

I chose our reading this morning because it's easy to get caught up in the bumper sticker face of Christianity, the American right ring religious face of Christianity—and forget that beneath it is a set of practices and ways of being that have many people have found healing for the last 2000 years. No religion can survive for so long for the sole purpose of proselytizing; or which by definition is opposed to science and reason; or which inherently divides people from each other and from the earth.

These eye-catching tendencies among some—a minority—of Christians are distracting, but not definitive. So, whatever your religious background, I invite you to set aside the Christianity you think you know this morning and encounter it as a learner. With the freshness and curiosity of a child. The way Jesus asked all his followers to in the gospel of Matthew, when he said that the ones who humble themselves like children are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

His words have often been taken to refer to purity or innocence, but all through the gospels Jesus challenges his followers' common sense, pressing them to become more open, more curious, to think outside of what they think they know.

Just as Jesus wanted his teachings to be encountered with openness, so today shall we encounter the tradition that emanated from it. We'll look at what Christianity has been, and is, and who the heck got to decide.

So, let's go back to the earliest days, and what we know about them, and then we'll be better prepared to understand what we're seeing now.

It all begins—as you know—with a Jewish carpenter. A guy from a family that would not have looked like much if you'd passed them on the street.

He did not think of his teachings as Christianity—that word would not be coined until long after his death. But to those who knew him it appeared God spoke to him, and through him, as he traveled around sharing what he had to say. And it was radical—especially compared to the Christian nationalism we are threatened with today.

He said that people cannot live on physical sustenance alone. They need an ever-deepening relationship with the world beneath the world we see, with Truth, with God.

He said that love for one another and being in right relationship are more important than any formal act of worship (Matthew 5:23).

And he told people not to show off in their religiousness. "Close your door and pray," he said, "in secret." Do not sound trumpets about it. Do not heap words. Keep it simple. (Matthew 6:1-16).

And he said that everyone is equally worthy of God's love, and equally worthy of joining Jesus's spiritual family. He hung out with unrepentant criminals as well as his devoted followers, with contagiously ill people, and with strangers and unmarried women— unheard of in his time. He called all of them his family.

And he was clear about what was most important. Loving God and your neighbor with all your heart is the essence of all other teachings, he explained, and you don't have to pay much attention to what people *profess* to believe. You will know the good ones by the way they *live their lives*.

But not everything he said was easy to understand.

He preached radical nonviolence, telling his followers not to resist evil, but to turn to the other cheek. Really? Haven't some of us been through enough already?

He said, perhaps contradictorily, that at the end of time, "the evil will be thrown into fire." Who counts as evil? And is this one of his many metaphors?

He spoke in the images of his time, "Let your loins be girded, and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast..." It takes some real research to figure out what that might mean.

His life left his followers with many questions.

His apostles each went off to teach what they had learned...but what to teach? Jesus never wrote anything down, and—as far as we can tell—his apostles might not have either. Of the gospels in the Christian bible today, most scholars think the Gospel of Mark is the oldest one, and it wasn't written until seventy years after Jesus's death. Seventy years! Although it is penned in the name of one of his apostles, it is unlikely that anyone who knew him firsthand could have written it. Instead, it is probably an example of pseudonymous writing, writing under someone else's name.

Pseudonymous writing was common in those times—maybe for the purpose of gaining credibility, or maybe to honor the person whose name is used. We aren't sure. What we do know is that there are far more texts from that time than are included in today's Christian bible, and their divergent perspectives reveal an amazing amount of diversity in the early church, beginning with those disciples, each of whom apparently had their own take on things.

In 1945, a shepherd discovered fifty-two ancient texts hidden in a cave near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. And of *all* the ancient texts that still exist, thirty are gospels like the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

So... why do most of us know of only those four? Why were the others lost, only to be discovered later (like in that cave), while those four were compiled into the Christian canon? (The official scriptures.)

This is where the plot thickens.

