't help for one group to feel like they're superior to the other. So he begins by describing the whole Greco-Roman culture in graphic detail: there's idol worship, there are sexual orgies, there is gossip and slander and rebellion against parents and lack of compassion.

This has the well-known section on same sex behavior that Paul condemns, and the question of interpretation is- Did Paul know about sexual orientation, or did he assume everybody was heterosexual in orientation, and so same sex behavior would be against their nature? We've had scholars argue on both sides of that issue. And I am someone who believes that the same sex behavior mentioned here is different from a loving, mutual, committed same gender relationship we see today. But Paul understands it as an example of idolatry that he can bring forward from his day, only one example of many sins.

But in the larger scheme of things, Paul is setting up a trap for the one who hears this list of sins and says, I'm not that kind of person! I don't do those things! Paul continues in Romans 2: 1- "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." Now he is talking to the Jewish believers who stand in judgment on those evil Gentiles, and he says, You do the same things. We all stand under judgment.

This is how Paul begins to explain the Gospel of Jesus to these believers; he helps them realize they all need a Savior. The second move he makes (Romans 3:21-4:25) as he explains the Gospel is that there is a new way forward for Jew and Gentile, and that is the way of *faith*. That's the passage we heard earlier from Romans 3 (21-28): "All who have sinned are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement through his blood, effective through faith." This isn't a new religion, it's not trying harder at the old religion, it is faith- dependence on God- that is available to everyone. So Paul puts everyone in two categories: we're all guilty sinners, and we all are made right by grace through faith. He uses Abraham as an illustration, when he says that before the law, and before he was circumcised, Abraham simply trusted God and responded to God's call.

And then Paul uses illustrations from the sin of Adam- "If, because of the one man's (Adam) trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion *in life* through the one man, Jesus Christ." (5:17) Remember how Jesus said that in him was life abundant? And how Jesus fulfills the Genesis theme of creation? Here it is again Paul! Paul says, the death that comes to us from Adam is overruled by the *life* we receive in Christ.

In chapters 9-11, Paul asks the question, Why have his fellow Jews mostly rejected the Gospel? Maybe they didn't hear it? No...Maybe they didn't understand it? No...Maybe God hardened their hearts to achieve a greater good? And that's what Paul concludes

happened. When many of the Jewish people did not accept the Gospel, the early Christians shared Christ with the Gentiles. Because most of the Jewish people rejected Jesus, the Gentiles were included. But even here Paul says that the covenant with the Jewish people remains, because “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (Rom. 11:29) The Gospel according to Paul gives hope to both Jew and Gentile.

How else does Paul explain the Gospel of Jesus? In chapters 12 and 13, Paul says that the Gospel of the kingdom of God has to do with their common life and mission. We have gifts that the Spirit has given us for the common good (12:3-8). Imagine hearing that in the church in Rome: there are Jewish Christians here with gifts that I as a Gentile need, and vice versa. And so much of what Paul says here sounds like Jesus and the kingdom of God: be patient in suffering, extend hospitality to strangers, associate with the lowly, don't repay evil for evil, if your enemies are hungry, feed them, overcome evil with good. (Romans 12, selected verses from 9-21)

And in the last part of the letter, Paul speaks to followers of Jesus who might see things differently, in terms of whether or not to eat food offered to idols, or what days to observe as religious days. The church always has people who take a freer interpretation of things, and a narrower interpretation of things. And Paul says, Don't judge one another for that (Rom. 14:13) It's exactly what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount- Do not judge, so that you may not be judged (Matthew 7:1-5). But Paul also says, you can be convinced in your own mind that eating a certain food is OK, or taking part in a certain activity is alright, but don't let it be a stumbling block for somebody else in Christ's family. The Gospel of Christ helps us to look out for sisters and brothers.

Paul is preaching the same Gospel of the kingdom of God in this letter: Jesus' good news of the kingdom of God is available for everybody. And it provides life now for us and for all people, and life for the world to come. Look again at that passage from the end of Acts that was read earlier today: “From morning until evening (Paul) explained the matter to them, testifying to the *kingdom of God* and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets...He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the *kingdom of God* and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28: 23, 30-31)

Notice that Paul was preaching *the kingdom of God*. That's the same Gospel Jesus preached. The kingdom of God is here; it's a different kingdom than the powers of this world; it's good news that frees us from the power of sin now, that frees our neighbor from bondage, and that gives us life forever. Is Jesus' Gospel different from Paul's? No. But it might be helpful to call it *the Gospel of the kingdom of God*. Amen.

Ten Questions Series  
What Do We Do About the Church? May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010

Some of us were at a workshop several weeks ago that featured a presenter from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. The forum researches the state of religion in America, and around the world. And he said his job isn't to particularly endorse any religion, or to make suggestions, but to offer data that shows what the religious landscape looks like.

The figure that jumped out at me when talking about people's religious affiliations was a change that is occurring in the category called "unaffiliated." It's a big category that includes people who once were connected to a church, and drifted away. It includes people who never belonged to a church. It includes atheists and agnostics. The national rate for Americans who are unaffiliated is 16%.

The people I meet most often in life in this unaffiliated category are "believers but not believers." They believe in God, they pray at times, they just don't feel like they need to be a part of a religious institution. They don't feel like the church connects with their life, or they got hurt in a church somewhere, so they've never been back, or they say the church is full of hypocrites.

