

## ***Why I Am a Christian***

Rev. Dr. Kathryn Nystrand Dwyer  
Congregational Summer Assembly  
July 23, 2023

1 Peter 3:15b – 16a

*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, <sup>16</sup> yet do it with gentleness and respect.*

---

My husband, Dale, and I noticed so much new life when we arrived this summer. The beach is back at Lake Michigan with the beautiful new ladder and steps. The assembly beach is seeing more activity than I remember in years, and there have been 30 or so people gathered for yoga (sponsored by the Women's Association). I even had to wait in line to get my assembly stickers!

I want to take a moment to thank each of you who keeps this place humming – from coordinating the worship services to planning programs, coaching tee-ball, teaching pickleball, running sound, singing in the choir or the musicals, and volunteering for the arts festival. I'm only scratching the surface – thank you for all of your contributions, those named and those many behind-the-scenes contributions people don't even know about. Your contributions, large and small, make this place what it is.

It has been a tough few years, here and everywhere, and so it is especially great to experience the assembly so full of life. My heart has been with all of the parents who were basically homeschooling while also working full time during the pandemic. Every industry has faced challenges – I am most intimately aware of the challenges the Church has faced. In March 2020, within a matter of days, most churches started online services – many using phones or tablets – and suddenly finding themselves in an independent crash course on all things technology.

Do you remember 2020 when we were not worshipping here in the Meeting House? Jim Reisner asked several of us to create a pre-recorded meditation to be mixed with a pre-recorded piece of music from the choir. I remember searching for a spot in my cottage that was light enough, but not too light, and taking numerous takes on my phone until there was something reasonable enough to share.

We all have many stories like these – my most memorable was on Easter morning in 2020. Our congregation had been livestreaming for several years but moments before the service was to begin, the streaming service stopped because the internet crashed from an overload of users! In my 3 inch heels I ran to my house to get a tripod and came back to the sanctuary winded

from running. I set up my phone facing the front of the sanctuary and connected to Facebook Live – only to learn that we began broadcasting upside down!

I share this to illustrate what we already know; these past few years have been tough. Now most churches are trying to figure out how to be in community with people who are online as well as in person, how to do worship in a way that honors people no matter where they are seated (and by that I mean in a pew or at home on the couch) and how to engage everyone in authentic ways. We are trying to figure out who is actually engaged and many of us worry that many people are not coming back.

The pandemic only amplified concerns about the Church. According to a Pew study released last September, since the 1990s large numbers of Americans have left Christianity to join the growing ranks of Americans who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” This study comes with warning lights that Christianity won’t be around much longer.

Recently the New York Times ran a four-part series that anecdotally describes how many Americans now fall into the category known as the “nones.” And in their new book, “The Great DeChurching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will it Take to Bring Them Back?” Jim David, Michael Graham and Ryan Burge say, “no theological tradition, age group, ethnicity, political affiliation, education level, geographic location, or income bracket escaped the dechurching in America.”

I’m not assuming that all of you who are seated here today attend church regularly. But for those of you do, I suspect – even without tracking with all of this data – you feel some sadness, angst, disillusionment, or worry about what is to come. And my hunch is that those of you who have given up on the church or who have drifted away – you might have some of these feelings too. Still others have been angered or hurt by actions of the church in the name of Christianity.

I was born into Christianity, and I love the Church, but there are times when I am embarrassed and angry about the dominant, exclusionary and harmful messages about Christianity we hear through the media or I hear in my office when someone comes trying to make sense of the fear or rejection they have experienced. (Let me clear here: a tradition that is based on fear and shame is not helpful in any way.)

All of this change and churn has led me to considerable reflection.

When things are changing so rapidly and there is a swirl of feelings and opinions, it helps to remember WHY we are doing what we do. WHY do we come to church? WHY are we Christian?

*Peter writes, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.”* Today I would like to share 5 reasons that I remain a

Christian. My hope is that by sharing my own defense for the hope that is within me – it might spark some important reflection for you too.

### **1. Call it God. Call it the Holy Spirit. Call it Love. Call it More.**

Since I have been too small to form sentences, this sense of the More has had a grip on me. For some reason I was gifted with faith. I don't mean faith as a set of beliefs that are mind-boggling – I mean faith in the transcendent power of love that is woven through this world and through our personal lives. Like the hymn, "Pass it On," I have wanted to pass along this experience that is both steadying and humbling. The older and (hopefully wiser) I have become, and the crazier our world has become, the more I have realized how counter-cultural Christianity really is. I'm signed up for it not because it is easy, but because the power of Love that we know in Jesus and through the Spirit makes life meaningful.

