

## “Blind Sincerity”

Rev. David Gregory

September 11, 2022

14th Sunday after Pentecost



Jesus and Nicodemus  
from the YouTube series *The Chosen*

### Readings

Brian McLaren

from *Do I Stay Christian: A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned*

Our religion can “hell-ify” us by inspiring in us an impenetrable sense of rightness or even superiority. That sense of rightness can inoculate us against humility, infusing in us an excessive confidence or addiction to certainty that keeps us from seeing our mistakes until after the harm has been done—to others (including our children) and to ourselves. Our religion is right, we believe which makes us right. As a result, the more devoted we are, the more stubborn and unteachable we become. And everyone can see it but us, because we’re blinded by our sincerity and zeal.

Luke 15:1-7

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

By this time a lot of men and women of questionable reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story:

“Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me! I’ve found my lost sheep!’ Count on it—there’s more joy in heaven over one sinner’s rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.”

If we've learned anything at all in the last decade, it is that words matter, whether those words are true or not. They have the power to sway our culture, whether they are true or not. You can sway the direction of our government if you can get enough people to believe you. And whether you like it or not—in an era of hyper-connectivity and the explosion of information—once words are spoken, they cannot be recalled. If someone like Jesus of Nazareth were born to our current generation, the gospels would not grow out of oral traditions, told and retold, but would spread by way of Instagram feeds or Facebook pages. We wouldn't say, "I wonder what Jesus really said?" It would be right there for us in a Reel or a Tik-Tok.

Words have a life of their own, and the New Reformation is happening because our words continue to live. I remember a time when I'd preach a sermon, and if someone missed church, they could borrow a copy of an audio cassette from the church library to play at home. These days, the things I say are accessible by anyone anywhere in the world who has a smart phone or a computer. It is not to say that my words are any more prominent than anyone else's (they're easily lost in an ocean of YouTube videos). But it's all searchable, and it causes me to think longer and harder about the economy of words that I employ in this vocation. Jeremiah Wright, the UCC minister who counted the Obamas among his parishioners, found this out the hard way back in 2008.

Words have come to matter more than the intent behind them. And sometimes we paint with them in such broad strokes that over-generalization becomes a pitfall that can do a lot of damage. Even the gospel writers were not immune to making assumptions about who people were in relationship to the way of life that Jesus taught. Take the Pharisees for example. Most of the gospel record puts this powerful Jewish sub-group in the category of the bad guys. Actually, they were serious scholars of the Mosaic Law, and many of them had a deep degree of sincerity in the pursuit of their religious and ethical lives. The Apostle Paul, when he was known as Saul of Tarsus, was a Pharisee who delivered followers of Jesus to those who would stone them to death. But there was also a Pharisee named Nicodemus who sought out Jesus in secret because he wanted to know more. Even though he couldn't bring himself to confront Jesus in the daylight, he possessed a degree of openness and teachability.

Some Pharisees were corrupt, and others were sincere seekers of God. But we have made them into right-leaning fundamentalists. We have come to associate the term "Pharisee" with someone who is rigid, inflexible, and self-righteous. When we say someone is "pharisaical," we're describing the quality of controlling the ideas and behaviors of others based on one's own opinions, judgments, and value systems. It is easy to react to someone with whom we disagree, and to do so by dividing further into camps. One of the growing edges of the New Reformation is finding a way to stay human with someone who offends us long enough to keep a channel open for relationship and dialogue. As it is now, wherever fractures occur, we quickly point the finger of blame at the other side, for *those* people are the ones who are inflexible and self-righteous. We rarely use those words to describe ourselves.

It is important to note that liberals and conservatives can be equally inflexible and self-righteous, and this inflexibility can happen easily when we become blinded by our own sincerity. This is not a quality of those who are Pharisees as much as it is a tendency of those who are *human*. Author Brian McLaren says that our religion can "hell-ify" us by inspiring in us "an impenetrable sense of rightness or even superiority." (Note: He didn't say, "*Their* religion can hell-ify *them*." He said, "*Our* religion can

hell-ify us.”) Our sense of rightness, he says, can “inoculate us against humility, infusing in us an excessive confidence or addiction to certainty that keeps us from seeing our mistakes until after the harm has been done.” The point I’m seeing in all of this is that it is never a good thing to ascribe an evil intent to every person who holds a viewpoint that differs from our own. Where there is sincere humility and love for others, there can be differences of thought and belief.

A quarter century ago as I was transitioning away from evangelicalism, I found myself in a role I had long avoided. I had become a polarizing figure. There were some to whom I had ministered in previous settings who now saw me as an apostate, a heretic, bound for an eternity in hell. There were others in the more mainline liberal Protestant world who saw me as a victim of the right wing and their evil intent in shunning me. While I did feel far more supported in a liberal setting, one that was more like the one in which I was raised, I was also uncomfortable when I heard a sermon in those early days entitled, “What Is Wrong with the Christian Right?” I remember thinking to myself: *This is too much of a generalization. They aren’t all bad guys.* I personally knew evangelicals who were loving and kind, who prayed for me not because they despised me, but because they loved me. I can name many of them today because in some way or another they are still in my life. I can see them as sincere, and I’d likely say they’re sincerely wrong, blinded by their own sincerity. But is it not possible that I am blinded by my own sincerity as well? Am I so sure that my religious ideals are the right ones? Am I so devoted to them that I have become stubborn and unteachable? Can everyone see this but me? Is my own zeal for a progressive Christian faith blinding me to what is good in other people? Have there not been many times in my life when I was sincerely wrong as well?

In the New Reformation we will find a new way forward. We will find a way to be human to one another, to love one another as we love ourselves, to love one another as we have been loved, to see through the eyes of Source, to see divinity in everyone we meet. To be sure, this idea will be subject to attack from those who can only find their power in division. If the Church survives at all, it will be because we looked in a mirror, noted our own sincerity and zeal, identified where we have become unteachable, and then made a different decision—one that leads us further from our own religion and closer to Jesus.