Do you know what the percent of unaffiliated people is in Oregon, people who aren't connected to any church? It's 30%, almost one out of three Oregonians. These are people in your families, your neighbors, people you work with. And when you share with them what's going on at your church, they say, Oh, I believe in God. I just don't feel like I need to belong to a church. I can worship out in nature, or out on the golf course.

So outside the church we have lots of folks who look at us and say, You haven't given me a good enough reason to be a part of your club. And then within the church, we have folks who have become frustrated with one form of church, and have switched to another. So you have people raised with liturgy who have joined Pentecostal churches; you have Pentecostals who get tired of emotionalism and become Presbyterians, and Presbyterians who get tired of rationalism and become Orthodox, and people who leave political churches because they want a more personal form of the faith, and people who leave personal faith churches because they want a church that'll take a stand in the world. Over half of Americans have switched religious traditions at some time in their life. Who here this morning is in a different denomination than the one you were raised in?

One of the models that we inherited out of the Roman Empire is the Constantinian model, that a church consists of a building that has a professional leader called a pastor, and the church members hire the pastor and pay him or her money to take care of their religious needs.

And there is some truth to that. I have been called to shepherd this flock. I've been trained to be a pastor. One of my jobs is to help you grow in Christ. But the New Testament model isn't centered around the pastor and the building, it's centered around

the people of God doing ministry in the world. The church began on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit landed on a group of followers of Jesus and empowered them to share the good news of Jesus with the world in word and deed.

And for the first three centuries, the people of God, the church, met in homes and other places because they were a minority in a larger world of the Roman Empire. But when the emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity in 312, Christianity became the official religion of the empire. Everybody in the village got baptized. Church buildings began to go up in the village square. The church began to get a lot more structured and hierarchical. And then the Reformation came along, and we disagreed not only on theology, but on church structure. Luther said we didn't need the pope. Some churches said you didn't need structure at all, just individual churches on the corner that didn't have to answer to anyone. And when you have a disagreement with the pastor, you split off and form a new church. I grew up in a church tradition like that.

But in an era when many people say they don't want to be a part of the church, they don't want to be a part of an institution; we need to ask the question, What is the church about? What do we exist for? And Brian McLaren gives a very simple answer in his book that is also embarrassingly hard to do. He says, What if the church exists to form Christ-like people, people who love and live and serve like Jesus?

What if the church exists to save people from wasting their lives? I was at a workshop where the presenter asked the question, Why aren't we more concerned about people who are dying without Christ? And I thought to myself, Why are we also not more concerned about people who are *living* without Christ? People who are less than they could be? People who are gaining the world but losing their souls?

So when we ask the question, What about the church? the question has to do with what our core mission is. Are we forming a community of Christ-like people who embody and communicate in word and deed the kingdom of God that we know in Jesus? And we don't form that community just for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons once said that a human being fully alive gives God glory. How do we as the church help those in our community become fully alive, become who God made them to be? There are desperate people around us who aren't looking to the church for answers. Many of them look at the churches of Jesus Christ and see all the problems. They see the divisions, the straddling of fences, the sexual controversies, problems with pride, excesses in some forms of spirituality and deficits in others.

And maybe instead of feeling guilty about that, we need to say to ourselves that makes us authentic New Testament churches, because the first Christian churches had all of those problems.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is a great example of a New Testament church with problems. And you can hear somebody from Corinth saying, I wouldn't belong to that church. Look at the troubles they have! The members had divided themselves into

personality cults. Some said I'm following Paul, some said, I'm following Apollos, some said Peter, some simply said, I belong to Christ. Many of them were not maturing into Christ-like people, because they had competing factions based on who had the most knowledge of godly things. They were tolerating gross immorality; they were suing each other in court. They had disorderly worship; they disagreed with each other over which spiritual gifts were more important.

But the biggest issue seemed to be over whether or not it was appropriate to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, but now was being sold in the public market. Some of them claimed to be wiser by saying, We know that these other gods don't exist, so it doesn't really matter that this meat was sacrificed to an idol. And others thought it was blasphemous. And both groups within this church looked down on the other.

So Paul says, You are all caught up in how much knowledge and wisdom you have, and yet you are tearing each other apart. Paul says, actually, knowledge and wisdom are gifts of the Holy Spirit, and they are not given for your personal advantage, but for the common good.

And then Paul uses the image of the human body, that all the parts need to be working together for the common good of the whole body. We in the body of Christ belong to each other and we need each other, especially in our diversity! And this community of the church actually becomes the body of Christ in the world.

So how does Paul say that this Corinthian church can move beyond their divisions and competitiveness to be the body of Christ in the world? Paul says it's the way of love. That's why I had us hear chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians this morning. Paul says it doesn't matter if you speak in heavenly tongues, or if you can understand all kinds of mysteries, or if you have great faith, or if you give away everything you have: if you don't have love, it isn't worth anything.