### **2. Community.**

The word "community" can mean different things to different people. But here's the thing – you can't be Christian by yourself. Christianity is a relational religion – we are not meant to do it alone. While I get really excited about Sundays when we get to gather for a congregational meal (often food trucks these days!), the Christian community is so much deeper than that for me.

Parker Palmer talks about it this way .. *"In true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace... In fact, we might define true community as **that place where the person you least want to live with lives**....Community will teach us that our grip on truth is fragile and incomplete, that we need **many ears** to hear the fullness of God's word for our lives. ... (Parker Palmer, A Place Called Community, 1977)*

For me, community happens when we are aware of our connection, our interdependence with one another as humans, and something much greater than ourselves. To put it another way, being committed to a community whose primary goal is to **practice love** – helps me to not be self-centered. It helps me to realize the center of the universe is not me! I often experience this in worship, especially during the prayers of the people when I am invited to consider the joys, sorrows, and challenges other people are holding.

### **3. Meaning-making**

We are living in the midst of a hot-mess world, and I need the Church to help me make meaning of it. This period of time we call the sermon in worship is a piece of that. As I have grown as a pastor and a preacher I have come to see this period of time not as a time for me to proclaim a strident truth, but rather a time for us to wrestle with scripture, to wrestle with what is happening around us and try to make some sense of it. More and more I see the importance of hearing from more voices – dialogue partners if you will – that challenge us to see varied viewpoints. I need help – I think we all need help with meaning making that leans into love,

hope, grace, and purpose for our lives.

#### **4. The Story**

Two weeks ago Rev. Lindvall shared an important sermon, helping us see Christianity's roots and connection with Judaism. Christianity has a 'piggy-back' canon. We claim all of the Hebrew Bible as part of our scripture and add to that a whole other canon including the life of Jesus and the events of first century Christianity.

4000 years of wisdom from ancestors tell a story that is our story, too. It is one of exile and return, of covenant, of call and vocation, of love and loss, failure, and the chance to begin again. It is a story that goes on through the centuries, as predictably as the sun rises and sets each day. But it is not static.

My Hebrew Bible professor, Gerry Shepherd used to say, "As we ask new questions of the text, we get new answers." At the time the Bible was written there wasn't much talk about gender identity, racism, or climate change. But what happens today when we ask new questions of the text and explore the wonders of creation and our responsibility to it?

In the United Church of Christ, we have the saying, "God is still speaking," meaning that we believe that there is still more light and truth to be revealed. When we ask new questions of the text we get new answers – often influenced by science, our personal experience, and other voices we have heard and considered. Yvette Flunder, the Senior Pastor of the City of Refuge UCC in California, suggests that it seems appropriate that every 2000 years we might add another canon, that now – in the midst of this current reformation we are definitely in – we might consider a 3<sup>rd</sup> canon. (who wants to sign up for that committee?)

#### **5. Our leader: a brown skinned Palestinian Jew named Jesus**

Far more than a model for good living, Jesus was a courageous, compassionate preacher, teacher, and healer – so in tune with his values, so connected to God with-in, that he was able to consistently live with a vulnerability that came from his own inner strength. I'm helped by the particularity of Jesus. The theological word for this is "incarnation." In Christianity, God is not just a theory. We experience God-with-us in the person of Jesus. As I encounter Jesus on the beach fixing breakfast, talking to the Samaritan woman, gathering children to his side, crying at the death of Lazarus, pulling Zacchaeus out of the tree, organizing a protest on Palm Sunday, turning over tables in the temple, washing his disciples feet, or hanging on the cross – I realize this faith we are invited into is not a generic 'be good and kind' kind of faith. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus invite us into a faith that is not oblivious to the complexities of life. It invites us to agape love – unequivocal love and respect for all humans and creation while addressing systemic injustice and the pain in the world.

Today there are many people who approach religion as a spiritual buffet. There is great value in learning about other traditions, but if we pick a little from Buddhism and a little from Judaism,

and a little from Christianity, and we lop off things we don't like, we might end up with a mix of things that feel like us or seem to meet our own needs. But here is the thing – if we do that, we risk deifying ourselves, making God in our own image.

My faith is bigger than one religion or tradition, but I was born into Christianity and my life has been immeasurably enriched by seeking to live in community, by engaging with our ancient story, and by seeking to follow in the way of Jesus.

Howard Thurman said, “By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of religion that the master had profaned in his midst.” I want to stay in this difficult, messy work of redeeming Christianity – seeking to give voice to the oppressed and rejecting white supremacy and patriarchal Christianity. I want to be all in for imagining Christianity's future.

*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you,<sup>16</sup> yet do it with gentleness and respect.*

Today I have tried to respond to Peter's call to defend the hope that is within me. Perhaps I have helped you consider your why as well. I hope so.

Amen.