*Living with Questions (or Reframing the Message of Christianity)*

A sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church on July 21, 2019

First Corinthians 13: 11-13

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When invited to be part of the summer preaching schedule my first reaction was to ask myself the question “After seven months have I lost the rhythm of this privileged aspect of ministry?” I have found that a welcome outcome of retirement is the transition from less doing to more thinking. Above all, the critical consideration in the preaching task is what topic or theme might be timely and have some appeal to those seated in the pews. And so this morning I will take the risk that the *stream of consciousness* I will share with you may have some meaning and resonate with our collective mindset; speak to the challenge for the church universal; and perhaps in some way be informative to this church’s outreach initiatives.

You will note that my sermon title is “Living with Questions” which I chose a couple of months ago, essentially for the purposes of the Summer Bulletin printing. In retrospect I think that a more appropriate title is *Reframing the Message of Christianity.*

I suggest that with few exceptions, if any, within the arenas of Theology, Christology, or the sheer existence of life we all live with questions. I am mindful this subject is extensive, far reaching, sometimes troubling, but overall enlightening if approached with an open mind. And so this morning we will simply scratch the surface. In fact in sharing with John what I had in mind for today he responded with a question. . . “In twenty minutes?” Well, may be with a few minutes of grace!

As I look back over thirty years of ministry I realize the extent to which my personal theological position has been enhanced and clarified by the writings of a wide range of contemporary and scholarly theologians.

By way of an introduction I invite you metaphorically to stroll by the top shelf of my bookcase and take note of just a sample of authors and particularly their titles. *Why Christianity Must Change or Die,* John Shelby Spong; *The God We Never Knew,* Marcus Borg; *Jesus For The Non-Religious*, John Shelby Spong; *Christianity without God,* Lloyd Geering; *Dying Church, Living God*, Chuck Myer; *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, John Shelby Spong, *With or Without God*: *why the way we live is more important that what we believe,* by Gretta Vosper.

Lest you think I am a closet heretic let me elaborate on why I wanted to introduce you to this small sample of contemporary theologians . . . and this is central to my reflection. What is common among these authors is that they collectively address questions in my opinion and experience that occupy the minds of believers, non-believers and skeptics alike. These are writers who have had the courage to attempt, and share with varying degrees of success, to bring some meaning and sensibility to critical questions in the realm of faith and its ingredients.

I respectfully suggest that, in the context of John Spong’s question “Why Christianity must change or die?”, the discussion as I see it is not about that of diminished givings, unsustainable budgets, and the emptying of pews as the principle diagnoses, but rather the overriding matter of the church’s relevancy and hence its message . . . that is, what is in the box of theological framework and practice that still has currency, attraction, and meaning for today? Whether or not that question resides in our consciousness, I believe that it stares in the face of the institutionalized church. Let me take a moment here to place this statement in a meaningful context.

From my perspective, to address the question of relevancy of Christian teaching, requires that we consider what elements of traditional Christian practice stand in the way of connecting with the unchurched, and particularly the younger generation. I observe with respect that it has become a given within progressive Christianity and the authors I have cited that dogma, ancient creed, literal interpretation of scripture, and a hymnody that still proclaims old theology in sometimes heavy metaphors, fails to reach people of this modern, scientific and technological age. If it did then we might legitimately ask where our children and grandchildren are today.

Just prior to his death in 2015, Marcus Borg released a book with the title *Convictions*: *How I Learned What Matters Most.* You may recall that last November I shared a reflection in which I described Borg’s three stage model of Christian development. He suggests that we all pass through this experience, whether consciously or unconsciously. Let me briefly outline this process again before moving on to this morning’s scripture.

In our childhood stage, which Borg calls *Precritical Naiveté,* he says, *“We take it for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us is true, is indeed true. Whether that be about the tooth fairy or the star of Bethlehem* *that appeared every Christmas Eve*, this naïve stage was exciting and foundational to our early development.

Then comes to all of us the necessary stage of *critical thinking* where we sort things out for ourselves. Borg refers to this stage as *an unavoidable part of growing up and that we do not become adults without it.* I think you know where Borg is going with this. In this stage (and I quote him*) generally accepted modern knowledge calls into question the factuality of much of the Bible and of religions more generally.*

Let me suggest that many of us have reached this stage and perhaps are still struggling with the questions. That is perfectly okay and I encourage you to stay with it and work it through. I think it fair to say that all of us at some time have experienced, particularly in the context of interpreting scripture, the unavoidable collision with science, religion, rationality, and pure common sense.