If the people around us don't see love in us, it's all for nothing. And to the Corinthian church that felt so strongly about having the right knowledge, Paul says, love is the truest form of knowledge. Paul says love for each other can hold you together. Love can help you disagree and remain in community. Paul concludes the letter with this blessing: "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love." (1 Cor. 16:13-14)

Let all that you do be done in love...So what is the purpose of the church? If the purpose of the church is to form Christ-like people, people who love and live and serve like Jesus, then the church can be a school of love! It's a community where we practice love! We don't just learn about it, we do it, we practice it, we live it, we model it, we put it on, we act it out.

We have started a Mutual Ministry Team again here at Prince of Life. The Mutual Ministry Team exists to help with communication and conflict resolution in the life of the church. But it starts with people going to each other. And because we are a typical

church, we have disagreements with each other; we have expectations that don't get met. We have conflict! That's normal! But if we are a school of love, where we are modeling for each other Christ-like behavior, then we go to each other in love and say, Let me share how I'm feeling! Were you aware that when you said that, I took offense? I felt trespassed against? Please give me your side of the story. I want to work this out. I want to speak the truth in love, and work through this. (Eph.4:15)

We have three eighth graders this morning who are saying, I believe! I believe what God did for me in my baptism. I believe that in the waters of baptism, God forgave me and made me a child of God. And these eighth graders can tell you stories from the Bible and can tell you that it's God's grace and not our works that bring us into a relationship with God.

But just as important as knowing the stories and the theology is that they are being formed spiritually in this community! They are discovering that living in community means forgiving each other, and working through problems, and putting up with people who bug us, because we're in the same community, and we need each other! What's the church all about? It's a space to help us all grow in Christ-like love! And we are taking that love out to transform the world, and help people become the human beings God created them to be!

Maybe you saw the story of the 90-year-old man who took a trip to Eastern Oregon this week in his 2002 Acura. Milton Pearlman was driving along the John Day River on US 26 when for some reason he hit the shoulder along a narrow stretch and his car ended up in the river. Oregon State Police Trooper Marv Ritter heard the call come in from dispatch. When he got there, he saw the car with the man in it, ran upriver several hundred feet, tied a rope around his waist, put on a life jacket, and jumped in the river. By the time he got to the car, he found Mr. Pearlman conscious and lucid, even though he'd been in the frigid cold waist-deep water for half an hour. By then a fire truck had arrived, and a crowd of people had gathered on the shore. The trooper got rid of the rope that he'd tied around him, and grabbed a rope that had been anchored to the truck and thrown out to the car. He wrapped it around Mr. Pearlman, gave him a life jacket, and then they began working their way to shore. At one point they went under water. But those on shore were encouraging them all the way. Let me quote from the newspaper: "Ritter (the Oregon state trooper) took heart when he looked to shore and saw several groups of people in the water, waiting to help. 'It was wonderful,' he said, 'As long as I live, I will see those people lined up, ready to help.'"

I don't think that's a bad picture of the church. There are people all around us who need to be rescued, falling short of who they could be, made in God's image. And we are lined up, offering words and deeds of encouragement, ready to help people become all that God wants them to be. We've got good news about forgiveness and hope and a new way to live. I'd like to think we are the encouraging people on the shore, pulling people out into a new way of life.

By the way, we keep falling back into the water too. We need God's grace in and through the community to keep pulling us out as well. What's the purpose of the church? To form people of Christ-like love to love and serve the world. Amen.

Ten Questions Series  
(based on Brian McLaren's book, "A New Kind of Christianity"  
"Can We Find a Way to Address Human Sexuality?"  
May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010

There used to be a bumper sticker that proclaimed, "The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it."

If you displayed that bumper sticker, you meant that the Bible is clear about things. We just need to believe what the Bible says and live what the Bible says. So let me start off this morning by declaring one thing that the Bible is clear about, and that is that the sun moves around the earth. The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it. After all, the psalmist says, "The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; *it shall never be moved.*" (Ps. 93:1) and, "You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken." (Ps 104:5) In other words, the earth is on a solid foundation; it doesn't move; everything moves around it. In 2 Kings 20, the prophet Isaiah asks God for a sign to show the king, and the sun retreats on the sun dial. Obviously the sun is moving around the earth.

In the book of Joshua, when General Joshua needs more time to defeat the Amorites, the sun "stopped in mid-heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day." (Josh. 10:13) The sun revolves around the earth. The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.

Now some of you think I'm being silly, because you say, You know we don't take that literally. Those are figures of speeches. And being 21<sup>st</sup> century people, and knowing from our astronomy classes that the sun does not rotate around the earth, it's hard to imagine believing any other way. But when Copernicus and later Galileo dared to say that the planets revolved around the sun, they were censured for that. The church placed Galileo under house arrest for the rest of his life, because he was going against Holy Scripture.

Luther, by the way, labeled Copernicus an "upstart astrologer." Because of his radical beliefs, Melancthon, Luther's friend, claimed that Copernicus was deluded by a "love of novelty." Calvin, the great reformer in Geneva, asked, "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of Holy Scripture?" In 1616, the Roman Catholic Church banned Copernicus' ideas as "false and altogether opposed to Holy Scripture." After all, the Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.

Now you may think that's a silly example when it comes to the history of Bible interpretation. But it shows how we as a church have struggled to understand Scripture in light of new discoveries in our world. We had to re-interpret Scripture when it came to slavery; remember that nowhere does the Bible condemn slavery, in fact, churches used to vehemently defend slavery from the Bible.

