

Speaking of God

Honest Christianity for a World Seeking Hope

Navigating Difficult Times

Holy and Untouchable

Since Constantine in the Fourth Century,
the church has presented itself
as holy and untouchable.

Even to ask if the church could be wrong,
risks the threat of being named a heretic.

Heretics haven't fared very well in history.
Some were merely silenced
but many were killed.

One is not supposed to question or challenge
the doctrine and dogma and moral codes
and one is to believe that all theology
has been revealed directly by God
to the clergy.

Right.

It might not be that simple.

Let's take a closer look at how we become church
and how the church becomes us.

What is Faith?

We don't put our faith in the church as such.

The church is not God.

It is a mystery imbued

with the hidden presence of God.¹

We put our faith in the Holy One first and foremost.

Beyond that, we don't place our faith in doctrinal propositions
 canon law,
 or even in the moral codes.

 Again, these are not God.
Our faith isn't in an absent, violent, male deity
 or anyone who claims to speak for "him."
This is the false god about whom
 Jesus excoriated first-century religious leaders.

To Whom Shall We Turn?

As people in our culture move away from organized religion,
 or from being formed in how to love,
 or from groups that welcome the suffering,
 or from civil discourse with each other,
 or from respect for government,
 or from having close friends,
 or even from the idea of marriage²
 a general sense of sadness
 and a feeling of loss overtakes us.

Those things on which we once depended
 now seem broken and in disarray.

Where once we felt that the sky was the limit
 now we feel that even the Earth
 is no longer able to sustain life as we know it.

In generations before us, workers and families pushed,
 they worked hard and long,
 they supported the social structures
 that made a society function.

When hard times came, we helped each other.
 When a new vision was needed
 we marched in the streets.

We lived in true neighborhoods together,
 even though we believed differently
 or belonged to the other political party.

Somehow, we knew we all needed to pull together
 and treat each other with respect and dignity,
 even if we disagreed.

Permission to Hate

But now we have moved away from those structures,
and the ties that bound us have fallen away.
And dear reader, in all honesty,
people of color and non-Christian faith,
people whose love didn't fit the norm,
and people without full citizenship,
have never been fully integrated into our "club."
But in these days, permission has been given
by national leaders obsessed with dividing us,
to hate each other,
distrust each other,
and even to attack each other with guns.
While once we may have been intolerant,
today we feel we can be outrightly contemptuous
toward others.
What is happening? We have become a mean people
with deep anxieties and open divisions.
This movement is powered by technology,
powerful national leaders,
and the for-profit media.
The world is becoming a melting pot
and many people fear that.
At the same time, the rich really are getting richer
leaving behind millions of impoverished people
for whom they no longer feel responsible.
Where once we saved our dimes to give to the poor,
today we blame them for their poverty.
To survive, we know we must work together
to reduce poverty,
illiteracy,
disease,
and climate disasters.
But instead, we spend our energy on empty political fights
that lead to nothing but stalemate.

Sadness and Loneliness

The Big Shift away from churches and religion,
away from social clubs,
and even away from marriage,

has left us without anyone to help us
grow in the human desire for community.
Instead, we wallow in sadness and fear,
we turn on our technology and zone out,
we consume and burn and stomp
and we have lost our very selves.
We know that being “on our own”
—isolated from a community of others,
in touch only with our own needs and wants
and believing only in ourselves—
isn’t enough.
Simply put, we are not enough alone.
We crave community
and need companionship.
Likewise, we need formation in living a moral life.
We cannot form ourselves because the result
leaves us with a self-referential orientation
that leads to selfishness.
And selfishness leads to sadness.
Inevitably.
The overall suicide rate in just the United States
increased by 33% from 1999 through 2017.³
It’s the 2nd cause of death among 10–34-year-olds.
What’s happening?

The Way Forward

Hence, we must ask who will teach us how to live together,
contribute to the common good,
and turn hatred into love and respect?
In the past, we could rely on the churches
on social clubs of various kinds,
on movements for justice and peace,
on both private and public schools,
and even on 4-H and scouting programs
to help us teach morals.
Families passed on moral values
from one generation to the next
and even taught such things as
manners,
etiquette,

and how to say thank you.
However, the churches allowed themselves
to be compromised by power and clericalism
becoming religions without real faith.
The schools are under attack for teaching values
because parents believe only they can do that
except that most parents never get around to it.
Social movements and programs have given way
to so-called “social” media
which is really unsocial use of private technology.
We’re living alone.
And we’re not happy.
Families no longer talk together about these things.
and our culture is marked by social norms
that stem from distrust,
dishonesty,
separation,
gun violence,
and economic inequality.
Do we have an inborn tendency
to disorder, cruelty, and selfishness?
Even though it leaves us feeling sad and alone,
we gather only with the like-minded,
we’re unwilling to listen and talk,
we ignore the climate,
we treat what we dislike as a hoax,
and we tolerate high-level dishonesty.
We must reign in these darkest inclinations
if we hope to recover our balance
and we need help to do that.

Good News!

The good news is that it is Jesus’ mission
to heal social divisions,
bring people back into community,
and teach love in place of hate.
The author of Luke’s gospel put Jesus’ mission
on his own very lips
when he visited his home village of Nazareth.
Jesus described his mission as one

that would liberate people from oppression.
He sketched out a new understanding of God,
a new form of power,
the power of love.
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” the text of Luke says,
“because the Holy One has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
The Holy One has sent me
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Please pause here, dear reader,
and return to that text.

If you were a person living in poverty
and unable to improve your lot in life,
what would this say to you?

If you were a person of color
facing systemic and constant racism,
always living with race-based assumptions
of everyone around you
due only to the color of your skin,
what would this say to you?

If you were a woman in our society or church,
not permitted to live your full vocation,
always aware that “men come first,”
what would this say to you?

If you were constantly fearful of unjust violence,
unable to sleep well and anxious,
aware that being a gay man or woman
may cause others to hurt you,
what would this say to you?

If you were an immigrant standing on our border,
seeking safety for your family
and a life free of poverty,
what would this say to you?

Try to think outside the box
in which the churches have long locked Jesus,
where Jesus is thought to support and bless

the actions of the dominant culture
and downplayed his call to reform.

Now return above and re-read this passage:

good news to the poor,
release to the captives,
recovery of sight,
freedom for the oppressed,
the year of the Lord's favor.

Let us close with this poem, to lift our hearts and brighten our spirits.

Prayer of Lavish Welcome

O God of prodigal love,
you run to meet us while we are still far off,
your arms wide, your heart rejoicing.
You do not count our failings,
but celebrate our return with song.

Jesus, friend of the lost and small,
you welcomed the children with laughter,
you looked up at Zacchaeus with delight,
you called Matthew from his table of burdens
to walk with you in freedom and joy.

Spirit of mercy, dwell in us:
make our homes places of forgiveness,
our parishes tables of welcome,
our hearts open to every seeker.
Teach us to live prodigal love—
lavish, unmeasured, and overflowing—
until all know they are embraced by you.

¹ The Constitution on the church from Vatican II, in the opening articles points to this. St Pope Paul VI used these very words in his opening allocution at Vatican II, September 29, 1963.

² More than half of all Americans now say that no one knows them well. This isolation is compounded by the reality that a smaller set of people are marrying than ever before in our history. In 2019 the number of Americans between ages 25-54 who never married stood at 38%. 44% of high school students in 2021 said that they live with persistent sadness. (Source: Gallup Study, May 2023.)

³ American Psychological Association. Kirsten Weir. March 2019, Vol 50, No. 3.