In her book, *Beyond Belief*, from which I drew today's reading, Elaine Pagels tells the story of the surprisingly diverse early Christian church. One of the most important questions facing them was what practices and beliefs were correct for this new group that would eventually be called "Christian."

Within a century of Jesus' death, she says, "some of his most loyal followers had determined to exclude a wide range of Christian sources." In order to understand why

they would do this, we have to understand the challenges and risks they faced in their time.

First, Christianity was spreading rapidly through the Roman empire, causing alarm among people in power, and consequently, Christians were beginning to be attacked and persecuted. Meanwhile, even though the diversity within Christianity no doubt helped it spread, it also led to division between differing groups. made them suspicious of each other and made it hard for them to defend their faith with one voice. Irenaeus, a bishop in the second century, was one of many Christian leaders who wished for one unified catholic church. The word catholic simply means universal. It was not yet a brand, but you can see where this is going.

Irenaeus was among the first to decide—based on *his* group's traditions— that only the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were legitimate, and he spent his lifetime working to unify Christianity accordingly.

He was so successful that those gospels still form the official church canon today, and not only that, his interpretation of them—which was aimed at contradicting what he saw as heresies, including the roots of Unitarian Universalism— is still reflected in the translations we receive.

Most of the competing texts were lost or destroyed. A few were hidden away in monastery libraries. And some were tucked away deep in the hillsides, where—amazingly— some were unearthed in the last century.

Unification, however, did not stop the persecution. Rather, it got even worse. For the next two centuries Christians' faith would be tested in dungeons, prisons, and worse. Throughout it, the radical message of love, equality, and the promise of the Kingdom of God forged a powerful, indomitable sense of community among believers.

Finally, in the fourth century, a titanic shift occurred. The emperor Constantine aligned himself with the most organized, visible strand of Christianity—the one Irenaeus had worked on—giving it official sanction and protection. Constantine was a practical military leader who recognized the advantage of marshalling such a rapidly growing movement. And even though he is said to have had an authentic Christian conversion experience, he also appears to have continued worshipping Apollo, the son of Zeus.

What happened next was the creation of a Christian empire, and—in 325, three centuries after Jesus died—the development of the Nicene Creed, which lays out the trinity, virgin birth, resurrection, and the reign of God to come. Diversity, though not snuffed out by any means, had been tempered. Decisions had been made.

Christianity was now poised to take the stage as one of the world's great religions. The interesting thing is that in terms of the teachings of Jesus, it is not clear this turn of events was as fortuitous as it might seem.

The religious historian Karen Armstrong says that Christianity—which began as a religion of hope, love, and peace for society's underdogs— has never been at its best when in power.

These days when we think about the separation of church and state, we in the US worry about the influence religion could have over the state. But the first people for the separation of church and state, were worried about what happened in Constantine's time: it wasn't that the church controlled the state, it was that the state controlled the church, and the church became—not a liberating message of hope meant to challenge and reorder an unjust world—but in some ways just another tool of politics.

A lot has changed since then, but not the struggle for Christians to reclaim the heart of their faith in the midst of power, and—as it turns out—not the tendency for the Christian tradition to foster diversity in its midst. And, fast forwarding, here we are, with Christianity in America today.

Christian fundamentalism is an American strain of Christianity that took shape in the 1940's as a response to historical criticism casting doubt upon traditional understandings of scripture. (Historical criticism is what I'm doing in this sermon.) It began with a collection of essays called *The Fundamentals*, published in 1910. They pretty much flew under the radar of scholars and the media at the time, but they went on to form the backbone of American religious conservatism. They laid out a set of fundamental beliefs, including the belief that the scripture we receive today as the official canon—which you now know was formed because of specific historical tensions and by a handful of powerful people— is the inerrant, literally true word of God.