Many of us, when we discovered how old the earth is and discovered fossil records, had to reassess how long it took for God to create this world and everything in it, and we reinterpreted Genesis 1 and 2. Many of us in the Christian church have changed our

understanding of women in ministry. And many of us are re-looking at what the Bible says about same-gender committed relationships. That became clear last August when our ELCA Church-wide Assembly voted to allow individual congregations to either call or refuse to call pastors and other rostered leaders in committed, life-long same-sex relationships. And that's the question that come up today in this ten-week series, based on Brian McLaren's book, "Ten Questions That are Transforming the Church:" Can we find a way to address human sexuality?

And one of the questions that has come up over the last hundred years or so of studying the human personality is the question of sexual orientation. And a relatively recent discovery is that some people are oriented towards same sex attraction. One of the questions to ask is, did those who wrote the Bible assume that everyone had a heterosexual orientation, so to act out sexually with someone of the same sex would be going against their heterosexual nature? But what if that is their nature? The Bible assumes that everyone is attracted to someone of the opposite sex. But in the mysteries of human biology and psychology, some people don't fit that category. And some of them are Christians, who have prayed for a change in their nature, and it hasn't happened.

And there are some who say, Well, it doesn't matter if someone has a homosexual orientation. If it can't be changed, then they simply need to remain celibate. After all, the Bible's examples of same-sex behavior are all condemnatory. (e.g. Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Gen. 19, Romans 1:26ff. 1 Corinth. 6:9-10).

The question many of us are asking is, Are the committed, loving, monogamous same gender relationships that we know today examples of what the Bible is talking about? Do we say, The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it? Or do we say that we have a different understanding of sexuality now than the biblical authors and two thousand and 2500 years ago?

We have the conversion story of a sexual minority in the book of the Acts this morning. But let me start with Acts chapter 1, where Jesus says to the disciples that they are to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon them. And when the Spirit comes, they will receive power to be Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

The entire book of the Acts is about boundary crossing. We forget how radical this was, but Jesus was saying, I want my Gospel, the good news of liberation and reconciliation and peace-making, to go out to all people, beginning with the Jews, but then going out to those awful Gentile people. And in Acts chapter 8, the Gospel goes out to a most unlikely person.

Philip, one of the leaders of the early church, has received an angelic vision where he was told to walk the Wilderness Road that leads to Gaza. Along the road came a chariot with a visitor from Ethiopia. The traveller worked for the Ethiopian government; he was in charge of the queen's treasury, and was just coming back from a visit to Jerusalem. Luke

says he was a eunuch, which is an odd designation to us today, but in ancient times it was less odd.

In the ancient world, certain males were chosen for castration, so they wouldn't marry and have a family. That way their loyalty would be only for the job that had been chosen for them. So eunuchs were put in charge of the king's harem, or they were the king's taster (an important "homeland security" job) or in this case the queen's treasury.

This Ethiopian eunuch had just visited Jerusalem- maybe as a way to show solidarity between the two nations, maybe because he was hungry for God, maybe both. So the Spirit says to Philip, run alongside this chariot. And as he runs alongside, he hears the Ethiopian reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." (Acts 8:32-33)

Philip asks him if he understands what he's reading, and the eunuch says, Come on up into the chariot and explain it to me. And then he asks this question: "Is the prophet speaking of his own experience or someone else's?" You've had the experience of reading Scripture or hearing Scripture and thinking, God's talking to me! Given this man's unique identity, why would this particular passage grab his attention? Would something about a sheep being sheared have special meaning for him? Would hearing about someone's humiliation shine for him in a special way? Would hearing the word "generation" be particularly poignant for a man who could not produce the next generation?

So Philip tells the eunuch about the good news of Jesus. Remember that the good news of Jesus has to do with God bringing about new creation in Jesus, it has to do with liberation, with reconciliation. Remember that the good news is centered around a man who was publicly humiliated, misunderstood, a man without physical descendants, a man who had been cut and scarred. Obviously the Ethiopian feels that this good news connects with him in a powerful way because he says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (8:37)

Remember that this man had been returning from Jerusalem, where he had been hoping to worship. But remember he is a person of color, so obviously not a Jew. He could have stood in the court of the Gentiles, and worshiped from a distance. But that would have been denied him too, because for the Jews castration was a "defect." (Lev. 21:18-20) It would have denied him from the priesthood. And it would have denied him access to the temple, because Scripture says, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." (Lev.23:1)

So he had come to Jerusalem to worship, but had been turned away because his racial and sexual identity put him outside the worshipping community. And I wonder if he hears this story of Jesus and wonders, Is there a place for me the way I am? You tell me about a man who was rejected and humiliated in Jerusalem, who was scarred, who would not

have physical descendants. Is there a place for me in his kingdom, even though I have an unchangeable condition that was condemned forever by the sacred Jewish Scriptures?

So Philip simply acts. He does something radical. They stop the chariot; he leads the eunuch down into the water, and there he baptizes him. The ministry of Jesus to the outsider and the outcast is continued in the Book of Acts. The Samaritans are accepted, Gentiles are accepted, and now the sexually other is accepted into the kingdom of God, someone who could never have had a place before. Philip and the Ethiopian walk out of the water, reconciled in the kingdom of God.

