

“Staying Christian: A Message for the Disappointed”

Rev. Pen Peery

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Last week we had a guest preacher who was this year’s Willard Lecturer. His name was Brian McLaren. Brian was a pastor of an evangelical church for about 20 years. After that he started writing books about the church, for the church. He is someone who has his finger on the pulse of American Christianity.

Last Sunday evening, Brian lectured on a book that will be released nine days from now. The book he wrote before that is one that caught your worship team’s eye a few months ago when we were planning for this spring. The book is called “Do I Stay Christian?” It both acknowledges the...perhaps, uncomfortable...reality that a good number of people are asking themselves that question these days, and it seeks to make the case for why the answer to that questions is “yes.”

This Sunday and next I will be preaching with Brian’s book in the background. These two sermons are going to probably feel a little different than others because most of the time we tend to want to ignore...or at least not dwell...on the questions of those who are on the fence when it comes to their opinions of church – be it our church, or churches in general.

But here’s the deal: I’ve had enough conversations with those of you who wonder if your grown kids are ever going to come back to church, and with those of you who might be in your 20s or 30s or 40s who wonder if any of your friends will find their way to a church...and I think it might actually be helpful to face up to some of these trends and questions and concerns...and name what is going on, and why...many times...it’s legitimate, and then make the case for why being a part of a church is important anyway.

Next week the sermon will be addressed to those who are disillusioned with the Church and Christianity. Today the sermon is for those who are disappointed.

I’ll read our Scripture in a moment, but first, please join me in prayer: *By your Spirit, O Lord, open our ears and minds and hearts to hear your word. And, in hearing, help us to live and love as those who follow Jesus. In Christ’s name – Amen.*

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Our Scripture for the day is from the book of Numbers. This is part of the story about Moses leading the people of God out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness (where God provided manna from heaven to keep the people from starving), and ultimately into the Promised Land. Of course, that is a journey that took a while...and one thing that is an immutable truth is that when you are around a group of people for a while...even a group of God’s people...there are, shall we way, opportunities for being disappointed.

I’m reading from the 11th chapter of Numbers – various verses between 1 and 15. This takes place during that part of the journey through the wilderness well-after the time when people asked “are we there yet?”

Listen with me for a word from God:

Now when the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the Lord burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned against them.

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.’

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased.

So Moses said to the Lord, ‘Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child”, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?’

Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, “Give us meat to eat!” I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.’

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Somebody needs to give Moses a hug.

Poor fella. You know what? You have got to be **some kind of disappointed** to go through all that Moses went through...to say yes to a calling to lead God’s people after he tried to run away, to go toe-to-toe with Pharaoh through ten plagues, to convince the Israelites to follow you through the parted waters of Red Sea with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit, to meet God face-to-face on Mt. Saini to receive the Ten Commandments...to go through **all of that**, only to be so disappointed that you just throw your hands up and say, “God – take me now. You can have ‘em. I’m done.”

I know it’s not possible to get inside Moses’s head, but there are three things I wonder:

1. I wonder if – way back in Egypt when he was gathering the Israelites into a community who would accompany him on this journey to the Promised Land – I wonder if Moses thought “well, at least once we rid ourselves of this pesky Egyptian army, the rest will be a piece of cake!”? My guess is that he started this 40 year road trip with God’s people a little naïve about how difficult it would be.

2. I wonder – many years and miles after today’s passage, with the Promised Land in sight – I wonder if Moses’s sense of pride in God’s people...for their resilience, their trust, their commitment...I wonder how those feelings compared to the disappointment that Moses felt in the moment that we heard about today?
3. I wonder how often Moses was the one who disappointed the people (because it works both ways in leadership, of course). And I wonder how the people coped with their disappointment around Moses (besides crying out to God to deliver them back to Egypt)?

I actually find great comfort in this morning’s Scripture. After all, this is the story of original people of God. The ones through whom we are all connected – as God continued to make promise after promise to include more and more people in the family in addition to this lot. Aren’t you somewhat relieved that even back then things weren’t perfect and easy and without trials and tribulations? Aren’t you glad our season of being God’s people isn’t the only one with people who are sometimes disappointed in the group, or the leader, or the whole endeavor?

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I will say, though, that I think those ancient Israelites had one thing going for them: for those who were disappointed, they didn’t really have a choice. After all, they were in the desert wilderness. Where else were they going to go?

Nowadays, if people get disappointed with church, they can just find another one (which sometimes happens). More likely, though, is that when people get disappointed they either disengage and just kind of hang out on the sidelines – or, they leave...fill their Sunday mornings with something else – maybe something that feels less complicated than living and worshipping in a community filled with people.

I want to say two things before I go on.

First – we all need to know that our church is somewhat of a unicorn in the midst of the overall landscape of American Christianity. Our worship life is vibrant...we’re growing...our giving is generous...our finances are strong...there is energy in our children’s ministries...we have a strong understanding of our mission. Sure, there are things to improve and things about which we may worry – but all things considered, we are in great shape.

