

Why Christianity? Pt. 1: The Good

Luke 6:27-38, 43-49

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Last week, I gave a bit of an introduction to a three-part sermon series on the theme “Why Christianity?” that I want to preach this Sunday and the first two Sundays of February.

I tried — not sure how successfully — to compare the life of faith and our relationship with Christianity to tennis.

It’s possible to play tennis in a very defensive way. You just kind of keep the ball in play, defend, defend, defend, hope the person across the net makes a mistake, but you rarely try to positively win the point. This is, sadly, mostly how I play tennis.

In the same way, I argued, it can be easy to approach Christian faith as something to defend, defend, defend. Something to justify, to say, “there are enough plausible reasons for me to believe,” but never really focus on the positive things that attract us to Christianity.

Ideally, Christianity should be more than just believable. It should be compelling, attractive, worth giving ourselves fully to.

Maybe the metaphor worked for you, maybe it didn’t.

But what I envision for this short sermon series is to in some small way try to communicate the positive, attractational force of Christianity.

I am not seeking to say why Christianity can merely be justified, but why it is good and true and beautiful.

The Good, the True, the Beautiful. These three categories are referred to by philosophers as the “three transcendentals” and they go at least as far back as Plato.

They are “transcendentals” because they *transcend* time and space, they express the universal human longing to know and to live according to what is right, what is real, and what is lovely.

I hope to show how Jesus responds to all three of these in deeply compelling ways.

A word about the title. I’ve called this series “Why Christianity?” Why did I frame it this way?

Do not many people prefer to say, “I’m a follower of Jesus” instead of “I’m a Christian?” Is not the most important thing the state of our relationship to Jesus Christ and not our relationship to the Christian religion?

Christianity has so much baggage, after all! All those wars and crusades and fighting over doctrines, all the embarrassing and immoral behaviours perpetrated down through the ages that make us cringe.

Many people like Jesus but would prefer to distance themselves from “institutional religion.” This is understandable. But it’s also impossible and inadvisable, for at least two reasons.

First, none of us comes to Jesus in some kind of unmediated way. We all encounter Jesus, at least on some level, through institutional Christianity, in some form or another.

The church — in the broadest sense of the word — has been the carrier of the stories, the traditions, the practices, the beliefs, the bread and the wine.

Even the person who reads the gospel of John alone in a hotel room and gives their life to Jesus is relying on the Scriptures that the church has faithfully translated and transmitted down through the ages.

The church has borne witness to Jesus. Not perfectly, of course. But without the church, none of us would have access to Jesus.

So, we can’t just say I’ll take Jesus but not the church (not that many people don’t try!). Jesus has, in a profound sense, entrusted himself to the church.

Second, we are not nearly so different than the people in the church’s history that we look down on. We have our own blind spots. We are just as human as they were.

It's almost certain that in a few hundred years, people will look back at the church in our time and place and wonder, "What on earth were they thinking?" on some matter or another.

We must be very careful not to be historically arrogant or naïve. As our reading this morning reminded us, we should be very careful about pointing out the speck in our neighbour's eye (even if our neighbour is the historical church) without looking at the log in our own.

"Christianity" is not perfect. But Christianity brings us to Jesus, and Christianity locates us in a community of sinners and saints that is always seeking to bear witness to what Jesus has done for us and for the world.

Ok, so, the good, the true, and the beautiful. Today: The Good. My sermon this morning is a very simple one.

Christianity has given the world a moral vision that was and is unprecedented historically, one that we often take for granted, both in the broader culture and in the church.

Like the fish who assumes the water it swims in, we live in a culture that has been so thoroughly and comprehensively formed by Christian moral assumptions, that we barely even recognize it.

I've spent the last month or so listening to a podcast called "The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God."¹ Its focus is on how "The New Atheism" kind of fizzled out and how a surprising number of atheists or agnostics or public intellectuals are reconsidering the value of religion or faith or God or Judeo-Christian values or a cultural argument or... *something*.

It's been very interesting, not least because I spent a good chunk of 2007-08 writing a master's thesis on The New Atheism and it's fascinating to see how the movement has aged over the last few decades (spoiler alert: not well).

People seem to need more — morally, existentially, culturally — than what the New Atheism offered, which was mostly an angry, and morally incoherent howl against the form of religion or belief that they most disliked.

¹ <https://justinbrierley.com/surprisingrebirth/>

One theme that pops up repeatedly on the podcast is whether you can have “fruits without roots.”

Many are seeing that the cultural legacy of Christianity is something worth cherishing and preserving (and is rapidly fading away).

They would very much like this not to happen, but they can't quite bring themselves to believe in God. They see a very ugly and trivial and merciless culture emerging and long to return to the values produced by the Christian West (human rights, tolerance, liberalism, freedom of speech, the possibility of forgiveness).

But God? Well, they're not so sure. They'll take the fruits, but not the roots.

Like many, I don't think this will work. You can't just subtract God from the equation and imagine that the culture will carry on.

This culture comes from somewhere. It relies on a very specific set of beliefs about humanity, about God, and about the world.

It didn't just emerge with the Enlightenment. It didn't come from some well-intentioned diversity seminar or policy manual on the importance of tolerance and philanthropy.

It certainly doesn't come from science, which can only tell us what *is* the case, never what *ought* to be the case.

It comes from Jesus and from the church he set loose in the world.

Our text this morning could serve as something of a summary of Jesus' ethic or vision of goodness.

Matthew has the Sermon on the Mount; Luke has the Sermon on the Plain. Maybe it was one sermon, maybe it was two different ones. Scholars aren't sure. But they cover a lot of the same territory.

What virtues do we see in this sermon?