Do you remember talking about that aspect of the Gospel Brian McLaren called the peaceable kingdom? Jesus modeled for us what the reign of God looks like, and it is the stranger being welcomed, and swords being beaten into farming tools, and creatures who normally would be at odds with each other finding community together, the wolf lying down with the lamb, that kind of thing. And do you remember I said that we have interpreted those descriptions as pictures of heaven? Those things won't really happen on earth, we say. And yet the prophets were talking about a time when God would make those things reality.

This Ethiopian eunuch- a nontraditional person, a person of color, a non-heterosexual person, is one of the first people baptized into the Christian faith. And tradition says that he went back to Ethiopia and founded the Christian church there. He was an early missional leader.

And with this story we are reminded of an image of the peacemaking kingdom from Isaiah, "Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people,' and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord, To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isaiah 56:1-7) And just in case they miss the point that God is moving the boundaries, Isaiah says this in v.8: Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel; I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." (Is. 56:8)

Isaiah was painting a picture a picture of the reign of God being opened up to people who had previously been excluded: foreigners, and people of suspect sexuality who were hungry for God.

I close with a story that Brian McLaren shares in his book, "A New Kind of Christianity." McLaren was pastoring a church that was meeting in a school cafeteria near the University of Maryland, where McLaren was teaching a class. He had invited a Kenyan student to come to worship, and this was his first Sunday there. Francis had suffered from polio as a child, and he walked with braces. His upper body was powerful above his shriveled lower body.

After the service, when all the folding chairs had been stacked away, Francis sat alone in the middle of the room, weeping. And when McLaren touched his shoulder and said, Are you OK? Francis answered, Oh, dear brother, these are tears of joy. McLaren said, I don't understand. What happened? Francis said, This was my first time celebrating the Holy Supper. McLaren said, But Francis, I thought you said you had been a Christian since childhood? Yes, but until today, I had never shared in the holy Supper. You see, I am the child of the third wife.

He went on to explain that the Anglican church in Kenya had made a policy that when a family was baptized and the husband had more than one wife, only the children of the first wife could receive communion. He was the child of the third wife. He said to McLaren, When I came here today, Brian, and when you said that all were welcome to the table, I realized that here I am not a child of the third wife. Here I am simply Francis, a Christian, and I am welcome at the table.

I am convinced that Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners, impure Samaritans, uncircumcised Gentiles, de-sexed eunuchs, children of the third wife. Jesus welcomes gay and lesbian and straight people, and asks them to live out their God-given sexuality faithfully. And yes, Jesus welcomes tea party activists and liberals, the abled and the differently abled. I believe that God gathers us all together around the table and invites us to be transformed in order to love and serve this world in Jesus' name. Amen.

“Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith” Series  
What About The Future?  
June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010

We’re looking at Question 8 in our series, Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith, based on Brian McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christianity*. Eschatology is the biblical study of the last days, or last things. Some of us grew up with a view of eschatology that was dispensationalist. Dispensationalism was developed in the 1830s by an Anglo-Irish pastor named John Nelson Darby. His view of the end times came to be popularized in a Bible called the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. It is a way of interpreting Scripture, and especially the writings we know as apocalyptic texts like Daniel and Revelation.

The “Left Behind” books and movies have popularized this view. According to the way they interpret the words of Jesus at the end of the Gospels, and the way they interpret Revelation, the world will get worse and worse. A one-world government will take power, headed up by someone called the antichrist, Christians will be persecuted, and an event called the rapture will happen that will draw Christians out of the world to heaven. There will be a final battle, and then Christ will come again for the last judgment. Finally God will make a new heaven and a new earth.

Now some of that timetable will change according to who is doing the interpretation, but that is the general outline of the future. And according to this version of the future, things look very predetermined, don’t they? We are going along a path in this fallen world, and things are getting worse and worse, and there’s nothing we can do about it, because that’s God’s plan. And the way I grew up, our job as Christians was simply to save souls from destruction before Jesus comes again. The Gospel didn’t have anything to do with endangered species or a warming planet or peacemaking or global poverty because the world was supposed to be getting worse and worse, and then the end would come.

The ultimate battle, according to this dispensationalist view, is going to come down to the forces of Light versus the forces of Darkness, and when I was growing up, the Soviet Union was usually seen as the being part of the dark alliance. Now those who read Scripture this way see the Muslim world as the great enemy that will need to be defeated in the last battle.

I said earlier that this is a deterministic kind of eschatology: everything has already been set out in advance according to God’s timeline, and our job is to simply read the signs. By the way, scientists have a deterministic view of the future too. There are two theories from scientists about how the universe will end: It will either be a collapse of gravity, which we could call a big crunch, or our sun will go dark, and we could call it the big freeze. We’ve either got determinism from a secular scientific point of view, or determinism from the dispensationalist point of view. Either way, there’s nothing we can do but watch things unfold.

But I want you to know that's not the only way to interpret Scripture. Brian McLaren paints another view from Scripture of what the future might look like. Instead of a determined flat-line where everything gets worse and worse until God intervenes, McLaren pictures the Gospel in its fullness being released in the universe. Remember when we talked about the Gospel, we looked at Jesus as carrying on three main themes from the Hebrew Bible: Creation, Liberation, and Peacemaking.

