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Texts: Isaiah 58: 11-12; Isaiah 61: 4  
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### “Church, After All”

A few weeks ago, I spoke about the ways different understandings of God can persist, even after older or outmoded images of God become unsustainable. Today I'd like to do something similar, this time for our notions of church. I wish to suggest that, even after something like belonging to a church may feel impossible - or undesirable, or, more strongly still, unethical - there often remains something that draws us back together in this collective formation that we call a church. And so hang onto those words from Isaiah - they shall build up the ancient ruins - we'll come back to them.

But first a story. This summer I enjoyed watching the latest season of *The White Lotus*, a show that ruthlessly skewers the entitlements of the ultra-wealthy. This season follows a group of visitors to a resort in Thailand, among whom we find three middle aged women, longtime friends reconnecting after years spent apart. At one point, one of them casually mentions that she goes to church. The conversation grinds to a halt. Her friends look at her in stunned disbelief, as if she had just opened a container of rotten food, or as if she admitted that she enjoyed torturing small animals. “Um...you go to church?” one of them finally asks. The revelation lingers like a bad odor, because of what the other characters, and presumably much of the audience, assume to be true of church these days - that it's a breeding ground for bigotry and intolerance and all sorts of reactionary attitudes, even if it's all dressed up with words that sound harmless enough - family, tradition, love. For many people, those words have come to conceal something that feels less than inviting when you begin to unpack the social program that lies behind them - demonization of immigrants, say, or the LGBTQI+ community, for example. As in the show, so in life, the very word “church” can derail a conversation, and even a relationship, because of what it's thought to imply.

I confess that the response of the characters in *The White Lotus* is often one that I share, even as a minister. Every time I read an interview from one of the far right leaders that the *Times* likes to feature these days, most of whom cloak themselves in some form of Christianity, I cringe. And while I hadn't really known who Charlie Kirk was prior to Wednesday, and while I lament - and mourn - one more violent gun death in the United States, I must also say that I lament that his understanding of the Christian faith is what passes for mainstream for many people in this country. Given all that, I can understand why some - why many - would wish to stay away from a church. Combine all that with the lived history that many people (including many among us) have actually had with churches - legacies that stretch from outright harm at one end of the spectrum, to ambivalence about what feels like outmoded beliefs on the other end - and it can make even the most devoted among us wonder, sometimes, why we persist in this form of religious life, why we locate ourselves within what is called the Christian tradition, and why we continue to involve ourselves in a church.

And yet here we are. What are we to say when we are confronted with versions of Christianity, or church, that we don't really recognize, or don't wish to be associated with? Assuming there is something here that continues to draw us, how are we to articulate a space for something different in this climate?

Perhaps we could start by saying that a religious tradition is composed, at its most basic level, of words and symbols. And words and symbols are complex, containing a multitude of differing, and sometimes conflicting, meanings. Though we use similar words and symbols, we're operating in a wholly different solar system than all those folks being profiled in the *Times*. When confronted with ever more narrow, sectarian, or literal understandings of Christianity, I want to point out that that is but one variant on how these symbols can be used. But it is not Christianity. In fact, properly speaking, Christianity does not exist. There was never just one thing that functioned as Christianity. It was always various and multiple, even (especially!) in the earliest days of the faith. The four Gospels included in our Bibles represent four overlapping, but sometimes very different, communal understandings of who Jesus was. There are several other Gospels that were not included in the Bible, representing other interpretations that existed soon after Jesus's life and death. There is, in other words, no pure and undiluted form of Christian faith against which all the other variants can be measured. Search the Bible - it is not there. Search theology - it is not there. Search through history - it is not there. A single, capital T "True" version of Christianity does not exist. There are only, and there only ever have been, *Christianities*, plural.

We can say the same about the Bible. *The Bible* does not exist. Our Catholic siblings next door have a different Bible than we do, and our Orthodox siblings have a different Bible still. Even if there was consensus on what books belong within each of our Bibles, there are a thousand different translations and paraphrases out there that assign different weight and meanings to certain texts. And then, even if we could eliminate all the imprecision of translation and just read Greek and Hebrew together, there are textual questions and variations from manuscript to manuscript that create a dizzying maze of possibilities in meaning. To say it again, there is no Bible - there are only *Bibles*. And there is no Christianity - there are only *Christianities*. There are only versions and interpretations of what the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth meant, and of what it continues to mean.

If that makes you feel dizzy, or if that makes you want to throw your hands up in the air in frustration, take heart! This is good news for those of us who are a little suspicious of authority, and especially religious authority. And it's good news for those of us who aren't really interested in, or don't wish to be identified with, what passes for Christianity in the public imagination.

This emphasis upon multiplicity allows us to say and do three things. First, it allows us to say that the self-appointed defenders of Christianity that keep showing up in the *Times* or on *Fox* or *Newsmax* don't get to define the terms. They don't get to establish what Christian faith might mean, any more than the hijackers who flew planes into buildings on 9/11 get to define what Islam means. Second, it allows us to reclaim a space for ourselves, one that has always been there but that has become more and more occluded. This is a space belonging to a proud line of theology and praxis, called, broadly, liberal theology - from the Latin word *libera*, free. Much of that lineage can be traced to the late 18th and

early 19th centuries, when some very smart and savvy theologians began to take seriously the need to grapple with new understandings emerging from the sciences and from textual criticism. That quest to be free of rigid dogmas or confining orthodoxies remains a part of our identity. Third, it means there is no need to believe that our way, that our interpretation, that our understanding and use of these symbols is the Right or the Only Way. Recognition of the multiplicity and variation within the history of Christian faith allows us to come at things with a strong dose of humility, recognizing that the form of faith we practice is a product of a particular time and a particular geography. It allows us to pursue, in humility, a never ending process of opening ourselves to wider understandings of what faith might mean.

