

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Not Convinced”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

2nd Sunday of Easter (Year B)

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1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

I imagine that by now you have heard of the “rise of the nones.” And I don’t mean habit-wearing nuns, but the rise of the N-O-N-E-Ses. These are the people who claim to have no religious affiliation. These are the spiritual-but-not-religious. These are our siblings, our parents, our children, and our neighbors who have left the established church.

Many of the “nones” will walk by our front doors and never think once about walking in. Some of them have been injured by the church of their past, abused by a message that threatened hellfire and damnation and left them in places of fear and guilt. These are the ones who don’t want to believe in a God who would leave them frightened and confused and guilty. And I don’t blame them. The gospel message of Jesus is about life and freedom, not about captivity to guilt and fear. But that is the God the church showed them at some point along the way. And so they walk on.

Others will walk by because they believe the church has nothing relevant to say about what is going on in their lives. Perhaps they experienced a life-tragedy and church-folk told them that “it was God’s will” or that “they must have done something to deserve it.” I don’t blame them either for walking on by. That is not the message I hear when I read about Jesus.

Still others have seen too many Christians say one thing in church and do another thing in the world. Abuse of power, idolatry of money, cruelty behind closed doors. It is enough to make anyone who has experienced this hypocrisy walk right on by.

We should not be surprised when more and more people claim to be “spiritual but not religious.” The church, as some see it, has become hypocritical to many, judgmental to others, and irrelevant to everyone else.

A couple of years ago, while on vacation, my father and I attended a worship service in the community where we were staying. The congregation was a small group of bright, well-educated, mostly retired Presbyterians whose community was in transition, having recently suffered a split. They were without a pastor, so a retired pastor in the area did the preaching while others led worship.

I came to worship that day enthusiastically. This group of faithful Christians was meeting in a non-traditional space and re-making themselves in some ways. I was hopeful for this life-boat church, floating out there on new waters. I was expecting a lively, passionate worship. What I got was deadly. Deadly boring. Deadly meaningless. Deadly irrelevant to my life in any way. The language was too theological. The speaker was monotone. He said, “Hear the good news. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.” I leaned over to my dad as we stood to sing the doxology and whispered, “I am not convinced that he believes that what he just said was good news. How can I receive it as good news for me if he doesn’t believe it is good news for him?”

Sometime after this dismal worship experience, I read a *Newsweek* cover story by Andrew Sullivan called “Christianity in Crisis.” Sullivan argues that the Christian church has forgotten who Jesus is and how to follow him. He tells of how one person cut every word that Jesus said (the “diamonds”) right out of the Bible and pasted them in what he called a new, improved version of Scriptures, containing only the doctrines of Christ.

Sullivan writes,

Jesus' doctrines were the practical commandments, the truly radical ideas that immediately leap out in the simple stories he told and which he exemplified in everything he did. Not simply love one another, but love your enemy and forgive those who harm you; give up all material wealth; love the ineffable Being behind all things, and know that this Being is actually your truest [Parent], in whose image you were made. Above all: give up power over others, because power, if it is to be effective, ultimately requires the threat of violence and violence is incompatible with the total acceptance and love of all other human beings that is at the sacred heart of Jesus' teaching. That's why, in his final apolitical act, Jesus never defended his innocence at trial, never resisted his crucifixion, and even turned to those nailing his hands to the wood on the cross and forgave them, and loved them.¹

Can you imagine such a thing?

This is not what you and I would have been able to do, if I am guessing right. You see, our gut tells us to fight back. A lot of what Jesus tells us goes against our gut. And yet all of what Jesus tells us follows the law of love – love for the other. And if we live by our gut, we simply enter the cycle of selfishness, the cycle of violence, the cycle of self-protection. And as Ghandi said, “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.”

But Jesus came to save a world that was trying to blind itself, was trying to kill itself, and needed to be saved by love. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus saved us – and saved us all – by love. As followers of Jesus we are called to follow him by living a life of love for others.

Now please understand, I am not recommending that we cut out large portions of the Bible. I do think, however, that we need to return to Jesus' words over and over again as a community of faith as often as possible. We do, after all, claim to be followers of Jesus, and if we don't constantly pay attention to what he said (or what he didn't say) we might just be tempted to make the Bible into

¹ <http://www.newsweek.com/andrew-sullivan-christianity-crisis-64025> (

whatever we want it to be, instead of the place where God reveals Godself to us in the incarnate person of Jesus Christ, who showed us how to live through his own life, who showed us how to love through his own love, who called us to love one another, and not to be afraid. We need constantly to pay attention to Jesus and who he was and who he called us to be because we are extremely likely to forget and fall back into our old habits.

It's amazing how quickly the disciples forgot, isn't it?

In today's reading from John's gospel, we find the disciples gathered behind locked doors in fear. Jesus has risen. Peter and the Beloved Disciple have seen the empty tomb and believed. Mary Magdalene has seen Jesus and has told the disciples all about her encounter with him in the garden. Jesus has risen. What is there to be afraid of? If Jesus has conquered death, what greater threat remains? But still those followers of Jesus hover behind locked doors in fear of the Jews. As if Jesus had never said, "Be not afraid." As if Jesus had never assured them of God's presence with them and love for them. As if Jesus had not risen from the dead. How could they have forgotten so quickly?

Jesus, though, doesn't condemn them. He forgives them for all their turning away, all their denying, all their running away, all their fear. He appears to them and offers them peace and breathes the breath of the Holy Spirit upon them. He sends them out to be bearers of forgiveness as well. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Jesus loves them. Jesus forgives them. Jesus wants them to love one another and forgive one another.

Isn't this what we are supposed to do as Christians? Love one another? Forgive one another?

I daresay that if all those who claim to be Christian were doing what Jesus told us to do, really forgiving, really living love, the church wouldn't be considered a hypocritical, judgmental place at all. I daresay that if all those who claim to be Christian were convinced of God's love for us and Jesus' call for us to change the world with love, the church also wouldn't be considered a boring or irrelevant

place at all either. And people would not walk past our doors without a first glance.

After all, what better news is there than the news that all are loved unconditionally?

And what better news is there than the news that all are forgiven and given a second chance at life and love?

What better news is there than the news that God in Christ transformed death into life that all might be transformed by love.

I am convinced that there is no better news than the news we share together in this place and the news we live out in the world. May God give us grace to bear it faithfully to the world.

In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer God. Amen.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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