We looked at Jesus' inaugural sermon from Capernaum (Luke 4:16f) when he quotes from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus calls that good news, or Gospel! The Gospel is not just about believing certain things about Jesus so that we have a ticket to go to heaven. The Gospel in all its dimensions creates a new world. It creates the kingdom of God in the very world around us!

So instead of a flat-line deterministic theology where the world gets worse and worse and finally ends with God creating something new, Scripture can be interpreted differently. There are pictures of an open future, where we are co-partners with God in bringing about a new creation, and liberation, and a vision of peacemaking. And instead of a flat-line leading to doom, we might want to think of this model as a tree that is reaching up into the light and the air, a tree that is growing and expanding with possibilities...

God is calling everything from chaos and darkness into order and fullness and life. The direction is up and out and into fuller participation into God's vision for this world.

One of the questions then is how does God relate to this universe. Many people believe God is like the machine operator pulling levers and controlling the world. Whatever happens is what God wanted to happen. God is like a chess master moving bishops and pawns. Some people have a more Deist interpretation of God's involvement in the universe. God got everything started, but then backed off. So now everything is up to us. Or there are those who say that everything in the universe is just random and purposeless.

McLaren suggests, and I agree with him, that God is *in relationship* to this universe. God is like a rider on a horse with a will of its own, or like a parent guiding a child with a will of her own. God does not so much control us as much as God is *in relationship* with us. And when we pull out of that relationship, like a rebellious child sitting in the corner, we harm ourselves and creation. And it's Jesus who shows us what a right relationship with God looks like, and what that looks like for our relationships with people.

So when we ask the question, What about the future? or What does the future hold? The answer might be "that depends." God at every moment is holding out a brighter future, and the question is, are we willing to receive it and work together with God? We are participating in what the future will be.

So in many of your minds right now you are asking the question, Well, what about the second coming? We declare in the Apostles' Creed, "He (that is Jesus) will come to judge the living and the dead." Isn't there a linear progression to history where God will at some point bring all of this to a close? What about the Bible passages that talk about a final judgment? That's different than a tree of life that just keeps expanding.

We'll get to that in a minute, but first of all let me say that many scholars don't believe that the early New Testament writers believed that the world was going to end. They believed that the world *as they knew it* was going to end and a new spiritual-historical age was going to begin. When we read the Bible passages about the end times, we often interpret it to mean that everything as we know it will end. But the early Christians didn't believe God was going to end everything as they knew it, but that a new era was going to begin. We know of at least three stages that future came in.

The first future focused on the resurrection of Jesus, from Maundy Thursday to Easter morning. And that hope was fulfilled in the resurrection, when the disciples met the risen Christ. The second future that was fulfilled was Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit; there was the period of hopefulness between the resurrection and the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon 120 followers of Jesus and the church was born.

The third hope that Christians had in the future may have been described in our Gospel today from Matthew 24. Matthew's Jesus seems to be talking about a disaster that will come in their lifetimes, as well as events that could happen at the end of human history. The third hope for the future focused on the survival of God's people through a catastrophe that was coming, and that was the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70AD. Jesus says in our Gospel today, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." In that part of the passage, he may be talking about the fall of the temple; the generation he was talking to would see the destruction of the temple.

So the early Christians had three reasons for hope in the future; hope for the resurrection; hope for Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit; and hope for survival through persecution and the fall of the Jerusalem temple. But here's the question: Was everything they expected fulfilled in the destruction of the temple, or were they expecting something more? And here is where we might say, They were expecting the second coming of Christ.

The term "second coming" doesn't appear in Scripture, by the way. The word we translate second coming is *parousia*. It means the arrival of a friend or associate. So in the gospel today, the disciples ask Jesus, Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming (*parousia*) at the end of the age?

Now here's where Brian McLaren really thinks outside the theological box, and I have to admit, this stretches me. He wonders if the *parousia*, or the second coming, might mean not the arrival of the end as we have always thought it, but it might mean the arrival a

new age in human history, where Christ is present through the Spirit, and we continue his work.

The destruction of the temple, the end of sacrificial system in 70AD was the end of an era, and the parousia, the second coming, was Christ in the Christian community. So if that is true, the point is not to try to get history over with so that God can destroy this world and create everything over again. We are more like a musician, not frantically trying to get through a beautiful song, but we are playing it like every note of the song is precious. Jesus said the kingdom of God has come near. It doesn't mean that it's full grown, but that it grows like yeast in bread or seeds in a field. So McLaren wonders, was that parousia event that early Christians talked about, was that Christ coming to the church through the work of the Holy Spirit?

But then, if the parousia is now, what about a final judgment? Do things just keep going? Do we just keep expanding the kingdom? Judgment is a theme all across Scripture, but the question is, What does God's judgment accomplish? Is it just to reward and punish people? I believe God's judgment is higher than that: God wants to reconcile and restore, and not merely punish. As Jesus says in John 3, he came into the world not to condemn it, but to save it.

