

“The Jesus Alternative”

Gene McAfee
Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church
Lyndhurst, Ohio

The Eleventh Sunday in Creation Time
August 21, 2022

The King James translation of Proverbs 29:18 says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish,” and I wonder if that’s why our world seems to be in such trouble right now. Our world has always been in trouble, of course – at least since we left Eden – and perhaps it’s because we no longer share a vision of what a world could be, and perhaps we’ve never shared such a vision. Maybe that’s where religion comes from: trying to provide a vision of what this world could be were enough of us willing to make the sacrifices necessary to bring that vision to reality.

But solving the problem of the world is a bigger challenge than most of us find it helpful to think about, so Francis and I have scaled things back to church-sized dimensions, and this morning, I get to share with you my vision for our church, Francis gets that opportunity next Sunday, and on September 4th, three of you will have the same chance.

You heard Francis and me say last week that we both love texts, the Bible chief among them, so you won’t be surprised to hear me say that I start with that text when it comes to my vision for our church. But when you’ve got a text as big as the Bible – sixty-six books in the Protestant canon, 1,189 chapters, 23,145 verses, and, in the Authorized Version, 783,137 words – when you’ve got that much material to extract a vision from, where do you begin?

How about if we start with Jesus? That’ll narrow things down a bit, even if it won’t simplify things. Jesus referred to himself as the truth, but as Oscar Wilde pointed out about the pure and simple truth, it’s “rarely pure and never simple.” And nowhere is that truer than in the Truth that is also the Way and the Life. Jesus is the Truth that doesn’t make life simple, easy, or neat. If you want Jesus to do that for you, this church will probably disappoint you.

Or at least I hope it will. I hope that Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church will disappoint anyone looking for easy answers for complex questions. Life is complex, so its problems will be complex, and the solutions to those problems will need to be, if not complex, then at the very least, not simple.

There are people who want simple answers for complex questions, and they can provide those answers only by doing violence to the complexity and subtlety that is real life. That’s one of those dividing lines between churches like ours and churches unlike us. The question comes down to this: How sophisticated, nuanced, subtle, or complex is a church’s understanding of reality, of reality’s God, and of God’s revelation about that reality? The answer to that question will tell you where a church is located on the theological spectrum, and my vision for our church is that we will be pretty far toward the sophisticated end of the spectrum.

Why? Because I believe that’s where Jesus was on that spectrum in his day and in his religion. I take as my first text – call it proof text number one for this sermon, if you wish –

Matthew 5:45, “God causes the sun to rise on evil people and on good people; God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous alike.”

That’s true, it’s maddeningly true, and we wish it were not true. We wish the world were a simpler, more just place – just, by our standards, anyway – where the sun’s light is hid from the wicked and the refreshing rain nourishes only the crops of the righteous. We want good deeds to be rewarded and bad deeds to be punished, and if God won’t do it, then, by God, we will.

And so we devise our laws, our rules, and our mores and our customs, to fit our prejudices, our hopes, our fears, our values, our moments in history, our social locations. We neaten and tidy up the world that way – these people get to vote or to marry, those people don’t; these people own property and those people are the property which is owned; these plants and animals are valuable and those plants and animals and soil and water and air can be designated private property and then destroyed or fouled or ravaged with impunity – and we thereby create for ourselves a world in our image and likeness, which is another way of saying a living hell for someone, somewhere, sometime.

So when we simplify and reduce the complexity of global rain and sunshine, we lose sight of God’s perfection and God’s love, neither of which is simple. My vision of our church – or of any church that I want to have anything to do with – is of a church that is as sophisticated and nuanced in its understanding of reality as Jesus’ understanding was when he preached and lived God’s aggravatingly inclusive – and perfect – love.

Now to proof text number two, also from the fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, and you can take your pick of verses as long as it includes these words of Jesus: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you.” The most important word in those sentences is “but”: “But I say to you. . . .”

That contrast makes all the difference. That contrast is the Jesus alternative to which my sermon title refers. It’s Jesus’ radically different way of approaching reality than the laws, mores, and customs that we have so painstakingly and self-destructively built across the centuries.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

There it is, the Jesus alternative about as radically put as you can find it. Loving our enemies is just not something we’re going to do. Nor was it anything Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries – our spiritual ancestors – were going to do. Heavily invested in survival, the Jewish religious authorities took one of two approaches when it came to their Roman occupiers: cooperate as needed, resist only when necessary. But love for enemies, no, that was not in the playbook of people invested in cultural, religious, and even physical survival.

And Jesus seemed to be pretty indifferent to that kind of investment, and that may have been one of the reasons he could urge his followers to love, rather than hate, their enemies. When you love as God loves – being prodigal with the rain and the sunshine – enemies have this funny way of becoming something else. They become opportunities. They become ways for us to interact with the world differently than others do and differently from the way we have before. They become targets, not of our anger, fear, or drones, but rather of our sincere and serious efforts to be the channels by which God’s grace flows to and through the world.

The alternative life that Jesus proposed was guided by one and only one concept: the realm of God. He expressed it in the prayer that he gave us, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

That's the Jesus alternative, and that's the vision that I have for our church: a group of people dedicated to making the realm of God manifest in this world through their serious commitment to living transcendent and transcending lives.

I could give you a long list that makes up my vision for our church, but that would make this sermon even longer than it already is, so let me close with just one simple example of how we might make our vision our reality.

Our Vision Statement says that we advocate justice for all creation, and for us that means trying to interact with God's natural world less as tyrants and more as stewards. It means seeing all of us, humans included, as "plain members and citizens" of the biosphere, as Aldo Leopold describes us.

We've begun planting a tiny forest where a piece of our lawn used to be as a step toward living out our commitment to creation stewardship. Can we take another step, one even more simple than a tiny forest? Can we take the step of becoming a zero-waste church? Can we commit ourselves to overcoming our addiction to trash? Such a commitment will require more set up and more clean up, it'll require washing dishes again, and it may even require us to forgo having food every time we get together. But for the sake of not continuing to trash God's creation, can we take that step?

From the tradition of Black spirituals comes the song, "I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus," and that's my vision for our church: a church with its mind stayed on Jesus, God's crucified and risen Human One. To focus ourselves there, to orient ourselves there, and to make the sacrifices necessary to stay there means more than anything this world can offer. As the late Yale historian of Christianity Jaroslav Pelikan once said about Easter, "If Christ is raised from the dead, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not raised from the dead, nothing else matters."

That's radical, friends. That's the Jesus alternative.