Fundamentalism is an attempt to fend off the influence of contemporary culture on Christianity. All traditions—including ours— should take note of the risk of bowing to the culture of any age. We must be on guard, for example, for the consumerist mentality, so pervasive in this time and place, that might lead us to decide whether to come to church or not based on whether we like the sermon topic, rather than showing up for the sake of community, or because we want to knit our lives to a larger purpose and mission.

Fundamentalism has gone awry, though, in imagining there has ever been a time when Christianity was not influenced by history and culture.

By picking a set of beliefs from long ago, and setting them in stone, Christian fundamentalists have to a certain extent merely set past cultural norms in stone, many of which do not support Jesus' command to love our neighbors, and many of which—if we judge them by their fruits—are rotten and bitter. Families and communities divided. Narrow, parochial theologies that do not lead to lives of social justice. A small, bumper sticker version of a once radically inclusive religion.

And it doesn't just divide the fundamentalists from non-believers. It divides them from other Christians as well.

Ruben Archer Torrey, dean of the Los Angeles Bible institute and one of the most prominent fundamentalists of the early twentieth century, referred to Pentecostals as the "last vomit of Satan."

The two groups agree on many points, but Pentecostals are more tolerant of theological diversity and value direct experience of God as well as scripture.

And then there are the evangelicals, some of whom are also fundamentalist in terms of their interpretation of scripture but who—unlike the fundamentalists—do not want to cut themselves off from the world. They want to engage it and save it.

There are less visible forms of Christianity in the US- the fastest growing one is made up of non-denominational churches that consider themselves part of the New Apostolic Reformation, and that's a movement worth its own sermon. I'll circle back to it another day. All of them in their own way, and despite other intentions, are in fact shaped by this historical moment and this culture.

And what a culture it is.

Occasionally, I received a catalog in the mail from a company called "Oriental Trading," and it is a truly bizarre expression of religion intersecting with culture. Plasticky nativity play costumes, including an inflatable manger, happy birthday Jesus party hats, beach balls.

One item had the description, "Remember the true meaning of Christmas with this ceramic mug." There are inspirational gift bags you can wrap it in if you want to give it away. There was a Jesus Rubik's cube, which was accurately described as a "faith-based puzzle." A roll of candy with scripture on the wrapper that said, "Blessed are ye when men shall persecute you for my sake." That wording is from the 15th century King James translation of the gospels-- an interesting choice.

And then there's the flier I received from *Homiletics* magazine, which I gather is meant to help preachers in their work:

"HOMILETICS," the marketing materials said, "paints word pictures for conveying the gospel to today's audiences. It uses concrete images such as fleas, ducks, nitpickers, used tombstones, church slugs and dung heaps to confront current topics."

"You'll draw people in with titles like, 'The Naughty, the Nasty, and the Nauseating,' 'Red Bull Buzz,' and 'Engineering for Eternity.' And of course, HOMILETICS anchors the quest for truth in Scripture."

Despite the noise of culture and rippling effects of historical events, liberal Christians say is still active. Jesus is still speaking.

Never place a period where God has placed a comma, says the United Church of Christ. They are Congregationalists, the group that split off from Unitarianism back in the 1800's and are our close cousins theologically.

So, what is Christianity?

Is it what Elaine Pagels encountered when she stumbled into church in New York City, and found a place to cry for her son?

or is it a set historic creeds?

is it the spiritual sustenance that nourished the soul of the civil rights movement and embraces diverse people today?

Or is it a movement that promotes violent attacks on LGBTQ people?

Who gets to decide?

All religions are lived in the context of a still unfolding history, with the result that they are influenced by historical decisions and are hard to narrow down.

But surely there is some glowing coal at the center of Christianity that its loveliest expressions make manifest. The question, I think, brings us back to the words of Jesus, "You shall know them by their fruits."

References:

Pagels, Elaine H. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. Random House, 2007.

Wilcox, Clyde, and Carin Robinson. *Onward Christian Soldiers?* Westview, 2006.

For further info about Christianity and other world religions, I recommend checking out the Pluralism project at Harvard: <https://pluralism.org/christianity>