And so one thought would be that when the final judgment comes, God will examine our lives for signs of Christlikeness: did we give a cup of cold water or a hot plate of food to someone in need; did we provide beds for a homeless family; did we visit a prisoner. And those parts of a person's life will be saved, will be remembered, will be raised up for a new beginning. And all the unloving, un-Christlike parts of our lives- and of all nations, families, churches- will be burned away, condemned and forgotten forever.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had this kind of hope within him that all people would be saved and freed in the battle for civil rights. In his Christmas Sermon on Peace, this is what he said: "To our most bitter opponents we say: 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, we shall continue to love you. ...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. 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.'"

And maybe that will be how God judges the world: what is Christlike in all of us remains, and what is un-Christlike in all of us will be burned away. And there will not be cruel, eternal torture, but gentle conversion. What about the future? I believe that God is allowing us to form it; God is allowing us to be partners in carrying on the work of Jesus. When God does the work of judgment, remember it will be Jesus who does the judging. And in the end, as Paul says in our first lesson today, God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). Amen.

“Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith” Series  
(based on Brian McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christianity*)  
Question 9: “How do Followers of Jesus Relate to People of Other  
Religions?”

June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010

When I began attending a Lutheran church in 1976, I didn’t know anything about Lutherans, but I saw the “ALC” that was on the church sign, and was informed that it meant, American Lutheran Church, and that there was a church from the Lutheran Church in America up the road. It was explained to me that different ethnic groups had formed the various church denominations.

In 1988, three of those denominations came together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. At that time, I heard a bishop’s assistant share a good reason to come together. He said that the LCA did a great job of fulfilling Jesus’ words in Luke 4, when Jesus says that he came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. (Luke 4:18) The LCA had a history of doing great social ministries in Jesus’ name.

And the ALC had a great history of fulfilling Jesus’ words at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matt.28:19-20) So the ELCA became a helpful merger of both aspects of the Gospel: reaching out to meet the spiritual and the physical needs of people in Jesus’ name.

We have both of these mandates as a part of the Gospel: Jesus clearly reached out to people who were suffering physically, and he shared spiritual good news, the good news of forgiveness of sins and a right relationship with God. We have a biblical mandate to do both.

But as Brian McLaren points out in his chapter on our relationship with other religions, Christianity has a mixed record when it comes to encountering people of other religions. There have been many people around the world who have joyfully embraced the good news of Jesus, but Christianity also has a record of forced conversions at sword point; we have the history of the Spanish Inquisition, when believers accused of heresy were tortured; we have the history of the 30 years War between Protestants and Catholics. We have the history of bringing European culture to other peoples along with the Gospel, with the implication that anything about their culture was inferior and they needed to give up their culture in order to accept the Gospel.

So in a religiously pluralistic country, where more and more people of other religions are our neighbors, how should followers of Jesus relate to people of other religions? We could begin by looking at some Scripture that might broaden the scope of “who gets in”. John says in John 1:9- “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Will *everyone* eventually be enlightened? In John 3:17, Jesus says, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Does God want to eventually save everybody? Jesus says in John 12:32: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth (and he means on the cross) will draw all people to myself.” Does he mean there will be salvation for everybody, as that implies?

At the end of John’s Gospel, Jesus makes a prediction about what will happen to Peter at the end of his life. Peter looks at John and says, What about him? And Jesus says, What is that to you? You follow me!” (John 21:22) Is that meant for us too? We could look around and say, Lord, what about those people in other religions? And maybe Jesus is saying to us, What is that to you? Your job is to follow me. And God will be the judge of everybody.

In the passage we heard from Romans chapter 2 several moments ago, Paul makes it clear that people are never judged based on knowledge they don't have, but based on what is written in their hearts. Paul says in Romans 2:7, "To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. There will be "glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good." (2:10) Does Paul really mean that God will give eternal life to everyone who does good?

The writer of 1 John says this- "Everyone who does what is right has been born of God." (1 John 2:29). Notice the order- John doesn't say, If you've been born of God you'll do what is right, but if you are doing what is right, you are born of God. There are people who don't claim Christ, but are doing God's will. And at the end of time, Jesus will be the judge.

When Paul is in Athens, speaking to the Greeks about the gospel of Jesus, he says this, "The God who made the world and everything in it.....made all nations to inhabit the whole earth; he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "in him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." (Acts 17:24-28)

Notice that Paul doesn't have an "us" v. "them" mentality here. He says God is at work in *every* language, culture, and religion. And in Genesis 12, when God calls Abraham, God doesn't call Abraham to the exclusion of others, God calls Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be a blessing to others.

When we consider how to relate to people of other religions, we might want to consider what Jesus said in the Sermon on the

Mount, the little verse we call the Golden Rule- “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 7:12)

So how would we want people of other religions to treat us? Well, we'd like them to treat us with respect, to show interest in our faith and learn about it, not to constantly attack it, to find areas they agree with, and to respectfully disagree where they need to. We wouldn't want them to pressure us to convert. Jesus says, Do to others as you want them to do to you. So why wouldn't we treat people of other religions the same way: we can listen to their story, agree where we can and disagree where we need to, we wouldn't attack their faith, but show an interest in it and learn about it.

But, you say, what about that Gospel we read earlier this morning? Didn't Jesus say that he was the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to the Father? It's interesting that we pull this verse out of our ammo belt, and ignore all the other passages that might suggest that God wants to save all people, that God has a bigger plan in mind.

