

“The Transformation Plan”
Rev. David Gregory
September 18, 2022
15th Sunday after Pentecost



The Strength to Change
Jeffrey Smith

Readings

Romans 12:1-2
from the New Revised Standard Version

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God’s mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

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

In *The Great Spiritual Migration*, I proposed that the purpose of the Christian faith is clear and simple: it is not an evacuation plan to heaven but a transformation plan for earth, a transformation plan built on the strategy of helping people become loving human beings who build loving societies, following the loving example of Jesus.

If you persist in minimizing the failures of the past, brushing them aside as trivial matters, then please realize: to growing millions of people, you now represent the contemporary failure of Christianity to transform lives.

The readings today are short and to the point, and this is by design. In seminary more than forty years ago, there was a professor who interrupted one of my early, inept attempts at presenting a sermon. It horrified me to the point that I still remember the sound of his voice, his facial expression, and my own desire for the earth to open up and swallow me whole. His question for me was blunt: “What ONE THING are you trying to say?” It’s always easier to present a list of fourteen things than to take the time to illuminate one thing, and do it in a way that can keep the attention of your listeners. And the only way that can happen is if you yourself believe that this ONE THING that you’re trying to say is vital for them to hear.

You may have noticed that this is the month of Brian McLaren. Some of us are involved in the book study on Brian's book, *Do I Stay Christian?* The book is about ONE THING, which is expressed clearly in the title. Each chapter presents one answer to that question along with ONE single "why?" or "why not?" Whether or not you are participating in the book study, it's a reading I recommend. Whether or not you're reading the book, it's a conversation I invite you to, for it involves the ONE THING I think I've been trying to say to you over the last five years.

Here we sit within the walls of the Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ—either physically or virtually—on a Sunday morning in September. Like it or not, agree with it or not, this is by definition a Christian church. It began as a mission of a brand new denomination at the end of the 1950s soon after the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church with the Congregational and Christian Churches, which happened when I was three months old (just for context). Though CCC has been a place of deep exploration of many ideas and experiences over the decades, and though most of us come from a background other than the United Church of Christ, the fact remains that when there is a pastoral vacancy we don't post in the want-ads for a new pastor. We have a relationship with the United Church of Christ that places us in a process which brings us into the proximity of ministers authorized by the United Church of Christ, some of whom will feel a divine tug to come to this place and travel with you for a season of spiritual life and progress. Can we at some point decide to chuck it all and be something other than a UCC church? Sure we can, as long as we don't mind handing the deed to this property back to the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ which facilitated its purchase in the first place.

There's a little enlightening piece of advice that might help us here: "You dance with the one that 'brung ya.'" In other words, this is a relationship that doesn't go away. It's been going on for the last sixty-three years, and whether we're deeply invested in it or not, it's the relationship that brought me here, and the one that will bring you your next minister and the one after that, and the one after that. So, when you say, "I go to CCC," and someone says, "What's that?" and you say, "the Community Congregational Church," and they go "Oh, what's that?" and you say, "We're part of the UCC", and they go, "What's that?" and you say it's "Unitarians Considering Christ," they go, "OK, I gotta go now. This is too complicated." It's time, I think, to get over the semantics of who we are, to sort out what identifies us, and to see what place our identity holds for us in the broader context of what it means to be Christian in the autumn of 2022.

Does this place make sense in the world we inhabit, and why or why not? If it doesn't make sense, how can we make sense of it? In this new book, Brian McLaren makes reference to an excerpt from his earlier work, entitled *The Great Spiritual Migration*, where he says:

I proposed that the purpose of the Christian faith is clear and simple: it is not an evacuation plan to heaven but a transformation plan for earth, a transformation plan built on the strategy of helping people become loving human beings who build loving societies, following the loving example of Jesus.

If you were to ask me what ONE THING Brian is trying to say in nearly all of his writings, I'd say it is this: Christianity is about transformation and not conformity. It's not about conforming to a set of unchanging standards to win our way to heaven some day. It's about taking a hard look at Jesus and

seeing in him a strategy for helping one another become loving humans who build loving societies on this loving earth. Christianity is not an escape plan to heaven, but a means of transformation for ourselves, our relationships, and our environment. This is the ONE THING that Brian McLaren is saying. And what ONE THING am I trying to say about the ONE THING Brian is saying?

In my view, much of our hand-wringing about the decline of the institutional church could be avoided if we would accept one clear thought. Perhaps Christianity's missing generations have concluded that the church just doesn't *do* anything. Where is the evidence of transformation? Why isn't the church a leading-edge catalyst for change? It certainly seems that Jesus was. What happened to his followers that they became so entrenched in creating a system that would produce conformity as a sign of faithfulness, rather than creating a new world fueled by love? Do the teachings of Jesus change your life? If not, then go join a club or a civic organization that gets something done. When the thirty-somethings in your life find out you go to church and wonder what difference it makes, they're looking for transformation. When our children grow up and leave the fold, it's often because we want them to take this institution we've inherited and perpetuate it into the future. But why? They've asked this question of us politely, but in the absence of an answer, they've quietly made their way elsewhere. What on earth would bring them back? It's transformation. How do we change the world? By embracing change itself.

This is when the words of the Epistle to the Romans echo in my ear. "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." This is where you find the path forward, or in first century terms, "The will of God," or the path of something that is good, desirable, and complete. If we're trying to find a path forward, it will never be one of conformity. It will be along the leading edge of life and creativity. Transformation cannot come from preserving what we used to have. It only comes from creating what we want to see. It is in times like these that I wonder if we've simply taken a 2,000-year detour. What if this is the moment to discern the path of transformation and get back on it?