That gives us a lot of room to maneuver. But some nagging doubts still remain. Let me share just one. I recently had a conversation in which a young father told me he would never, ever, ever set foot in a Christian church. He is gay, and has absorbed all the anti-gay (and now anti-trans) hostility that has come out of certain quarters of Christianity for centuries, if not millenia. For him, it was not sufficient to say that some Christians have behaved deplorably while some have not, because the whole weight of the tradition has been brought to bear, often quite violently, upon non-hetero conforming sexual and gender expressions. In this person's view, all of us who identify with a church, and indeed, with any form of Christianity, bear some culpability.

He has a point. Harmful actions and attitudes have been cultivated in churches, using the very words and symbols that we ourselves embrace, sometimes in places very similar to this. Maybe, because of the symbols we use, there's not as much distance as we might imagine between the harmful versions of faith, and who we ourselves might wish to be.

How shall we come to terms with this? How shall we grapple with, and take responsibility for, the ways that our tradition, broadly speaking, has created harm? Perhaps we can start by noticing all the other difficult and morally ambiguous structures - a very important metaphor - that we inhabit, simply by being alive. Most of us are citizens of a country, for example, one which, like most countries, has a profoundly conflictual history. It is a structure in which we live, mostly by an accident of birth, and though we may not identify with certain parts of that structure, we still live and operate within it. All of us have been born with bodies, and many of us have been born in male bodies - again, an accident of biology. I don't need to rehearse the long history of how many men have sought to control the bodies and the lives of women since time immemorial, and yet we have the bodies that we have, including the way those bodies have been coded - it's another structure. Most of us speak English, which is the language of Shakespeare but is also the language of empire, a tool used to eradicate local cultures and traditions the world over. And yet it is the tongue in which we continue to speak - again, for most of us, an accident of birth. We are embedded in, we are saturated with, structures and traditions that have sometimes contributed some good to the world, but that just as often have created a world of harm. And sooner or later, someone will point an accusatory finger, asking us how we could possibly have remained within those structures knowing what we know, and feeling what we feel.

One option, of course, is to flee those structures when the dissonance becomes too great - to move to a different country, to speak a different language, to choose a different religion or no religion, or to

alter our bodies somehow. There are often good reasons for exercising that option, and I begrudge no one who does so. But often it's not enough, for the purity we seek is elusive. The quest to eliminate moral ambiguities is an ever receding horizon, a quest that tends to fail. That leads to a second, and, I think, a better option: not to flee the structures that define us, but to learn how to inhabit them humanely - to learn how to bend them, to shape them, to give them a breathability so that they become life giving, instead of feeling confining or hurtful.

Which brings me, at last, to our Scripture lesson - they shall build up the ancient ruins, says Isaiah. Throughout the prophets, but in Isaiah in particular, there are countless references to rebuilding the Temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Isaiah dreams of how this new, rebuilt structure will be life-giving, one that will be used to heal and not harm, one that will contribute to the ongoing justice and goodness of the community, one that will protect and harbor the most vulnerable in that society. The prophets look for the time when it will be possible to build such a structure, just as Jesus later tells his disciples that he too will build a new structure, using people rather than stones - "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," he says.

I read such passages as metaphors for the kind of work faith communities such as this one are continually called to. From the wreckage around us - the heap of stones that are our words, the crumbled walls that are our symbols - we're invited to create new structures of being, over and over again, new dwellings in which the best human aspirations can be nurtured - transformational spaces of possibility, ones that will practice openness, healing, creativity; ones that will pose honest questions, articulate a hope for the future, conduct experiments in being and living, create pathways toward joy, but also toward mourning. Such "structures" would be optimistic in outlook while also being forthright about the sorrows, the struggles, and the pain that afflict us all. In all those metaphors of building and rebuilding, we're invited to create structures of radical inclusivity where many expressions of love are valued, as well as many forms of intimacy. Jesus and the prophets invite us to get out of the business of policing our religious structures, emphasizing instead the habits of building and dwelling that will make the churches and institutions we actually do inhabit livable, open to the working of the Spirit.

If that's true of churches, it's also true of the other structures in which we dwell. We're invited to imagine, and then to labor toward, a democracy worthy of our stated ideals. We're invited to create forms of masculinity which don't necessitate control, and still less domination. We're invited to live into the multiplicity of spoken languages, learning, if we are able, to communicate in tongues we were not immersed in at birth. We're invited not to fantasize about living outside of these flawed institutions, but to shape them, to bend them, to build and rebuild them, stone by stone, piece by piece, creating something habitable for ourselves and for those around us.

We have our work cut out for us. But I, for one, believe there is an opening right now for voices such as ours. For voices that continue to insist upon words and symbols such as God, Jesus, and the Spirit, while building ever new meanings for those words. For people that continue to practice their faith in a community, and not merely in some private or interior region of the self. For a community that supports and nurtures people wherever they happen to be along life's journey - whether we believe all the traditional stuff wrapped up in church doctrine and lore or not. For a collection of people who hear

the voice of the living Christ calling wherever human rights are being violated or denied. For a people willing to put themselves on the line for justice, but also for love, and for mercy. I sense an open door for places like FCCOL in this world. I trust we will have the courage to walk through that door, dreaming this thing called church together, again, after all.

And should we ever find ourselves in a conversation that grinds to a halt, after which someone asks - "Um...you go to church? - I hope we shall have the courage to say, "FCCOL isn't what you may think. Come and see for yourselves."