Brian McLaren suggests that the way we interpret the text sounds like this: “You should be very troubled, because if you believe in God but not in me, you will be shut out of my Father's house in heaven, where there are a few small rooms for the few who have correct belief....Then Thomas said to him, “Lord, but what about people of other religions or no religion at all? Will they go to heaven after they die? Jesus said to him, I am the only way to heaven, and confessing the truth about me is the only truth that will get you to life after death. No one will go to heaven unless they a) personally understand and believe a clearly defined message about me b) personally and consciously ask me to come into their heart c) disavow any other religious affiliation and d) affiliate with the new religion I'm starting and naming after myself. None can come to God unless they get by me first.” (*not* John 14:1-6)

That is generally the way we have interpreted this passage. But I always say to you that we need to look at the context of a passage. When Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, he is not answering the question , What about people of other religions? or Is Jesus the only way to heaven? Actually, the question is a very practical, down-to-earth question- “Jesus, where are you going?”

This passage is in the middle of a long conversation with his followers. This happens just before the crucifixion. He is telling them he is going somewhere they cannot go, and that is troubling, because they are his followers, and they want to follow (John 13:33) He says, You cannot follow me, but here’s what I want you to do. He gives them a new commandment, that they love one another just as he loved them (John 13:34). He is distilling all of Moses’ commandments into one: Love each other as I have loved you. Remember that he had just washed the feet of his followers. He did the menial task of the servant. Love each other like that, he says.

Peter interrupts him and asks, Lord, where are you going? Jesus says, You can’t follow me now, but you will follow afterward. Peter says, I will lay down my life for you. And Jesus answers, Will you lay down your life for me? Before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

That’s the context of this passage. The disciples need reassurance. So this is why he says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1-3)

In my Father’s house, Jesus says. We have interpreted “my Father’s house” to mean heaven. In fact, we use this at funerals as

a comforting text. And yes, god does have a place prepared for us in heaven! But before we make the assumption that that's what my Father's house means, we need to realize that earlier in John's Gospel, when Jesus uses the phrase "my Father's house," he is talking about the temple. When he overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple, and drove out all the animals for sale, he said, "Take these things out of here! Stop making *my Father's house* a marketplace! In John 2, my Father's house doesn't mean heaven; it means the temple down here on earth. And shortly after that text, he says, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The religious authorities think he means the earthly temple, but John says he was speaking about the temple of his body (John 2:21). The earthly temple will soon be irrelevant; in fact, it will be destroyed 40 years later. Jesus' body will become the new temple.

So when Jesus says in John 14, In my Father's house are many rooms, could he have his own body in mind? God dwells in me, Jesus is saying. I am the Father's house. I am the new temple, where God is located. This temple, my body, is about to be destroyed on the cross, but then it will be raised again. And the new temple will be the body of Christ in this world. Peter says we are all living stones being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5)

So, yes, there will be a place for us in heaven, but that may not be what Jesus is referring to here. He is saying that after the resurrection, there will be a place for his followers in his body, the body of Christ. Jesus will be preparing the way for the people-of-God-as-temple. So here's another interpretation of what this passage could mean: "Don't be worried, my friends, even though I've told you I'm leaving. Trust God, and trust me. By going away I'm going to make it possible for you to be with me again where I am now at this moment: dwelling in the presence of God, living in the kingdom of God, bearing the presence of God to this world. There's plenty of room for you in this venture! So don't worry. You know the way to the place I'm going." (McLaren, p. 220)

I'm going through death, into resurrection, to be present in a new way with you. Thomas still doesn't get it. So he says, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5) Thomas is not asking about Buddhists, or Hindus, or Zoroastrians, or atheists or skeptics. He is saying, How can *we* know the way? *We* are your disciples, and we want to follow you! And Jesus replies with the oft-quoted text, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know the Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (14:6-7)

Jesus is saying to Thomas and the other disciples, This is how you're going to get from my crucifixion through the resurrection to the other side, where you will be with me in a new way. It's not separate from me, Thomas. The way I have lived is the way, the truth and the life.

Then Philip leaps in with, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." (14:8-9) Jesus says, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. And what did people see when they saw Jesus? Compassion, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, concern for the stranger and the outsider, love from beginning to end. So where you see that in someone, you see Jesus. And when you see Jesus, you see the love of God.

When we baptize adults, or when we ask young people or adults to affirm their baptism, as we did the last several Sundays, we ask them to say they believe in certain doctrines. That is a statement of faith. But we also ask them to live out the Gospel: to love and serve our neighbor in need in word and in deed, and to work for justice and peace, following the example of Jesus. We ask them to live out the life of Jesus. And there are people in this world who

are doing that, who don't claim the name of Jesus. But they are living out the kingdom of God.

I don't believe Jesus is saying here, Unless you believe in certain doctrines about me, you will be damned. He is saying, If you've seen me, seen the way I live and love and serve and forgive, then you've seen what God is like. And there are people living Jesus' way who do not call themselves Christians. And Jesus will be the judge of all of us.

How should we relate to people of other religions? Jesus sends us out with Christ-like love to serve all people, and that includes people of other religions and no religion. Jesus calls us to go out and to share the Gospel in word and in deed, to go out with humility and respect, to try to understand and serve all people- and to let God be God. Amen.

*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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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?