Second – the overall trends in American Christianity are troubling. You’ve heard me preach more than once about the fastest growing slice of the American religious landscape – “The Nones” – those who claim no religion or faith in particular. Rather than hope that things turn around, or judging or shaming people who

choose to disaffiliate with Christianity – the church needs to practice empathy...and to try to understand what is going on in people’s hearts and meet them where they are...not just expect that they will one day come to their senses and sit back in the pews.

I could spend parts of this week and next quoting statistics and data that confirm these trends, but my guess is that you already intuit that these things are true. What I thought might be more helpful is to be personal about what I know about the ways the church has disappointed people.

I know that some people have left the church because they think we aren’t courageous enough. They hear us talk a good game about justice and being agents of change...about being in solidarity with our neighbors and advocating on their behalf. They roll up their sleeves and get involved – as leaders, committee chairs, volunteers. And then they wonder why we don’t do more – especially if we claim that outreach is a priority. This is one disappointment that I know has led to people leaving our community.

I know that some people have been disappointed in their pastors – yours truly included. Disappointed in things that we have said – and in things that we have not said. Disappointed that we didn’t lead in a way they thought we should. Disappointed that we didn’t provide care in the manner than they thought we would.

I know that some people have been disappointed by the community. That some people haven’t felt included. That some people have felt like their convictions – political or theological – weren’t respected here.

I’m not going to use names in this sermon, but each example I just listed has at least one name attached. These are real disappointments. They have led to good and faithful people departing our community. And that grieves me – and maybe you, too.

Here’s what I think we need to do with that grief. I think we need to sit with it. I think we need to honor it. I think we need to learn from it. It’s easy to get defensive. It’s easy to say “well, we can’t be all things to all people” – and that’s true. But part of the responsibility of being a community of God’s people is to respect the feelings of all those who God gathers as a part of that community – including taking the disappointments of those who choose to leave seriously.

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In 21 years of being a pastor, Ed Henderson was the person who was the most disappointed with the church of anyone I have ever known.

I met Ed when I was a 31-year-old Senior Pastor at my last congregation in Louisiana. Ed was disappointed I wasn’t older.

Before I arrived, the church named Ed an Elder Emeritus. That sounds like it was an honor, but, really, it was just a way to ensure that Ed couldn't serve as an active Elder on the Session anymore. The leaders of that church had had enough of listening to Ed's disappointments in Session meetings.

Ed asked to have lunch with me a couple of months after I arrived. We met in “his private dining room” at the Shreveport Club. I order a sandwich. Ed ordered a cup of soup – which he never touched, because he had too many things to talk about. He brought two, three-inch, three-ring binders. In them catalogued a generation of disappointments with the church – his congregation, and the Presbyterian Church in general. Ed was conservative – and he was disappointed by what he considered to be the blind embrace of progressivism. Ed was disappointed that the church didn't have as many members as it used to. Ed was disappointed that Elders were no longer appointed for life. Ed was disappointed in the last pastor. And the pastor before him. It was quite a lunch.

I was Ed's pastor at that church for four and half years. I can say with absolute certainty that I did my part in disappointing Ed further.

Ed died during pandemic at the tender age of 99-years-old. He lived to see his wife's funeral, and his oldest son's. Disappointment aside, he remained a faithful member of First Presbyterian Church until the end.

One regret I have is that I never asked Ed why the heck he stayed a part of a congregation that was the cause of so much disappointment for him. I suppose I was too young and intimidated to ask at the time. But based on what I learned about him – and heard about him through his children and grandchildren who were members of the church, and other members who had served on the Session with Ed and gone toe-to-toe more than once – I can surmise three reasons:

1. Being part of a church helps locate your story in a larger whole. I don't think anyone wants to feel like they are alone, and Ed was no exception. To be a part of a church is to be a part of God's story – even if that story is filled with people who sometimes let you down.
2. God works in the world through the church. Is it a perfect vessel? No. (And Ed could point out the imperfections if you asked him...) But for all its warts, the church is an instrument God uses to help spread the good news of love and hope to a world that is weary.
3. Being a part of the church provides a reminder for why we need saving and for what we are saved. You don't join a church to gain salvation. That's God's choice whether you belong to a church or not. But being a part of a church gives you an awareness of why Jesus saved us in the first place – and an appreciation for what our salvation might mean for the sake of others. At his core, Ed wasn't a part of

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the church for his own sake. It was because he knew God’s grace in his life was intended to benefit others.

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It's not a question of whether being a part of a church will disappoint you on occasion. It will. When it does, we should talk about it...and learn from it...because it’s okay to acknowledge disappointment.

The question is whether the journey with an imperfect collection of God’s people is worth it.

I think it is – and I hope you do, too.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.