The third and final stage of Borg’s model which he calls *Postcritical Affirmation* is when we come to the realization that *some truths, especially religious truths, can be expressed only in metaphorical and symbolic language.* For me personally this was the enlightenment that I so needed. It was a freeing experience. It negated the need to struggle with the question of scriptural literacy. It affirmed why I was engaged in ministry. Through the use of metaphor we can get to the heart, the very essence, of what scripture has to say to us today.

Turning to First Corinthians chapter 13, I am mindful that this passage is mostly known, and used primarily, to lift up the subject of authentic love. You can no doubt recite with me its characteristics . . . a love that doesn’t keep count that is patient, that doesn’t boast, that is not arrogant, rude, irritable, or resentful, etc. However there are two verses in this chapter that have application to this discussion, namely 10 and 11. I see these speaking to lifelong learning and they mirror not just the suppositions of theologians, but the development that we, you and I, have personally experienced. We spoke like a child, we thought as a child, and reasoned like a child . . . taking in as implicit truth the statements we as *naïve* children heard from authority figures in any arena, especially the church. We then entered the *critical stage* in which our newly formed intellect and reasoning prompted us to raise significant questions; struggle with the relevance of dogma and other traditions of the church to our lives; and where necessary discard that which we considered irrelevant or unhelpful. In summary, in Paul’s words*, we put an end to childish ways.* But having said this I believe that this doesn’t mean we throw out the baby with the bath water. In fact Borg’s third stage, *post critical affirmation*, can lead to a conclusion that this whole endeavour we call faith has value . . . if only in the person of Jesus, later called the Christ, whose way of living is worthy of emulating, and so we don’t have to join that company described as the ever growing *great church alumnae*. That is a potential target group to whom we would like to reach out especially through the medium of the *Soul Table* initiative. The members of this alumnae have largely soured from their past affiliation with the church and so unbelief and skepticism have in many instances led to rejection. As such the challenge is a high bar and our message will need to have both meaning and application to their lives.

It is a pity that fundamentalism has done a great disservice to Christianity. So much so that many Christians are now describing themselves as *spiritual* rather than *religious.* The word *religion* has become stigmatised because it is mostly associated with the atrocities carried out in its name. Fundamentalism is still pervasive today and its manifestation has also has stigmatised the word Christian.

Archibald McLeish, an American poet, an assistant secretary of State in the Franklin Roosevelt administration, and later Librarian of Congress provides a good summary statement; He says: “Religion is at its best when it makes us ask hard question of ourselves. It is at its worst when it deludes us into thinking we have all the answers for everybody else.

As the church, we might wish to seriously consider what we are passing on to future generations if it isn’t too late given the visible absence of at least one generation within the church universal. That is our collective responsibility in that clarification very rarely comes from denominational bodies as they are generally guardians of the *status quo.* (Just this week, despite the positive vote of the majority laity and the priesthood, a minority of thirteen Anglican bishops here in Canada were able to overrule the vote to allow same sex marriage.) *The power of the Church!*

We here at LPCC are not immune from that generational void. Hence an examination is timely of just what shape and substance an appropriate Christian development programme should look like today.

This morning I have shared, hopefully with some degree of coherence, what has occupied my mind for some time but more so now that I have the time to discern where my head is in the quest for a meaningful and common sense faith.

Marcus Borg prompts our thinking when he says *Imagine that Christianity is about loving God. Imagine that it is not about the self and its concerns, about ‘what is in it for me,’ whether that be a blessed afterlife or prosperity in this life.*

Because we share the responsibility in this search for what really matters, let me offer up what my response is at this point in my personal journey . . . simply one opinion.

The message of the church must have at its very heart a values system, the essence of which is expressed in love; compassion; justice; community; inclusivity; care for ourselves, each other, and the earth; and a continuous thirst for understanding. This values system is firmly grounded in the teachings and life of Jesus who remains the central figure and reason for our faith. We need not in any way shy away from or apologise for our identity as followers of this Jesus. Furthermore these values must become action verbs if they are to have any integrity.

I conclude with the statement of a friend and colleague in ministry, Reverend Gretta Vosper. Gretta has been vilified but also commended for her courage in sharing her own journey and where it has led. Whereas many will disagree or question the outcome of that journey, few will disagree, if any, with the sub-title of her book: “Why the way we live is more important than what we believe.” AMEN.