- Love: Even for enemies (scandalous).
- Doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you

- Compassion and care for the weak (“give to those who ask”)
- Generosity (“lend without expecting repayment”)
- Equality, dignity: Do to others as you would have them do to you
- Mercy: Let your love extend beyond what you can get out of people; imitate God who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, be merciful as he is merciful.
- Don’t be judgmental, don’t condemn other people.
- Don’t be hypocritical, look in the mirror first. Be truthful with yourselves and be self-critical.

This is just one little part of Luke’s version of Jesus’ most famous sermon. We haven’t even talked about the Beatitudes, which radically relocate blessing in the realm of the poor, the hungry, the mourners, the persecuted.

This ethic doesn’t sound nearly as radical to us as it likely would have at the time. Because we live in a world whose moral vision has been shaped by this ethic.

This was not the world before Christianity. Tom Holland has made this point quite compellingly in his recent book *Dominion*, where he quite persuasively argues that the pre-Christian world of antiquity was much more brutal than this.

The dignity of each human life (the language of human rights), the centrality of an ethic of love for all, the insistence upon care for the vulnerable – these and more came from Christianity and Christianity alone.

Just last night, I was watching a hockey game on TV and a commercial came on with the message of lifting every voice (I think it was somehow connected to Martin Luther King Jr.).

There was nothing remotely Christian, at least explicitly, about the message. And yet, I thought, this commercial would be unimaginable anywhere other than a world whose ethic was shaped in profound ways by Christianity.

Now, again, the church has not transmitted or lived according to this ethic perfectly. The church was and is populated by sinners saved by grace and by grace alone. We must always say this.

But at least in the West, we live in the moral world shaped by Jesus Christ and by his church.

This vision of goodness is a powerful attractational force of Christianity.

The sad irony of our time is that we in the West often do not recognize this. The West tends to be where the church is shrinking. We are in many ways coasting on the ethical fumes of a religious and moral world that we are leaving behind.

We are determined to have the fruits without the roots.

I periodically listen to a podcast called *This American Life*, hosted by Ira Glass. In an episode called episode, “The Weight of Words,” Glass talked about his recent trip to the synagogue of his childhood to honour the anniversary of his mother’s death.²

He hadn’t been for years, he said, and was struck by how, despite all the changes he had experienced since childhood, the words of the prayers that were recited daily in synagogue never change.

He spoke about how even though he no longer believes in the God to whom these prayers addressed, even though he didn’t believe in the central reality *behind* the words, they remained a strange source of comfort for him.

They connected him to a tradition and history — familial, cultural, moral — that was important to him.

As I listened, it seemed to me that even though Ira Glass finds *actual* faith in God impossible, he’s glad that *other* people have it.

He’s glad that there are people out there to populate and preserve the institutions and traditions of the faith he was raised in so that he can pop in every few years to experience a bit of connection to his childhood and to have a stable framework from within to metaphorically locate and interpret his own individual experience.

Like many pastors, of course, I’m well-acquainted with the occasional attender who drops in a few times a year for some combination of community, curiosity, and duty but has their doubts about the whole package.

² <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/741/the-weight-of-words>

Or the children and grandchildren of older generations who show up periodically (usually around Christmas and Easter). These people are usually generous in conversation, expressing appreciation for the prayers, the liturgy or even the sermon, speaking of their gratitude for the warmth of the welcome and the kindness of the community.

Occasionally, there will be a wistful expression of longing for “something like this” — a recognition of its value, perhaps, or a fading half-memory of a time when they were part of it.

In the Mennonite world, I sometimes encounter people who retain a great deal of affection for the ethic of their Anabaptist upbringing, most often expressed in the work of MCC. But they can't believe it anymore, or their priorities have shifted, or they don't have the time, or they worship God in their own way, or they're “spiritual but not religious.”

But again, they're very glad that such communities exist. They're very glad that pastors and a faithful remnant of “religious” people still shuffle off to church on Sunday mornings to keep the traditions, rituals, and language of faith alive for everyone else.

I do not feel personally slighted or offended by this idea (usually implicit, rarely stated outright) that “It's a good thing some of you keep this alive for the rest of us to access when we feel like it.”

I don't *agree* with it, obviously, but I've sort of come to a kind of grudging peace that at least *part* of what it means to be a pastor in the twenty-first century post-Christian West is to kind of have faith on behalf of those for whom faith is difficult or impossible right now, to tend the embers of a fire that is not burning as brightly as it once did.

This is part of the job description in this time and place. At least so it seems to me.

The question I have, though, is simple to state but profound in its implications: How long? How long will people like Ira Glass be able to poke their noses into houses of worship and find a bit of inspiration or connection to tradition, morality, and ritual, to rely on this solid reality to at least temporarily orient their experience?

How long will the vocabulary of faith, prayer, and liturgy be around to tweak the memory or provoke the occasional question?

How long will Christianity's vision of the Good continue to shape our public life in unacknowledged ways? How long will the fruits last without the roots?

My sense is that we are presently are in a cultural window where it is still possible to live off the ethics and assumptions handed down to us by the broad Judeo-Christian tradition and the faith communities that it has given birth to.

And this will probably last for a little while longer. But it won't last forever.

I don't have some comprehensive cultural answer to the question of what we ought to do about this cultural reality. Other than, you know, "Come to Jesus." Or, "come back to Jesus."

But I have to believe that at least part of the answer is ordinary Christians like you and me being willing to unapologetically and confidently point to Christianity's vision of the Good and say,

"This is part of why I am a Christian." This is what draws me to Christ and to his church."

Jesus Christ and his church has transformed our world and reshaped our moral vision.

For this, we should always be ready to say, "Thanks be to God."

Amen.

